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Advocate advises on Gay-Straight Alliance clubs

The local chapter of PFLAG, or Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, hosted a talk Saturday at the Trevi Entertainment Center in Lake Elsinore that focused on how best to launch Gay-Straight Alliance student clubs at area schools.

The discussion was led by Daniel Solis, Southern California program manager for the GSA Network, who told the 50-plus members of the audience ---- which included parents, students and teachers ---- that the first step to launch the club is to know the law and the rights it affords.

He walked the group through a presentation that spelled out policies schools should have in place that protect "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning" students.

The policies, he said, should include anti-harassment rules that specifically protect actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identities, appearances and behaviors.

"I do have the legal right, if I were a transgender girl, to use the girls' restroom," Solis said. "The school could not make me use the boys' restroom. ... A lot of this is based on law. This is what schools are supposed to do."

When he asked the crowd how many teachers were in the room, about five people raised their hands. When he asked how many students were in the room, about a dozen did.

Of those students, none said they had a Gay-Straight Alliance at their school.

Solis said the clubs are vital not just for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning students, but the entire campus.

"For students, having a GSA is critical," he said. "Studies show even if they just have one at their school, they feel safer --- not just the LGBT students, all of them."

When someone in the audience asked whether the clubs can be formed at middle schools, Solis said that not only are they launched at those campuses, but it's not unheard of to have them at elementary schools, as well.

He added that "what they look like" at each grade level varies to make the clubs age-appropriate.

The subjects of harassment and discrimination were often touched on as the meeting progressed.

Solis said that if a student is bullied, and a teacher witnesses it and does nothing to stop it, then the teacher is guilty of harassment as well.

If a student wears an "I support same-sex marriage" T-shirt to school, that is protected political speech and it's legal for them to wear it, he said.

"Students have the right to express their political beliefs," he said.

Thanks to the passage of a recent law, the FAIR Education Act, schools must now teach about people with disabilities and LGBT people, Solis said.

However, the California Department of Education does not have the resources to enforce the new rule, he added.

"It's up to the people in this room" to ensure that the subject is taught at local schools, Solis said.

For those who believe their rights or state laws have been violated at a campus, usually filing a complaint or talking to school officials can help alleviate the situation, Solis said.

"A lot of times the school will say, 'Thank you for educating us and not trying to sue us,'" he said. "The last thing you want to do is make drama."

Nicole Duca, president of the local PFLAG chapter, said she hopes the meeting prompts students to start GSA clubs at their schools.

Duca estimated that about one-third of local high schools have one established.

"This is to educate the youth and educate parents about what GSA is," Duca said of the meeting. "I hope they understand the importance of having a GSA at their school. It's the one place they can go on campus to feel safe and welcome, and have friends and connect with people."

Elsinore High School seniors Kymberly Porter and Joshua Hill, both 17, attended the talk and said they were inspired to restart a GSA club at their campus.

Joshua said the meeting taught him a lot about his rights and what steps to take.

"I think it's really helpful," he said. "I didn't know half these things."

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