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Apr. 28, 2010 ? t. aaron

Nearly 100 LGBTQ and straight ally youth from all over California helped make history at the 5th annual Queer Youth Advocacy Day on April 26, 2010. They were fierce lobbyists, proud activists, and courageous youth leaders.



LGBTQ and straight ally youth from across California gather in Sacramento for the 5th annual Queer Youth Advocacy Day

During the weekend preceding Queer Youth Advocacy Day, the youth participated in the GSA Advocacy & Youth Leadership Academy (GAYLA), an intensive three-day training focused on the legislative process, policy and administrative advocacy, media activism, and other important leaderships skills for students fighting homophobia and transphobia in schools.

On Monday, April 26th, youth took to the hallways of the Capitol, and spoke with legislators about several bills that would improve student safety, health, and educational opportunities.

? [Mental Health Access for Youth At-Risk \(SB 543\)](#) [1]

? [Hate Crimes Protection Act \(AB 1680\)](#) [2]

? California Educational Opportunity Index (AB 2273)

Youth leaders spoke to the media during a press conference, which also featured **Assemblymember Lori Saldaña, Assemblymember Tom Ammiano, and Assemblymember Tom Torlakson.**

"GAYLA was an incredible experience - learning the skills to effectively advocate for safety, equality, and social change was invaluable. The entire experience was motivating. Having the opportunity to work with my peers on issues I truly believe in and personally connect to really made me believe in my potential," said Lily Amodio, a junior at The Met Sacramento.

Tyler Beltran, a senior from La Quinta High School in Southern California said, "GAYLA was a great experience for me. I actually have decided to minor in politics [in college]."

"At GAYLA I learned about three bills that are very important for the safety of youth, and I went to the Capitol to lobby legislators about them," shared Karissa Doll from Oak Grove High School in San Jose. "Not only was it an amazing learning experience but an amazing bonding experience with many youth all over California. This was a weekend I will never forget."

Andrew DeSoto, a senior from nearby Santa Teresa High School echoed the sentiment. "I learned that I can be a part of making a change. I learned skills for speaking to legislators and how to lobby. GAYLA is a family, and we are all there for the same thing, which was to lobby for bills and talk to school administrators, to make change for everyone."



LGBTQ youth activists take action in the state Capitol.

?For the last four years I have worked with the California Department of Education in implementing laws already in place to protect students," shared veteran youth organizer, Molly Boyer from Sonoma. "My story is like many others around the state, involving horrific things happening to youth on campus. Most youth don't even know they're protected or that they can take action and file a complaint. Together with the CDE we are hopeful to eliminate discrimination in schools across California.? In addition to lobbying, a few students met with education officials at the California Department of Education and the California School Boards Association to talk about how to improve the implementation of existing school non-discrimination laws that protect students from harassment based on gender identity and expression.

Not only did students learn skills and advocate for policy change, they also learned the importance of having a voice to stand up for youth across California. "GAYLA reassured me of how important it is to share our stories. It feels great to know there are so many youth out there willing to stand up for the safety of queer youth in schools," shared Aja, a junior in Santa Rosa.

?GSAs across California now have even more students who can take their media and advocacy training back to their schools, supporting our movement for safe schools and LGBT equality across California. They also now have a network of fellow GSA activists and friends to support their work through the rest of their lives,? said Alexander Tran, Advocacy Program Associate with GSA Network.

GSA Network organizes the annual GAYLA and Queer Youth Advocacy Day with Equality California Institute, Transgender Law Center, and BIENESTAR. We are grateful for their support, along with many co-sponsoring organizations, individual donors, and volunteers who made the event possible.

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Links

[1] <http://www.eqca.org/site/pp.asp?c=kuLRJ9MRKrH&b=5027751>

[2] <http://www.eqca.org/site/pp.asp?c=kuLRJ9MRKrH&b=5828207>