

California approves LGBT history lessons in classrooms

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff on 07.26.16

SAN FRANCISCO, Calif. — California second-graders will now be taught in school about an aspect of life that they hadn't learned about before. Teachers will discuss families with two moms or two dads with them. Two years later, while studying how immigrants have shaped the Golden State, they will hear about how New York native Harvey Milk became a pioneering gay politician in San Francisco.

The state's Board of Education unanimously approved those changes in classroom instruction Thursday. They are doing this to comply with the nation's first law requiring public schools to include prominent gay Americans and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights milestones in history classes.

Support For The Guidelines

The updates are part of a broader overhaul of California's history and social science curriculum. During four hours of public testimony, dozens of speakers criticized the way the framework discusses Muslims, Hindus and Jews. However, no one objected to the inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights.

Allyson Chiu, who just finished 11th grade at Cupertino High School, said the revisions would make LGBT students more comfortable. She and seven others spoke in favor of how the guidelines address gay rights. "My classmates can solve quadratic equations or cite the elements on the periodic table. They can't tell you who Harvey Milk was or the significance of the Stonewall Riots," Chiu said.

In June 1969, a group of customers at a popular gay bar in New York City called the Stonewall Inn, who had grown angry at harassment by police, took a stand and a riot broke out. The riots lasted for days and inspired LGBT people throughout the country to organize in support of gay rights.

LGBT Contributions Make It To Textbooks

The changes satisfy legislation passed five years ago, requiring that students learn about LGBT Americans and people with disabilities. These groups have been added to the list of social and ethnic groups whose contributions schools are supposed to teach. This information must appear in textbooks from Kindergarten through eighth grade.

The law also prohibited classroom materials that reflect adversely on gays or particular religions. Conservative opponents argued that it should be up to parents to decide how and at what age to discuss sexual orientation with their children. They made two unsuccessful efforts to repeal the law.

The approved framework weaves references to gay Americans and events throughout the history and social science curriculum. The references start in second grade with discussions about diverse families. The references come up again in fourth grade with lessons on California's place in the gay rights movement.

Gender Roles In Past Centuries

The guidelines also touch on the topics in fifth and eighth grades, looking at gender roles in the 18th and

19th centuries, and examples of individuals who went against them. The guidelines have students continuing to explore these topics throughout high school. A high point of sorts would come in U.S. government courses. There, seniors would learn about the 2015 Supreme Court ruling that legalized same-sex marriage nationwide. They would also discuss recent court cases involving bathroom access for transgender students.

California's law took effect in January 2012, but its implementation was slowed by attempts to overturn it. Competing educational priorities and budget cuts stalled work on drafting recommendations for the school board and textbook purchases. Opponents remain concerned that the guidelines de-emphasize important historical figures and events to make room for LGBT symbols of lesser or disputed importance, said Pacific Justice Institute senior staff attorney Matthew McReynolds. His Sacramento legal defense organization was involved in the repeal efforts.

LGBT History Part Of American History?

"Certainly, some families will be concerned about their second-graders learning about two- mom families, but I think parents would be much more alarmed if they knew that LGBT History Month, in the last few years, has promoted the notion that 'America the Beautiful' is a source of lesbian pride," McReynolds said. Katharine Lee Bates was the Wellesley College professor who wrote the song in 1893. She lived with a fellow faculty member at the women's school for a quarter-century, and contemporary scholars speculate that the relationship was romantic. Supporters say the changes recognize that LGBT history is part of American history.

"You cannot understand where we are now collectively as Americans without understanding something of the LGBT past," said Don Romesburg, chairman of women's studies at Sonoma State University.