



GLSEN Safe Schools Advocacy Summit concludes with visit to Capitol Hill

By Alex Sennello

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Students gain skills in legislative advocacy during GLSEN summit

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- After two full days of education on lobbying strategy and the language of SNDA and SSIA, the participants of the Safe Schools Advocacy Summit headed out on the morning of Tuesday, March 27, to Capitol Hill to meet with U.S. Senators, Representatives, and their staffers.

The night before the event, the participants received a pep talk from Mara Keisling, the executive director of the National Center for Transgender Equality.

Keisling told the room that "[representatives] get slickos [lobbyists] all the time, they don't get real people... you're going in there as a real person, your stories are automatically real." and continued by saying that "some of them [senators and representatives] will never get it, but some will, and this is how you do it."

After the dinner, everyone headed to the Rayburn House office building for a dinner reception with GLSEN executive Dr. Eliza Byard, Representatives Richard Hannah (R-NY) and Linda Sanchez (D-CA), and a number of other staffers and representatives for other governmental and queer related organizations.

In total, 31 states were represented in the lobbying efforts, 62 Senators' offices, and 41 Representatives' offices were visited.

After the meetings, participants took turns on a row of laptops evaluating the meetings and making recommendations on how to proceed with lawmakers and their offices towards the goals of passing the Student Non-Discrimination Act (SNDA) and the Safe Schools Improvement Act (SSIA).

Most staff and representatives were receptive, or at least respectful of the lobbyist who visited them, but this was not always the case. Courtney Brown, a 20 year old from Wisconsin, reported back to the group that, "I walked in [to the office] and I'm talking to them about this [SNDA and SSIA], and she [the staffer] said 'what makes your people any better than other people when it comes to bullying' and told me that if I have issues with my state's laws I need to meet with my state legislatures, and that it was my choice whether or not I took her advice."

In regards to lawmakers lobbied from Illinois, Senator Kirk (R-IL) is still strongly supporting SSIA, but is concerned with the possibility of added litigation with SNDA; Senator Durbin (D-IL) is a proponent of both bills; Representative Dold (R-IL) seems likely to support both bills; and both Representative Shimkus (R-IL) and Representative Johnson are unable to support either bill due to delegation issues.

Later that night, participants boarded planes and trains to return to their homes with their newly gained skills in legislative advocacy.

Related: Read [Alex Sennello's](#) complete coverage of the GLSEN Safe Schools Advocacy Summit as found on the GoPride.com Network.

[GLSEN youth activists gather to support safe schools legislation](#) (3/24/2012)

[GLSEN Youth Summit continues in DC, builds support for safe schools](#) (3/26/2012)

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