



NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 5, 2025

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Fifth-Grade Students from La Costa Heights Elementary School Present Inclusive Playground Bill at California State Capitol

Sacramento, CA – Fifth-grade students from La Costa Heights Elementary School (LCH) in the Encinitas Union School District (EUSD) recently visited the California State Capitol for an educational civics trip. In addition to observing legislative sessions, the students had the unique opportunity to present their own bill proposal to California Secretary of State Dr. Shirley Weber, State Assemblymember Tasha Boerner, and State Senator Catherine Blakespear.

Prior to the trip, every fifth grader at LCH collaborated to draft the *California Inclusive Playgrounds Act* (CIPA), with the help of teachers and an LCH parent. The bill seeks to make playgrounds more inclusive for children of all abilities by incorporating features such as sensory play structures, ramps, adaptive swings, and quiet spaces. The students aim to ensure that new and renovated playgrounds not only meet accessibility needs, but foster a more inclusive environment where all children can play together.

During their presentation at the Capitol, the students emphasized that, "Inclusion and accessibility are the cornerstones of a thriving community. Just as every child deserves access to playgrounds that welcome all abilities, every person deserves equity in every aspect of life." Their research taught listeners the difference between accessible and inclusive, and showed that inclusive playgrounds benefit all children by fostering empathy and an understanding of diversity. Their extensive preparation of the bill shined brightly as they showcased their abilities as skilled communicators, innovative thinkers, and empowered learners.

"The opportunity for our students to travel to Sacramento and present the California Inclusive Playgrounds Act was more than just a civics lesson—it was a transformative experience," said LCH fifth-grade teachers, Natalie Christ, Sean Murphy and Katie Andan. "This journey fostered student advocacy, empathy, and inclusion for the greater good, empowering our 5th-grade student leaders beyond the classroom as engaged global citizens."

The idea for the bill emerged from classroom lessons on leading with empathy and celebrating differences. Students conducted surveys at their school to assess its accessibility. Their focus quickly turned to playgrounds.

While writing the bill, students consulted with experts, including Elise Gout, a senior policy advisor at The White House, who shared her experience with passing large-scale legislation. They also worked with Brittany Dougherty, a pediatric physical therapist, who educated them on accessibility, and LCH parent Jamie Cruz, who taught them about augmentative and alternative communication devices for nonverbal students. Additionally, students conducted field research by visiting an inclusive playground in San Diego, and met with the Magical Bridge Foundation, a California nonprofit dedicated to building inclusive playgrounds.

In their presentation to state leaders, students shared their vision for an inclusive future: “We hope we inspire and empower you to continue to make it your business to celebrate, engage in, and defend the importance of choosing to include for the greater good of our community,” they said.

The students also wore matching "Choose to Include" t-shirts from the EUSD Special Education Parent Council to demonstrate their commitment to inclusivity. Their passion was evident as they took every opportunity to advocate for their bill, including delivering elevator pitches to everyone they met. Students even bumped into a fellow San Diegan on one elevator ride, Patricia Karlin from the San Diego County Office of Education, with whom they readily shared their bill proposal. Patricia later praised the students for their impressive elevator pitch in an email to EUSD administrators. According to LCH teachers, students weren't shy when it came to promoting their cause.

"Kids were giving out elevator pitches left and right," said the LCH fifth-grade teachers. "From the San Diego Airport to breakfast at the hotel, to conversations in elevators, and even while waiting in lines at the Capitol. Seeing their confidence grow as they championed real change is truly inspiring. They returned not only with a deeper understanding of civic engagement, but also with the belief that their voices matter and can shape a more inclusive future for all."

In addition to presenting their bill, students observed live legislative sessions and were introduced on the Assembly and Senate floors by Assemblymember Boerner and Senator Blakespear. Both lawmakers and Dr. Weber also spoke with the students about the legislative process and the importance of civic engagement.

"This project is a perfect example of the learning experiences we are striving to create for all learners. Throughout the process the students were in charge of the work, they were excited and engaged because it was connected to their passions and their community, and it was based on what they wanted to achieve," said EUSD Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services Dr. Amy Illingworth. "This was a real, authentic problem about something that is not inclusive and equitable in their lives, and they personalized their problem-solving approach to create a solution that can impact not just their school, but all schools and parks in California."

The LCH students have proven that even at a young age, they can inspire change and make a difference in their community. The next step for their bill is to secure a legislator who will sponsor it for a vote in the 2026 legislative docket. In the meantime, students will meet with the Executive Director of the California Building Standards Commission and the state architect to continue discussions on inclusive playgrounds. Additionally, EUSD administrators are committed to using the research provided by students as guidance to ensure future playgrounds being built are inclusive.

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ABOUT ENCINITAS UNION SCHOOL DISTRICT

Encinitas Union School District's (EUSD) vision is to ignite the limitless potential of all learners. EUSD works to cultivate values of joy, belonging, integrity, service and innovation for its approximately 4,300 students in Kindergarten through 6th grade. EUSD serves the city of Encinitas and the Rancho La Costa area of South Carlsbad in North San Diego County. All nine EUSD schools have been recognized as California Distinguished Schools and serve a diverse and varied community.