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Students launch protest at Capitol

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About 400 Phoenix high school students walked out of class Monday, protesting a federal immigration bill that would make undocumented immigrants criminals.

They rallied at the Arizona Capitol, as similar protests took place in California, to also tout federal legislation that aims to grant undocumented high-schoolers legal status.

"I'm not a criminal. I'm a good person, and I deserve a quality education," said Metro Tech High School junior Ariana Lomeli, 17, who was brought illegally into the country as a baby. "That's why I'm here. To show that I'm willing to work toward that goal and that I've earned that right."

Students from various Phoenix high schools, including Central, North and South Mountain, chanted and waved Mexican flags at the Capitol after staging classroom walkouts reminiscent of school protests from the 1960s.

The impromptu protest gathered steam after postings on myspace.com asked students to skip school to oppose House Bill 4437, which would make it a felony to be in the United States illegally.

A handful of people at the peaceful protest backed the bill and questioned the students' presence at the Capitol.

"These kids should be in school, not waving the Mexican flag here," said Phoenix resident Denise Olson. "I think that's a disgrace."

Local high school chapters of MEChA, or Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan, organized the Phoenix rally, using cellphone text messages and e-mail to get the word out.

The protest came on the heels of another march opposing HB 4437 on Friday that drew more than 20,000 people.

Most students at Monday's rally hailed from Phoenix Union High School District schools.

About 150 North High students walked out, with some piling into cars sporting slogans such as "We are not criminals."

An additional 200 students walked out of Metro Tech, with police and school security officers escorting them toward the Capitol.

"They left our charge, yet we were concerned enough to follow along to make sure nothing happened, and they were safe," district spokesman Craig Pletenik said.

At Trevor Browne High School, things turned "rowdy" once classes let out about 2:45 p.m. Hundreds of students flooded the protest area at 75th Avenue and Catalina Drive. Some threw water bottles and rocks at the 104 officers trying to clear the area, Phoenix police Sgt. Andy Hill said.

Hill said a 15-year-old girl was arrested on suspicion of aggravated assault after she pushed an officer, and a 16-year-old girl was arrested on suspicion of disorderly conduct. Both were released to their parents.

Students from other schools trickled in throughout the afternoon, despite facing possible disciplinary action for skipping class.

Reporters Karina Bland and Lindsey Collom contributed to this article.

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