

Reasons for Day of Silence Walkout

A broad coalition of individuals and organizations is urging parents to oppose the Day of Silence (DOS), a political action sponsored by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), because it politicizes the classroom for ideological purposes.

The explicit purpose of DOS is to encourage sympathy and support for students involved in homosexual and cross-dressing behaviors whose voices have been allegedly silenced by the disapproval of society. The implicit purpose is to undermine the belief that homosexuality and cross-dressing are immoral. Parents should no longer passively countenance the political usurpation of public school classrooms through student silence.

Parents should call their children's middle schools and high schools to ask whether the administration and/or teachers will be permitting students to remain silent during class on the Day of Silence. If students will be permitted to remain silent, parents can express their opposition most effectively by calling their children out of school on the Day of Silence and sending letters of explanation to their administrators, their children's teachers, and all school board members. One reason this is effective is that most school districts lose money for each student absence.

School administrators err when they allow the classroom to be disrupted and politicized by granting students permission to remain silent throughout an entire day. The DOS requires that teachers either create activities around the silence of some or many, or exempt silent students from any activity that involves speaking. Furthermore, DOS participants have a captive audience, many of whom disagree with and are made uncomfortable by the politicization of their classroom.

Some administrators assert that DOS merely seeks to promote "acceptance." They fail to clarify, however, what precisely they want students to accept. While it is legitimate to teach students that there exist diverse opinions on this issue, it is not legitimate to imply that one of those opinions is preferable to another. While it is appropriate to teach acceptance of people, meaning that we should treat all with civility, it is not appropriate to suggest that students need to accept the view that homosexual conduct is moral. These important distinctions are never made in public school discussions of "acceptance."

One oft-repeated mantra is that the goal of DOS is to keep LGBTQ students safe. The problematic rhetoric of "safety," however, substitutes speciously for the more accurate term of "comfort." To suggest that in order for those who self-identify as homosexual or "transgender" to be "safe," no one may disapprove of homosexual conduct is both absurd and dangerous. If this definition of "safety" were to be applied consistently, virtually all statements of disapproval would be prohibited.

Day of Silence participants claim they seek to end discrimination. There is, however, a problem with the way "discrimination" is defined in public discourse today. Groups like GLSEN believe that statements of moral conviction *with which they disagree* constitute prejudice or discrimination. While relentlessly promoting this view, administrators are never asked to provide evidence for the dubious presuppositions on which claims of discrimination are based. They are never asked to provide evidence for the arguable claim that homosexuality is equivalent to race; or that disapproval of homosexual *conduct* is equivalent to racism; or that homosexual impulses are biologically determined; or that the presence of biological influences in shaping desire renders a behavior automatically moral. The time is long past that parents demand justification for those claims.

If we allow schools to define discrimination so expansively as to prohibit *all* statements of moral conviction, character development is compromised and speech rights are trampled. And if

administrators continue to define discrimination in such a way as to preclude only *some* statements of moral conviction, they violate their pedagogical commitment to intellectual diversity and render the classroom a place of indoctrination.

Finally, DOS supporters contend that one of their purposes is to end harassment. What they fail to acknowledge is that the worthy end of eliminating harassment does not justify the means of exploiting instructional time. There are myriad other ways to work toward that end. DOS participants have a First Amendment right to wear t-shirts, or put up posters, or host after-school speakers, or set up tables from which to distribute informative materials. They ought not to be allowed to manipulate instructional time in the service of their socio-political goals.

Here are responses to some **common concerns** about calling children out of school on DOS:

- **Some parents believe that there is value in having students who hold traditional views on sexual orientation in class on the DOS.** This belief is flawed for two reasons. First, the adolescent culture is liberal, and adolescents desire to fit in. The vast majority of conservative teens do not feel comfortable vocally opposing their culture and will not do so. As those adults who are more public in opposing the normalization of homosexuality can attest, very few adults demonstrate the courage to oppose the dominant culture; we cannot expect teens to do what adults don't do.

Moreover, the goal of calling students out of school on DOS is not to communicate an alternative message to that of DOS. The goal is to remove GLSEN-sponsored political action from taxpayer-funded classes.

- **Some parents express concern over the possibility that teachers will exact retribution through grading.** First, it would be highly unethical for a teacher to treat a student punitively because of the teacher's view of the parents' reason for calling a student out. If a teacher were to attempt to punish a student in such a way, parents should address the problem with the administration.

Second, some students are willing to accept this possibility, viewing the cause as worthy of the sacrifice. Too often we teach our children through our silence and acquiescence to be cowardly conformists. We need, instead, to teach them through both our words and deeds as well as what we encourage in them to stand firm for principle even when it costs us something.

Finally, those parents and teens who are not willing to risk even the remote possibility of teacher retribution can call their child out of school and *not* send a letter expressing their objections to DOS.

- **Some have argued that calling students out of class represents an attempt to deny free speech.** Calling students out of class does not represent an attempt to deny free speech to students; rather, calling students out of class represents opposition to the exploitation of instructional time for socio-political action. Students are free to express their views in multiple ways mentioned above.
- **Some claim that those who oppose DOS must not care about the suffering of LGBTQ teens.** It is utterly specious to suggest that parents, teachers, and administrators who oppose political action in the classroom support harassment. Put another way, this claim implies that the *only* way parents, administrators, and teachers can prove they oppose harassment of homosexual or transgendered teens

is to allow the politicization of the classroom. It also represents a classic ends justifies the means argument: If the ends, in this case, combating harassment of homosexual teens, are good, then any and all means are justified.

There are countless worthwhile goals that should not be promoted during class. Some might consider ending the tragedy of teen drunk-driving deaths, or the war in Iraq, or abortion to be worthwhile goals, and yet it would be equally inappropriate to use the classroom to promote them. The truth is that parents, teachers, and administrators can oppose harassment while concomitantly opposing the politicization of instructional time.

- **Some mistakenly believe that students have an absolute right to remain silent in school.** GLSEN, the ACLU, and Lambda Legal, however, have published a document that explains that schools do, indeed, have a right to prohibit silence during instructional time:

- ❖ **Can a public school student remain silent in school?** Sometimes. The right to freedom of speech includes a right not to speak. *However, a school may in some ways restrict a student's freedom of speech during classes, in assemblies, or in school-sponsored activities. This means the school can regulate what students say at these times, and it can also insist that students respond to questions, make presentations, etc.* During non-instructional time (e.g., between classes, at lunch), however, a school may not suppress a student's right to speak or remain silent, unless the speech or silence will interrupt or interfere with another student's learning...

- ❖ **What if there are curriculum-related obstacles to a student being silent in class?** ... If you have a presentation, an oral exam, or something else that requires speaking, please speak.
http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org/StudentsRights_DOS_GLSEN_Lambda%20Legal_ACLU.pdf

Public School Teachers: Plan activities for this day that involve student speech. Schedule speeches or oral exams; ask questions; or plan discussion-based activities that require participation from all students.

Schools have the right to *prohibit student silence* in the classroom if they deem it “disruptive.” It is our hope and belief that if schools have one group of students silent and another group called out, they will eventually decide that classroom silence is “disruptive.”