

January 28, 2011

Dear Principal or Educator,

We are writing in support of students at your school who would like to participate in the Day of Silence. The Day of Silence project ([www.dayofsilence.org](http://www.dayofsilence.org)) is one of the largest student-led actions in the country. The purpose is to silently and peacefully protest anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) bullying, harassment, and name calling. As evidenced by recent tragedies, awareness and attention to this issue is needed now more than ever. Because students who are targeted for anti-gay or anti-transgender bullying often do not identify as LGBT, the Day of Silence represents a peaceful protest of a problem that affects *all students no matter their sexual orientation or gender identity*.

On April 15, 2011 students will be taking a vow of silence to represent the silence faced by LGBT people and their allies everyday. Typically, on the Day of Silence, rather than speaking, participants hand out "speaking cards" explaining their reasons for remaining silent throughout the day. There are numerous ways in which Day of Silence participants can meet their academic responsibilities without speaking. With the support of teachers, students could lead or take part in a "silent lesson" or complete a written assignment.

We hope that your administration will support the students who wish to participate in the Day of Silence. The Day of Silence is an opportunity for students to take the initiative to teach one another about diversity, respect and safety for all students. Students gain leadership skills, provide a valuable service to the school community and empower themselves by realizing their ability to make a difference in their school.

If you are unwilling to accommodate the students' desire to remain silent during classroom instruction, we hope that you will nonetheless support them in the peaceful expression of their beliefs (for example, through t-shirts or the "speaking cards" or other materials about the Day of Silence) during the non-curricular portions of the school day. Although you may be concerned that other students may react disruptively to the Day of Silence, school officials may not prohibit students from engaging in speech out of "an urgent wish to avoid the controversy which might result from the expression." *Tinker v. Des Moines*, 393 U.S. 505, 510-11 (1969). Nor may school officials censor student expression out of "a mere desire to avoid the discomfort and unpleasantness that always accompany an unpopular viewpoint." *Id.* at 509; *see also Cox v. Louisiana*, 379 U.S. 536, 551 (1965) (holding that "constitutional rights may not be denied simply because of hostility to their assertion or exercise.").

AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES  
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LESBIAN GAY BISEXUAL  
TRANSGENDER &  
AIDS PROJECT

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Moreover, as a recent decision by a federal court made clear, student speech that promotes the fair and equal treatment of LGBT people is constitutionally protected political speech. *See Gillman v. School Board for Holmes County*, 567 F.Supp.2d 1359 (N.D.Fla. 2008). The court explained, “political speech involving a controversial topic such as homosexuality is likely to spur some debate, argument, and conflict. Indeed, the issue of equal rights for citizens who are homosexual is presently a topic of fervent discussion and debate within the courts, Congress, and the legislatures of the States, including Florida. The nation's high school students, some of whom are of voting age, should not be foreclosed from that national dialogue.” *Id.* After a two day trial, the court issued an injunction against the school district and ultimately the district had to pay \$325,000 in attorneys' fees to the student-plaintiff.

If you have a reasonable belief that other students may react hostilely to those who are participating in the Day of Silence, we encourage you to take appropriate security measures to punish the disruptive students and to protect those students who are peacefully engaging in their right to free expression. The law is clear that school officials may not censor peaceful expression solely because other students will have a hostile reaction. *See Butts v. Dallas Indep. Sch. Dist.*, 436 F.2d 728, 731 (5th Cir. 1971) (“We do not agree that the precedential value of the [*Tinker*] decision is nullified whenever a school system is confronted with disruptive activities or the possibility of them. Rather we believe that the Supreme Court has declared a constitutional right which school officials must nurture and protect and not extinguish, unless they find the circumstances allow them no practical alternative.”); *Holloman v. Harland*, 370 F.3d 1252 (11<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2004) (concluding that school officials have the duty to punish disruptive behavior, not prohibit the plaintiff's speech, because “allowing a school to curtail a student's freedom of expression based on such factors turns reason on its head.”).

Please do not hesitate to contact the Project if you have any questions about the above or if we can be of any assistance to you. We can be reached via email at [getequal@aclu.org](mailto:getequal@aclu.org).

Very Truly Yours,



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