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The Advocate
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Resistance by the nation's most vehemently antigay groups could not keep the National Day of Silence from garnering a record number of participants this year. More than 8,500 middle schools, high schools, and colleges in the United States participated in the 12th annual day of action on April 25, which is coordinated by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network to promote safe school environments for LGBT and ally students.

"A lot of students were mobilized by what happened to Lawrence King," GLSEN spokesman Daryl Presgraves told The Advocate. "I think a lot of the messages the students were sharing -- the T-shirts they were wearing, the posters they made -- mentioned him in some way or honored him to bring about safer schools."

King, 15, was shot twice in the head on February 12 by 14-year-old classmate Brandon McInerney in a classroom at E.O. Greene Middle School in Oxnard, Calif. McInerney's supposed motive? Embarrassment over the openly gay King telling other students he had a crush on McInerney. This year’s DOS was dedicated to King.

The American Family Association, an organization that opposes gay visibility and equality, sent an action alert to its members in March, urging them to pull their children out of school on April 25. Despite their efforts, a record number of schools participated in DOS.

"Many of the kids pulled out of school probably were the ones who should have heard the message the most," Presgraves said, adding that the AFA and like-minded organizations are a prime illustration of why the day of action must continue annually.

Carolyn Laub, the executive director of the San Francisco–based Gay-Straight Alliance Network, said that involvement this year probably spiked because of the AFA's outcry.

"As school administrators saw the bulletin, they actually went out and learned more about the Day of Silence, making them even more supportive," she said. "The right to safe schools is an important message that educators should be behind."

In Los Angeles, more than 900 students, or 60%, at the Miguel Contreras Learning Complex participated in what may be the largest single DOS recognition ever.

Jessica Pierce, organizing director for the U.S. Student Association, a student advocacy group, said that more than 700 college campuses worked with them to participate in the Day of Silence. Students observed the DOS with performance art; at the University of Wisconsin, Parkside, participants made a cemetery of those victimized by hate crimes based on their perceived or actual identity, she said in an e-mail.

Across the country, most students went through the day without incident, but some students were bullied. Presgraves said that posters were ripped down, and other participants reported name-calling, but for the most part, "students remained silent though it, and it was mostly a positive day."

Laub said that most of the schools her organization works with -- 660 registered California student groups -- had a good day, but at least two incidents were reported to the GSA Network as of Monday. A group of students in Fresno met with resistance from school administrators, and participants in a Sacramento-area school were harassed and called names.

In Lebanon, Mo., police officers patrolled the grounds of Lebanon High School, anticipating violence, according to KSPR-TV, an ABC affiliate in Springfield, Mo. Leading up to the DOS, a large number of parents threatened to keep their children home from school. The controversy caused many students to ditch school out of protest against the DOS, and others didn't show up because they feared for their safety. Lebanon's hallways were relatively quiet on Friday. As principal Robert Smith said in the report, the event was "blown out of proportion."

In Snoqualmie, Wash., nearly 100 protesters gathered at Mount Si High School, approximately 30 miles east of Seattle, to rally against the DOS. The group, led by antigay pastor Ken Hutcherson, whose daughter attends Mount Si, prayed and sang loudly outside the school. About 40 counterprotesters beat on drums, chanting "Go home," according to the Seattle Times. Almost a third of Mount Si students did not attend classes on Friday.
But according to Presgraves, the protesters were unable to derail the DOS.

"AFA and its partners basically failed," Presgraves said. "Their effort was to stop the Day of Silence and continue the bullying that goes on in schools, but the message was heard in more schools than ever, in more schools that had never heard of the Day of Silence before." (Michelle Garcia, The Advocate)

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