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ARTICLE

Teaching Tolerance

Teaching Tolerance is a program of the Southern Poverty Law Center. Its mission is to reduce bias and promote equity in schools throughout the United States.

GRADES

All

SUBJECTS

Anthropology, Geography, Human Geography, Professional Learning, Social Studies, Civics

For the complete profile with media resources, visit:

<http://www.nationalgeographic.org/article/teaching-tolerance/>

By Ryan Schleeter

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Teaching Tolerance is a program of the Southern Poverty Law Center, based in Montgomery, Alabama. Its core goals are to “foster inclusiveness, reduce bias, and promote educational equity” for K-12 students in the United States.

PROGRAM

Director Maureen Costello says the idea of “anti-bias” is central to understanding Teaching Tolerance’s work.

“We are an anti-bias program. That’s one of those words that people don’t always understand,” she says. “We try to help people—and especially students—shake off the bias that society teaches them and reduce prejudice by getting past the labels. We’re helping teachers with pedagogy and we’re helping them bring children and youth together to appreciate each other and appreciate difference.”

The main way Teaching Tolerance works to achieve these goals is as a publisher of books, magazines, films, and teaching materials. Its flagship publication, *Teaching Tolerance* magazine, is published two times per year and distributed to 450,000 educators. Its films address topics ranging from the Civil Rights Movement to anti-gay bullying in schools and have earned two Academy Awards in the short documentary category. All materials are free to educational institutions.

HISTORY

The history of Teaching Tolerance is deeply intertwined with that of the Southern Poverty Law Center, which was founded in 1971 by civil rights attorneys Morris Dees and Joseph Levin. The center is a program truly rooted in Southern history. Its original purpose was to bring civil lawsuits under the Civil Rights Acts and the 14th Amendment and to fight for desegregation.

The organization broadened its focus in the 1980s and adopted the idea of “fighting hate as well as seeking justice.” Specifically, Dees and his contemporaries began to dismantle the Ku Klux Klan through civil lawsuits. The motivation to form Teaching Tolerance came from Dees’ realization that “it was not enough to beat them in the courts” and that the SPLC should also work to “prevent racial and ethnic violence from happening.”

“Teaching Tolerance came out of the idea that the best way to prevent hatred and violence is to start changing attitudes among children,” Costello says. “Schools are often the best possible opportunity, because everyone goes to school. Public schools bring together people of all kinds; it’s a great opportunity for a program that reduces prejudice.”

MOST REWARDING PART OF THE PROGRAM

Costello says the support and feedback from educators is the most rewarding part of Teaching Tolerance’s work.

“We live for the responses we get from teachers about what happens when they show our films or use our resources,” she says. “I’ve read literally thousands of letters or evaluations from teachers about the film *Bullied*. It just amazes me. It says to us, story by story, individual student by individual student, ‘Your films have made a difference.’”

Teaching Tolerance also acts as an outlet for educators experiencing prejudice themselves or working against the grain to reduce bias in their schools.

“We hear a lot from teachers who feel really isolated in their schools because they themselves are closeted LGBT, or they’re the only progressive educator in their school,” Costello says. “What they turn to Teaching Tolerance for is a sense of community.”

MOST CHALLENGING PART OF THE PROGRAM

One challenge the organization faces is gauging how effective its methods are at creating change.

“The big challenge is that it’s hard to know whether you’ve had an impact. That’s a challenge of teaching in general,” Costello says. “The kinds of things that we teach are the things that change character.”

The organization also encounters opposition from those who don’t believe in its mission. As a self-proclaimed “progressive organization,” Teaching Tolerance often has a difficult time connecting with schools with socially conservative environments or administrations.

“We don’t want to make it hard for schools to use our materials, but we do face opposition from people who are fearful of the changing diversity of American culture,” Costello says.

GEO-CONNECTION

The geographic contexts of the Southern Poverty Law Center and Teaching Tolerance have always played a critical role in shaping the organization.

“I think most of what we do fits into the category of human geography,” Costello says. “We’re rooted in the South where the social and cultural environment produced Jim Crow (laws) and the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Movement, which started out as a racial movement, has expanded to be embraced by all sorts of groups.”

Unique geographies across the United States have allowed Teaching Tolerance to expand the scope of its work and respond to current events that have an impact on cultural understanding.

“We try to pay attention to the pulse of the nation, in a sense,” Costello says. “If there’s a division in American society somewhere, it finds its way into the schools. So not only is there a

problem to be addressed in the schools, but it's also an opportunity for prevention."

GET INVOLVED

Teaching Tolerance has a number of outlets specifically for educators. Its monthly newsletter, magazines, and teaching resources are all free. It also maintains an active Facebook page where teachers can come together to share ideas and stories to support coexistence in the classroom.

Beyond making use of the program's resources, students and teachers alike have the opportunity each day to fight against prejudice and stand up for equity in schools.

"Stand up for what's right, for what you believe in. Switch from being a bystander to what we call an *upstander*," Costello says. "For kids who are being bullied, know that it can change and find help—confide in trusted adults."

Vocabulary

Term	Part of Speech	Definition
14th amendment	<i>noun</i>	update to the U.S. Constitution guaranteeing all citizens equal protection and due process under the law.
attorney	<i>noun</i>	lawyer.
bias	<i>noun</i>	prejudice.
bullying	<i>noun</i>	use of physical or psychological force to abuse or intimidate others.
civil rights	<i>plural noun</i>	set of fundamental freedoms guaranteed to all individuals, such as participation in the political system, ability to own property, and due process and equal protection under the law.
civil rights movement	<i>noun</i>	(~1954-1968) process to establish equal rights for all people in the United States, focusing on the rights of African Americans.
conservative	<i>adjective</i>	traditional or reluctant to change.
context	<i>noun</i>	set of facts having to do with a specific event or situation.
desegregate	<i>verb</i>	to end segregation by race.
dismantle	<i>verb</i>	to take apart.
diversity	<i>noun</i>	difference.
documentary	<i>noun</i>	non-fiction film.
equity	<i>noun</i>	fairness or impartiality.
foster	<i>verb</i>	to promote the growth or development of something.

Term	Part of Speech	Definition
human geography	<i>noun</i>	the study of the way human communities and systems interact with their environment.
inclusive	<i>adjective</i>	containing many different parts or elements.
intertwine	<i>verb</i>	to unite by twisting together.
Jim Crow	<i>adjective</i>	(1874-1965) set of laws, rules, and behaviors that enforced segregation between African Americans and whites in the American South.
Ku Klux Klan	<i>noun</i>	terrorist organization formed after the Civil War to suppress the rights of Americans not of northern European descent.
LGBT	<i>adjective, noun</i>	(lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) having to do with the queer community, particularly as it relates to sexuality, gender identity, gender, race, class, ability, and age.
pedagogy	<i>noun</i>	art and science of teaching or developing instructional strategies.
prejudice	<i>noun</i>	unfair feeling for or against someone or something without basis in reason.
publisher	<i>noun</i>	person responsible for producing a printed or electronic set of information.
reduce	<i>verb</i>	to lower or lessen.
South	<i>noun</i>	loosely defined geographic region largely composed of states that supported or were sympathetic to the Confederate States of America (Confederacy) during the U.S. Civil War.

Articles & Profiles

- [National Geographic Education: The Selma-to-Montgomery Marches](#)

Instructional Content

- [Teaching Tolerance: Bullied](#)

Interactives

- [National Geographic Magazine: Civil War to Civil Rights Timeline](#)

Websites

- [The Southern Poverty Law Center: Teaching Tolerance](#)

