

THE TEACHING TOLERANCE PROJECT of the Southern Poverty Law Center is among the nation's leading providers of anti-bias resources for K-12 schools, serving 400,000 educators annually. Its materials — free to educators — have garnered more than 20 honors from the Association of Educational Publishers (AEP), including the Golden Lamp, the highest accolade in the field, as well as two Academy Awards.® Its guidebook, *Responding to Hate at School*, was a finalist for AEP's Distinguished Achievement Award in 2000.

THE SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER is dedicated to fighting hate and bigotry and to seeking justice for the most vulnerable members of our society. Using litigation, education, and other forms of advocacy, the Center works toward the day when the ideals of equal justice and equal opportunity will be a reality. The Center is providing legal assistance to the Jena Six.

FREE RESOURCES FOR SCHOOLS

Visit www.tolerance.org/jena to find:

- ➔ Tools to assess school climate
- ➔ Warning signs that a campus incident involves bias
- ➔ Proven strategies for handling bias incidents and hate crimes in schools
- ➔ Standards-based lesson plans to counteract bias and promote tolerance

TEACHING
TOLERANCE 

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SIX LESSONS *from* JENA

WHAT EVERY SCHOOL & EDUCATOR
SHOULD TAKE TO HEART

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Teaching Tolerance

A PROJECT OF THE SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER

Six Lessons from **Jena** every school and educator should take to heart



THE OAK TREE WHERE NOOSES WERE HUNG ...

on the Jena High School campus in Fall 2006 no longer stands. It was chopped down, presumably in an effort to erase racial tensions in the small Louisiana town.

The school's main academic building is also gone, destroyed by an arson that has raised questions about a possible link to the racial discord.

What remains in the predominately white, rural town are legal battles involving black students who have become known internationally as the "Jena Six." They are accused of beating a white student at the climax of racial discord sparked by the noose hanging. Five of the students were initially charged as adults with attempted second-degree murder and conspiracy; the sixth was charged as a juvenile.

Advocates at the Southern Poverty Law Center and elsewhere, though recognizing clearly that violence is never an acceptable solution to racial tensions, argue that charges against the black students were disproportionate to the actual offense and that their race factored into the charges levied against them. Others disagree.

But, what educators must never forget is this: Had school officials in Jena paid closer attention to racial divisions on campus, addressed the noose-hanging incident properly and kept tensions from escalating, the beating may never have happened at all.

1 Don't ignore obvious signs of trouble

In Jena, a black student approached a vice-principal and asked, "Can we sit under that tree?" On campus, it was known as the "White Tree" — a place where white students historically gathered. The principal said people could sit wherever they liked. It was an appropriate response, yet one that overlooked the core issue: Why did students feel like they needed to ask for permission? What did the very question reveal about the school's racial climate?

2 Examine your school's climate

You may think your school is "no Jena High" — but do you know for sure? Are there divisions about which you are unaware?

In a survey conducted in 2005 by Teaching Tolerance, the National Education Association and the Civil Rights Project, the vast majority of teachers said their schools were largely free of racial or ethnic tensions.

Students paint a very different picture.

One in four reports being victimized in racial or ethnic incidents in a typical school year, and race and ethnicity aren't the only lines of division. Seventy percent of female students say they've been sexually harassed at school; 75 percent of gay students report hearing anti-gay slurs frequently or often at school, and more than a third say they've been physically harassed.*

3 Take bias incidents seriously

After a few black students sat under the "White Tree," three white students hung nooses from it. Jena's white school superintendent, Roy Breithaupt, later told the *Chicago Tribune*, "Adolescents play pranks. I don't think it was a threat against anybody."

In truth, the hanging of nooses was no youthful prank; it was a bias incident connoting racial lynchings. As Caseptla Bailey, whose son Robert is among the Jena Six, told Britain's *Observer*, the act "meant the KKK, it meant ... 'We're going to kill you, we're gonna' hang you 'til you die.'"

By their very nature, bias incidents intend to demean or instill fear in those targeted, and schools must address them quickly, consistently and effectively.

4 Provide forums for meaningful discussion

When bias incidents occur, schools must open lines of communication, not shut down debate. In Jena:

- After black students gathered around the "White Tree" to protest the school's response to the noose-hanging, the principal called a school assembly and told students it was time to put the incident behind them. The district attorney spoke next, flanked by police officers, warning students: "I can end your life with one stroke of my pen" — the equivalent of throwing gasoline on a fire.

- When black parents showed up at a school board meeting, they were not allowed to speak. When they showed up again, board members allowed a spokesperson to address them, but then quickly moved on to other business without addressing the parents' concerns.

In highly charged bias incidents, schools should hold forums for educators, students, parents and community members and issue regular updates about the incident, describing what happened, why the incident was unacceptable and how the school has responded thus far. Schools should seek input about ways the school, students, parents and community can work together to resolve the underlying problems.

5 Use bias incidents as teachable moments

Ask teachers to set aside class time to allow students to reflect on what has happened. Because students can influence peer behavior, ask them to write down suggestions for preventing further incidents and promoting respect and to discuss their suggestions in small groups. Since bias incidents often involve the use of bigoted speech (slurs, epithets or symbols), conduct lessons to empower students to make respectful choices.

6 Bridge divisions in the school — and the community

Organize school-wide events to help students cross the boundaries that divide them and learn about respectful behavior. Mix It Up at Lunch Day (Nov. 13, 2007, www.mixitup.org) and No Name-Calling Week (Jan. 21-25, 2008, www.nonamecallingweek.org) are excellent events with which to start.

Schools don't exist in isolation, however. If tensions exist in a school, they exist in the larger community, too. Whether through structured dialogue programs like those offered by the Study Circles Resource Center (www.studycircles.org), racial justice initiatives like those sponsored by the National League of Cities (www.ncl.org), or mediation services available through the Community Relations Service (www.usdoj.gov/crs/), the events in Jena serve as call to each of us to explore what divides us — and what can unite us.

* See U.S. Department of Education, "Protecting Students from Harassment and Hate Crime: A Guide for Schools," at http://www.ed.gov/offices/OCR/archives/Harassment/harass_intro.html and Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network, "2005 National School Climate Survey" at <http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/library/record/1927.html>