



SIX LESSONS

from

JENA

WHAT EVERY SCHOOL & EDUCATOR
SHOULD TAKE TO HEART

WWW.TOLERANCE.ORG/JENA

Teaching Tolerance

A PROJECT OF THE SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER



THE OAK TREE WHERE NOOSES WERE HUNG ...

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

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 a period of racial tension 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 played a factor in the charges levied. 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.

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

BY JENNIFER HOLLADAY

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're unaware?

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

Students, however, paint a very different picture.

One in four report being victimized in racial or ethnic incidents in a typical school year, and race and ethnicity aren't the only lines of division, either. 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 Caseplia 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: "With a stroke of my pen, I can make your lives disappear" — 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. Because bias incidents often involve the use of bigoted speech (slurs or epithets), conduct lessons to empower students to make respectful language choices.

6 Bridge divisions in the school — and the community

Organize school-wide events to help students cross the boundaries that may divide them and learn about respectful behavior. Teaching Tolerance's Mix It Up program (www.mixitup.org) and No Name-Calling Week (Jan. 21-25, 2008, www.nonamecallingweek.org) are excellent initiatives with which to start.

Schools don't exist in isolation, however. If tensions exist in a school, they probably exist in the larger community, too. Whether through structured dialogue programs like those offered by the Study Circles Resource Center (www.studycircles.org) or other social justice programs, like the Department of Justice's Community Relations Service (<http://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>

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Responding to Hate at School (Free)

www.tolerance.org/rthas/index.jsp

This free online guidebook from Teaching Tolerance provides tips for identifying bias incidents and hate crimes and model response protocols. Available in English and Spanish, print copies are available for use as part of educational training programs.

Six Lessons from Jena Online (Free)

www.tolerance.org/jena

Find free lesson plans and activities to help diffuse racial tensions, promote respectful language choices among students and teach about the Jena Six.

The Respectful School (\$23.95)

shop.ascd.org/productdisplay.cfm?productid=103006

Drawing from definitive research and the experiences of young victims, Stephen L. Wessler explains fundamental changes that every school should make to preserve a respectful learning environment.

SCHOOL CLIMATE QUESTIONNAIRE

This simple one-page questionnaire can be used to uncover differences in teacher and student perceptions, as an activity to open professional development programs related to school climate and safety, or as part of larger school-climate assessments that also include interviews, focus groups and other tools. It also can be adapted for use with parents.

Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.

	AGREE STRONGLY			DISAGREE STRONGLY	
	1	2	3	4	5
a. Students in our school get along well.	1	2	3	4	5
b. Students choose to interact primarily with people most like themselves.	1	2	3	4	5
c. Students in my school know how to report harassment or racial abuse to school officials.	1	2	3	4	5
d. Students in my school would feel comfortable reporting harassment or racial abuse to school officials.	1	2	3	4	5
e. Teachers in my school actively work to create a safe and welcoming environment for every student.	1	2	3	4	5
f. Every student in my school feels like he or she belongs here.	1	2	3	4	5
g. My school creates opportunities for students to get to know each other.	1	2	3	4	5
h. At my school, teachers, administrators, staff, students and parents listen to one other.	1	2	3	4	5
i. I look forward to coming to this school in the morning.	1	2	3	4	5

In the last three months ...

1. I've seen biased vandalism or graffiti at school.	true	false
2. I've heard a student use a slur, epithet or other derogatory put-down.	true	false
3. I've heard a student tease or ridicule another student.	true	false
4. I've heard a teacher or other adult in the school make disparaging remarks about a particular group of students.	true	false
5. I've seen — and analyzed — our school's safety data and reports.	true	false
6. I've had a conversation with someone about our school's climate.	true	false

Adapted from *Responding to Hate at School* (<http://www.tolerance.org/rthas/index.jsp>), *Mix It Up* (<http://www.mixitup.org>) and the U.S. Department of Education's "Creating a Safe and Connected School Climate" (http://www.scusd.edu/safe_schools/Docs_PDFs/Creating%20Safe%20Schools.pdf)

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