



ISSUE BRIEF

Southern Poverty Law Center's "Teaching Tolerance" Project

SPLC's "Teaching Tolerance Program" and Other K-12 School Initiatives

Since 1991, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) has led teacher trainings, published the *Teaching Tolerance* magazine for educators, developed online lesson plans, and produced documentaries for teachers. SPLC teacher resources seek to encourage K-12 teachers, and specifically English and history teachers, to discuss controversial topics related to gender identity and purported "prejudice" and "bias" in the classroom. The Teaching Tolerance program bills itself as a program focused on social justice, civil rights, multiculturalism, and anti-bias education. However, Teaching Tolerance program materials, sample curricula, and resources focus disproportionately on conveying acceptance for homosexuality and endorsement of the Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, and Transgender (LGBT) community. Through lesson plan templates and teacher training programs arranged through local school districts, SPLC encourages teachers to address controversial issues related to gender and sexual orientation in the classroom with children starting in preschool and kindergarten. Examples of such resources include the following:

- ◆ **Teacher newsletters:** SPLC sends newsletters and the SPLC *Teaching Tolerance* magazine to 400,000 teachers nationwide presenting strategies for creating classroom environments that celebrate the LGBT lifestyle. In a May 2012 SPLC teacher newsletter entry focused on "Queerness Meets Early Childhood Education," gay or lesbian teachers were encouraged to share their stories of "addressing queerness" with their "young students" in early childhood education. "Anti-bias" classroom activities are encouraged beginning in Pre-K.
- ◆ **Lesson Plans and Toolkits:** SPLC publishes model lessons and teaching material on topics such as civil rights history, gender equity, family diversity, and LGBT rights. In a lesson plan "My Family Rocks!" elementary teachers are instructed to help early learners (Pre-K through 5th grade) understand that though families may look "different," all families are "equal." Teachers are instructed to cite gay and lesbian couples, single parent, and partner/guardian relationships as examples of families "no different than" traditional nuclear families.¹ In a featured teacher "Toolkit for 'Gender Spectrum,'" SPLC presented a model lesson plan for grades 3-12 encouraging a "gender-neutral day in the classroom" as a starting point for discussion about societal expectations for gender norms.² In additional lesson outlines on "Using Role Plays to Understand How Gender Stereotypes Affect Our Lives," teachers are encouraged to consult resources from the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Educators Network (GLSEN) a pro-homosexuality activist organization.³

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801 G STREET NW, WASHINGTON, D.C. 20001
202-393-2100 • fax 202-393-2134 • (800) 225-4008 order line
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- ◆ **Teacher Training:** SPLC does direct outreach to school districts and state education departments to establish relationships with teachers and administrators. Though SPLC will customize seminar material, a predominant part of such trainings is the focus on normalizing the use of teaching material that specifically affirms various sexual identities. In March 2014, a Hawaii state legislator filed an ethics complaint with the Hawaii Department of Education for allowing SPLC to conduct a pilot seminar on SPLC's new model curriculum "Perspectives for a Diverse America." The curriculum includes a discussion about homosexual penguins and a boy wearing dresses, among other similar topics. After reviewing the content of the pilot seminar, the state representative criticized the state for allowing teachers to be paid to participate and implement such content.⁴ The lawmaker objected to teachers receiving an inherently biased training that presents a political agenda and targets individuals who may have moral or religious objections to homosexuality.⁵ The SPLC K-12 curriculum "Perspectives" emphasizes multiculturalism and "anti-bias standards" designed to affirm LGBT students. By the SPLC's own admission, resources and literacy standards are formulated to embody "culturally responsive pedagogy with the rigor of the Common Core."⁶
- ◆ **Anti-Bullying Initiatives:** SPLC has expanded the understanding of bullying to include any communication or treatment that does not celebrate and positively affirm an LGBT student's gender identity. Schools with policies that require simple neutrality on contentious subjects such as same-sex marriage have been targeted by SPLC as not "inclusive" enough of LGBT students. In practice, the school-wide bullying policies that SPLC advocates for (and often threatens legal action to secure) create a hostile environment for students who hold traditional religious or moral beliefs about family formation.⁷ To spread their new conception of "bullying," SPLC partners with teachers and school districts to deliver toolkits with its documentary on gay bullying ("Bullied"⁸) to teachers across the country. SPLC encourages teachers to help students form activist groups such as Gay Straight Alliance clubs on school campuses and to work with the politically-charged Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Educators Network, an organization that has promoted sexually explicit materials to young people.⁹ All the while, SPLC fails to take into account recent research that shows such "anti-bullying" initiatives in schools may actually empower real bullies, not reduce their behavior.¹⁰

What Can Parents Do?

Parents should be aware. Because SPLC communicates directly with teachers and school districts, you as a parent may not be informed immediately about SPLC content being delivered to your children. Parents should have conversations with their children's teachers, particularly social studies and English teachers, regarding their concerns. Parents should also express their opposition to SPLC's biased content to school administrators, principals, superintendents, and school board members.

Parents should point out that SPLC resources are fundamentally biased against people of religious faith as SPLC resources characterize individuals who adhere to religious or moral views about proper sexual ethics as "intolerant" and "bigoted." Parents should ask school leadership to avoid utilizing the one-sided and offensive content of a far-left activist organization to address controversial topics related to human sexuality.

Key Points to Communicate to Your Child's School:

- ◆ Teachers should not be using limited classroom time and resources to promote activist material
- ◆ SPLC is a one-sided political organization that presents biased information
- ◆ SPLC discriminates against people of faith and compares beliefs in natural marriage to racism
- ◆ SPLC's methodology and data has been criticized by academic experts and can not be trusted

Parents seeking to determine if SPLC has reached out to school officials may in some states file a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request to access communications between certain officials and SPLC

NOTES

¹ "Family Tapestry" Lesson Plan: "My Family Rocks!" Teaching Tolerance - A Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed March 11, 2013, <http://www.tolerance.org/lesson/family-tapestry>.

² "Toolkit for 'Gender Spectrum,'" Teaching Tolerance - A Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed March 11, 2014, <http://www.tolerance.org/toolkit/toolkit-gender-spectrum>.

³ "What Happens If ... Using Role Plays to Understand How Gender Stereotypes Affect Our Lives," Teaching Tolerance - A Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed March 11, 2014, <http://www.tolerance.org/lesson/what-happens-if-using-role-plays-understand-how-gender-stere>.

⁴ Keoki Kerr, "Ethics Complaint Targets Teachers' Anti-Bias Training Session," *Hawaii News Now*, accessed March 12, 2014, <http://www.hawaiinewsnow.com/story/24949407/ethics-complaint-targets-teachers-anti-bias-training-session>.

⁵ Malia Zimmerman, "Bribes for teachers? Lawmaker says advocacy group should not pay educators to attend 'tolerance training,'" *Hawaii Reporter*, accessed March 11, 2014, <http://www.hawaiireporter.com/bribes-for-teachers-lawmaker-says-advocacy-group-should-not-pay-educators-to-attend-tolerance-training/123>.

⁶ "Perspectives for a Diverse America," Teaching Tolerance - A Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed March 12, 2014, <http://www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-43-spring-2013/perspectives>.

⁷ One local parents group opposed to efforts to install a pro-LGBT anti-bullying program in a Minnesota school district was placed on SPLC's "Hate Map" for their opposition. For more about that school district's fight with the SPLC, see Heather Mac Donald, "Undisciplined," *City Journal* (Summer 2012): 26-39.

⁸ "Bullied: A Student, a School and a Case That Made History," Teaching Tolerance - A Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed March 12, 2014, <http://www.tolerance.org/kit/bullied-student-school-and-case-made-history>.

⁹ "Best Practices: Creating an LGBT-inclusive School Climate," Teaching Tolerance - A Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed March 11, 2014, <http://www.tolerance.org/lgbt-best-practices>.

¹⁰ Alexander Trowbridge, "Are-anti-bullying efforts making it worse," *CBS News*, accessed March 11, 2014, <http://dfw.cbslocal.com/2013/10/08/are-anti-bullying-programs-having-an-opposite-effect/>) and Seokjin Jeong and Byung Hyun Lee, "A Multilevel Examination of Peer Victimization and Bullying Preventions in Schools," *Journal of Criminology*, vol. 2013, May 2013, accessed March 11, 2014, <http://www.hindawi.com/journals/jcrim/2013/735397/>.