



What’s in a Name?

Among our Frequently Asked Questions, it is number one. Whether we’re on the road or here in Montgomery, the Teaching Tolerance staff can count on responding to it at least once a week. It comes during face-to-face conversations, via email, on Facebook, in letters and even—occasionally—in a phone call.

“You should change your name,” we’re told. “Tolerance isn’t enough.”

Almost invariably, this is followed by the vegetable example: “I tolerate broccoli (or Brussels sprouts or spinach), but I don’t like it.”

The question comes in so often—and has since Teaching Tolerance began 20 years ago—that we have a ready answer.* We agree the word is imperfect and offer the UNESCO definition as the one that most closely matches our own:

Tolerance is respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world’s cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human. Tolerance is harmony in difference.

Sometimes it seems that this response doesn’t go far enough. The question is often a pained plea, and deep-felt, as when a lesbian teacher wrote, “I’m not interested in just being put up with. I want to be accepted.”

That’s what we want, too.

Tolerance *can* mean “to merely put up with,” it’s true. But—as the UNESCO statement above shows—it’s not the only way to define *tolerance*. More importantly, it’s not what we mean. A

quick look at the contents of this issue will show that. We advocate for classrooms and schools in which every student is welcome and valued, in the hope that this generation of students will grow into adults who reject intolerance.

That idea—rejecting intolerance—is also key to the acceptance we all strive for.

Sadly, we still see far too many episodes of intolerance in our public life and in our schools. In the last two months, two states have considered anti-bullying laws that would make an exception for taunts based on religious beliefs. Fortunately, Michigan rejected this attempt to legalize religious intolerance. Tennessee has yet to act on the proposed legislation.

Other states, including Alabama, have passed draconian anti-immigrant laws that unleashed a torrent of hateful abuse toward Latino students. In one

instance, students taunted a girl, a U.S. citizen born of Latino parents, telling her she didn’t belong in their school and needed to go back to Mexico. Since parents without documents are being denied entry to schools, they are powerless to act when they learn that their children have become pariahs.

Intolerance isn’t a word we hear much anymore, but the hate it describes is very much with us. Kids who look different, those with disabilities, the ones who follow a minority religion and the ones who follow no religion, the children whose parents don’t have the means to keep up with trends—all of them know it. They need to be held close by teachers who care that they experience the respect and attention we all want for our own children.

That’s what Teaching Tolerance means.

—Maureen Costello

* [Read it at tolerance.org/about](http://tolerance.org/about)