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## Leading from Tolerance to Acceptance

By [Jill Berkowicz](#) and [Ann Myers](#) on January 27, 2013 8:31 AM | [2 Comments](#)

Evidence exists that bullying has life long effects and frequently leads to other forms of violence. Bullying is discriminatory harassment when based on race, national origin, color, sex, age, disability, or religion. In New York State the [Dignity for All](#) Act took effect on July 1st, 2012. The New York State Education Department website reports, in part: "The Dignity Act also amended Section 801-a of New York State Education Law regarding instruction in civility, citizenship, and character education by expanding the concepts of tolerance, respect for others and dignity to include: an awareness and sensitivity in the relations of people, including but not limited to, different races, weights, national origins, ethnic groups, religions, religious practices, mental or physical abilities, sexual orientations, gender identity, and sexes." Now, at least in New York, there is the protection of law. Immediate protection, however, lies in the minds and hearts of leaders.

### Confronting Personal Belief Systems

Schools must make the subtle and significant shift from tolerant environments to accepting ones. Some people use the word tolerance and mean acceptance. Others see a difference between the two. Here we view them as words with different meanings. Tolerance includes a type of separateness, while acceptance requires inclusion. Leading the leap from tolerance to acceptance requires the hard work of confronting personal belief systems. Belief systems are deeply rooted and formed early in life. They affect behaviors and decisions even though they are often not closely explored. They become transparent in those with whom we choose to associate and those who get excluded from our personal lives.

In his [January 22nd blog post](#) on service, Peter DeWitt said, "Too often, diversity is something that people are afraid of and they do not want to discuss it." That is a dangerous fear for a leader. The time will inevitably come when those belief systems become visible. Ask those who ignored the reports of sexual harassment or abuse at Penn State because the charges were leveled against a colleague. Ask those who made the mistake of blurring the line between private lives and public life on social media like the chief financial officer of the [Hernando County Public Schools](#) who resigned from her job just recently. Even those cases which merit much less media attention impact public respect for all of us.

The consequences of unexplored values can be life altering for children and career altering for leaders. The journey inward requires intense honesty. Often it begins with an examination of our humor and what we watch and read when we are alone. It is turning on the flashlight to delve into those dark places of the self while accompanied by our highest angel.

Inclusion is an essential foundation in the successful development of public school learning environments. Whether including means listening to the voice of the only female superintendent at the meeting, or a male point of view in a predominantly female department, embracing the angry and oppositional position of a board or community member, treating all students in the same manner, whether gay, straight, or questioning, white or of color, rich or

poor, acceptance is something leaders must model in order for schools to be a safe place for all.

On a recent trip to Okinawa, the **Dali Lama said**, "Past history clearly shows that violence cannot solve problems. Therefore, in the 21st century the path of peaceful dialogue is the only option left to us in achieving peace. For that reason, both compassion and courage are needed in order to work towards our mutual benefit." The times require us to be the leaders of change, hunkering down will not do.

So far, it has been a century of debate. There are changes that have to happen in our schools that have the potential to change the lives our students will lead as adults. It begins with examining our own personal belief systems while shifting the environment from tolerant to accepting. It continues as safe environments are built and maintained in which teachers, students, and administrators feel safe enough to question the status quo. We must be courageous enough to lead accepting environments in ways that allow the next eight decades to shift from polarizing debate to peaceful dialogue.

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