



OaklandNorth

Oakland teacher wins Teaching Tolerance award

By [Ryan Lindsay](#)

Posted September 15, 2016

On a Friday afternoon in the middle of a staff meeting at Aspire Public School's Monarch Academy, second grade teacher Karen Schreiner felt her phone buzz. It buzzed again. And again. And again. The call was from an area code she didn't recognize. Schreiner whispered to her principal that she'd be right back and stepped into the hallway. She called back. It was good news—she'd been chosen as one of five recipients of the Teaching for Tolerance Award.



Karen Schreiner follows along as Adrian Pina Rios reads aloud.

"I know I didn't yell in the hallway, but I did a little dance," says Schreiner, recalling her excitement.

"It's great to be recognized for work that you're really passionate about."

Over 100 educators across the country applied for the award. In addition to receiving a \$2,500 prize, each awardee collaborates with Teaching Tolerance (TT), a project of The Southern Poverty Law Center, for two years to develop programming, write for TT's blog and showcase their teaching practices for other educators.

"Karen is able to develop deep relationships with her scholars and create a classroom community that is safe, engaging, and students are able to take risks—both socially and academically," says Monarch Academy principal Jennifer Green. "She grounds her teaching in her deep belief that children should be aware and knowledgeable of their own identity, aware of justice and injustice, and equipped with the tools to make lasting change."

"I am incredibly proud of Karen," adds David Nutt, the school's second and third grade lead teacher. "Karen puts kids first in everything she does as an educator."

The prize—officially called the Teaching Tolerance Award for Teaching Excellence—was created in 2011 with the support of a grant from The Richard W. Riley College of Education and Leadership at Walden University. The award was given to its inaugural group of five recipients with a \$1,000 prize in collaboration with the National Education Association (NEA), *EdWeek Teacher* and other professional organizations.

In 2014 and 2016, according to the Teaching Tolerance website, the group focused on awarding teachers who worked "to reduce prejudice, improve intergroup relations and promote equity in their school communities" throughout the year. In 2011 and 2012, the group focused on recognizing teachers who "excelled at teaching students from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds," according to TT staff. Teachers are responsible for submitting their applications, which include short essays, school-specific questions and, upon finalist selections, a biography, video and a lesson plan.

"Karen Schreiner is an anti-bias educator with a firm and vocal commitment to racial equality," states a blog post congratulating the winners on the group's website. "Her classroom is truly a community."

For the past five years, Schreiner, with the help of some of her colleagues, has been developing an anti-bias curriculum to create a classroom culture in which it is normal to develop skills for handling discussions focused on “race, gender, family structures, exploring classism, ableism” and other critical topics, said Schreiner.

Schreiner calls this “literacy-based, social-emotional learning,” which means that students learn through reading different texts, by developing their social skills and learning to talk about the emotions that they feel in their lives and in the classroom.

In a sea of brown faces, Schreiner’s is the only white one. (Monarch Academy’s student body is 95 percent Latino.) Her students don’t seem to mind. They listen intently as she reads Angela Johnson’s *The Leaving Morning*, a colorfully illustrated book published in 1992 about an African-American family moving from their apartment to a new home. An excerpt from the book reads:

*Mama said the people in a truck would move us
and take care of everything we loved,
on the leaving morning.*

“How are the characters feeling about moving?” Schreiner asks.

Their hands eagerly shoot up to respond to her question. A few students respond, expressing sadness, especially because the brother and sister in Johnson’s book will no longer be close to their cousins once they move.

“Why did the characters’ feelings change during the story?” asks Schreiner.

Schreiner also teaches a Black Lives Matter unit over the course of five lessons. The first lesson introduces the students to the concepts of justice and injustice. She works with her students to identify examples in books they’ve read throughout the year.

A video taken of Schreiner teaching this unit shows her kneeling in between two students who are sitting at their desks, sharing an open book. She points at an illustration of a water fountain labeled “WHITES ONLY.”

“So do you think only letting white people drink from a water fountain is going to help black people get healthy?” asks Schreiner.

They shake their heads no.

“Hm,” she says. “So is this an example of justice—people being treated fairly? Or injustice?”

In the second lesson, students learn about protests through a gallery walk, where they see images of Black Lives Matter protesters, masses gathered for the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Justice, and other pictures of people engaged in protest. Lessons three and four use read-alouds to teach students about using empathy and assertiveness to combat injustice, and different techniques for appreciating differences, especially those dealing with race.

For the last portion of the unit, Schreiner introduces her students to Mike Brown and Tamir Rice, two African-American young men who were killed by police officers in 2014. Brown was shot in the back while running from Darren Wilson, a former Ferguson police officer; Rice was playing with a toy gun at city park when he was shot by former Cleveland police officer Timothy Loehmann.

In her video, Schriener shows her students a picture of Brown, in his forest green high school cap and gown and of Rice at a restaurant smiling without showing his teeth. They’re the first results of a Google Image search of their names.

“What do you notice about him?” asks Schreiner.

A student shares that Brown is holding a diploma. Another student says that Rice is smiling because he’s happy.

“What would you say if you saw him?” Schreiner asks.

The students say “Congratulations!” and “Let’s be friends!”

“What would you say or do if you saw someone treating Mike Brown or Tamir Rice unjustly?” asks Schreiner.

The class breaks into pairs to discuss.

“I would tell people to not treat people unjustly,” says one student.

The teacher then shares with the class what happened to Brown and Rice. The mood in the room shifts. “So because those people thought something bad about people with black skin, these two boys died,” Schreiner says. “Does anyone want to share what they’re thinking about that?”

“I’m feeling sad because Tamir Rice is, like, 12,” says one student.

“The police should have talked to Tamir Rice before they shot him, because they didn’t know if it was a real gun or not,” adds another student.

Schreiner exposes her students to issues like these in order to challenge stereotypes perpetuated by the media and as well as the students’ own unconscious biases, and to help them develop critical thinking skills, something she believes can be done at a young age.

As part of her persuasive writing unit, she helps students craft letters to address issues they feel strongly about. One student mailed a letter to Donald Trump attempting to convince him to not run for president. A group of students wrote to Mayor Libby Schaaf about keeping parks clean—she wrote back, inviting them to meet with her.

Schreiner says she strives to stay mindful of her own racial and class background when she’s leading her kids through discussions on topics like self-identity, police brutality and the school-to-prison pipeline.

“I think it’s really important for me to be aware of my own identity and how that’s impacting students,” she says. “I’m a middle-class white woman not from Oakland—what’s my role in having these conversations with students? How do I honor their concerns while also navigating my own white privilege and my authority and power?”

The Rockland County native wasn’t always comfortable having conversations about race. Schreiner went to school at a high school she describes as “highly racially segregated” in a “very geographically-segregated” city outside of New York. She recalls one of her teachers making fun of students who spoke Spanish.

“I was told explicitly and implicitly [by my parents] that meritocracy is a real thing and if you work hard enough, you can do anything,” says Schreiner.

While that shaped her own work ethic, Schreiner says it ignores systemic problems like institutionalized racism. “We operate in a society that benefits and privileges some groups over others,” says Schreiner. “Black and brown students are disproportionately referred to the office, suspended, expelled and jailed.”

Many students of color deal with poor learning environments and schools with inadequate teachers and high drop-out rates. These are realities that Schreiner did not have to face growing up because of the color of her skin.

Schreiner's goal is to eventually get her curriculum published for widespread use. She believes that if every child is exposed to this type of education, they can "become people who can not just identify when injustice happens, but take a purposeful and active stance against injustice" and become people who can identify problems within their communities and beyond.

Schreiber said she is humbled to receive the award—and she wants to make sure she gives credit to other teachers and activists whose work paved the way for her to pursue her curriculum. "It's very easy in a society that values white supremacy to look to white folks who are doing this work," says Schreiner. "I think it's also important to give credit to the activists and organizers who've been doing this work forever."

In October, Schreiner will present her anti-bias curriculum and the specific ways in which she approaches teaching the Black Lives Matter movement at the Teachers for Social Justice Conference in San Francisco.