

Teaching Tolerance Asks Congress to 'Mix It Up' in Open Letter

Written by Australian Business

Annual Event Helps Break Down Social Barriers in Schools Nationwide

MONTGOMERY, Ala., Oct. 23, 2013 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- In the wake of the recent government shutdown, the Southern Poverty Law Center's Teaching Tolerance project issued an open letter today calling on Congress to "Mix It Up."

On Oct. 29, students at more than 6,000 schools across the country will participate in the 12th Annual Mix It Up at Lunch Day event, which encourages students to step out of their cliques and sit with someone new in the cafeteria for just one day. The program was launched by Teaching Tolerance in 2002 to foster respect and understanding among students. To learn more, visit: tolerance.org/mix-congress .

As one of the nation's leading providers of anti-bias education resources, Teaching Tolerance reaches hundreds of thousands of educators and millions of students annually through its *Teaching Tolerance* magazine, multimedia teaching kits, online curricula, professional development resources and classroom-friendly social justice documentaries. These materials are provided to educators at no cost.

The open letter can be viewed below:

Dear U.S. Congressional Representatives,

Here at Teaching Tolerance, we provide resources to educators across the nation to help them teach students how to get along with each other and to work together productively. We believe that these are important skills for living and working in a diverse and democratic society.

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I've noticed that many of you are finding it hard to work together, and some of you don't like to talk to people outside your party. I've even heard name-calling. It reminds me of what happens in schools when kids are ostracized if they hang out with the "wrong" group. Like many Americans, I'd really like you to figure out how to get along so you can work on issues that matter.

I thought you might start by participating in Mix It Up at Lunch Day on Oct. 29, along with students in 6,000 schools across the nation, including 35 in

Nevada

; 59 in

Kentucky

; 68 in

Alabama

; 152 in

Washington State

; and 171 in

Wisconsin

. Go to our map to see your state. The idea is simple: We ask students to move out of their comfort zones and connect with someone new over lunch.

Although it's designed for kids in grades K-12, the teachers we've talked to think Mix could work for Congress too. It's so easy that 10-year-olds can plan it, so you'd have no trouble giving it a go.

You could probably ask your interns to help. Schools have been organizing Mix It Up events for 12 years, and millions of students have participated. Chances are that some of your young staffers already know what to do.

In elementary school, they might have enjoyed a Mix It Up at Lunch with everyone in the school community, including parents and cafeteria staff, just like Sol Feinstone Elementary School in Newtown, Pa. As middle schoolers, they might have danced, written poetry and seen a student-led flashmob – that's what students at Sandy, Utah's Albion Middle school did last year.

If they were in their high school's student council – and they probably were – they might have organized Mix several times a year (

Thomas Jefferson High

,

Bloomington, Minn.

), or planned a three-day extravaganza called "Lunchapalooza" (Palatine High School,

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Palatine, Ill.
).

On second thought, you should probably not plan on "Lunchapalooza" or a flashmob. It's your first time, so keep it simple.

I've checked the calendar and you're all in session on Oct. 29. Why not plan to eat lunch in the Senate or House cafeteria? Your interns could help you find a group that includes people you don't normally hang with. Don't worry about what to say. Simple conversation starters like "What was your favorite TV show as a child?" or "Do you have a pet?" can help you get to know each other as human beings.

Don't plan on talking about healthcare, taxes or the federal debt, OK?

Instead, you could do what the students at H.C. Wilcox High School, Meriden, Conn., did and create a paper chain of written suggestions of ways you could be kinder to each other. Or, if lunch is really fun, you might be inspired by the students at Chaminade College Preparatory School in West Hills, Calif., and leave the cafeteria in a conga line.

Here's what we've learned after 12 years of doing Mix: When students interact with those who are different from them, biases and misperceptions can fall away.

That sounds like a good goal for all of us, including our elected representatives.

Respectfully submitted,

Maureen Costello, Teaching Tolerance Director

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The Southern Poverty Law Center, based in Alabama with offices in Florida, Georgia, Louisiana and Mississippi

, is a nonprofit civil rights organization dedicated to fighting hate and bigotry, and to seeking justice for the most vulnerable members of society. For more information, see www.splcenter.org

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