



The Civil Rights Team Project

We get schools to think and talk about issues related to race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, physical and mental disabilities, gender, and sexual orientation (including gender identity and expression.)



Here's what you can read about in the September 2014 edition of *The Torch*:

From the Teams: An early civil rights team meeting at Daniel F. Mahoney Middle School in South Portland, and a project to address bias-based language on the school bus from Gardiner Area High School.

From the Office: New civil rights teams, our expanded and more inclusive definition of sexual orientation, summer efforts to increase collaboration, working with school administration, and getting more press.

From the News: How a recent decision from the Maine Human Rights Commission affects our work in schools, and some quick thoughts on Ferguson.

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This newsletter is written and distributed by the Civil Rights Team Project, a state-wide program under the auspices of the Maine Office of the Attorney General. The mission of the Civil Rights Team Project is to increase the safety of elementary, middle level, and high school students by reducing bias-motivated behaviors and harassment in our schools.

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From the Teams:



At **Daniel F. Mahoney Middle School** in South Portland... the civil rights team had their first meeting before the school year even started. I

joined 33 students in saying “yes” to Assistant Principal George Conant’s invitation to attend a half-day training on August 21. We did introductions in a community circle, I led [this wonderful activity](#) on why we have civil rights teams, and then we did some deep thinking on the concept of leadership. We ended the day with pizza. Overall, it was a great way for the team to start creating their identity, and they’ll certainly be ready to get to work right now, in September.

Hey, Mahoney Middle School civil rights team: thank you for giving up a half-day of your summer vacation to think and talk about civil rights issues in your school. It’s this level of commitment that makes the Civil Rights Team Project so strong. We expect great things from you this year! (And thanks to their advisors, George and Pat Peluso, for feeding having me.)

At **Gardiner Area High School**... the civil rights team is taking the lead in addressing the issue of bias-based language on MSAD #11 buses. For the first day of school, all MSAD #11 buses featured an anti-bias poster on the ceiling. (That’s 27 posters, each hand-made by the civil rights team!) The posters will serve as a visual reminder that bias-based language is not OK on the school bus.

Even more impressive, though, is the process the team went through to get those posters in the buses. Since last spring, they have met with the high school principal, district transportation director, and school board. In each of these meetings they shared their concerns about bias-based behaviors on the bus and sought permission to launch their campaign. During one of the district’s August workshop days they met with bus drivers to enlist their support and highlight the importance of an adult response to bias-based language. The bus drivers enthusiastically supported the initiative, and even offered ideas for how they could follow up with the civil rights team to measure the campaign’s effectiveness.

Moving forward, the team is scheduled to meet with the district’s administrative team to discuss the campaign and creating expectations for adult response to incidents of bias-based language. Later this fall they will also present to all K-8 students, highlighting the posters and the bigger issue of bias-based language.

Hey, GAHS civil rights team: This campaign shows how *students* can take the lead in enacting real change. Your posters are great, but the conversations you are initiating



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around those posters are what's really important. With every step of this campaign, you have taken the exact right tone so that adults don't feel like they're being accosted; you are simply enlisting their support. And to their credit, they have responded positively. The fact that you've done all this as a spring/summer project is simply inspiring. Thank you for the great work you're doing for all MSAD #11 students. (And thanks to their advisor, Christina Benedict, for sharing.)



Your School could be featured here! Ever wonder how teams get mentioned in *The Torch*? It's really quite simple: their advisors keep us informed about what they're doing. We are *especially* interested in highlighting:

- The ways your team is addressing any of our five expectations for civil rights teams.
- Any project initiatives, large or small, that are specifically related to race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, physical and mental disabilities, gender, or sexual orientation (including gender identity and expression).

So if your team is doing this stuff, why not drop us a note to let us know about it? All of us in the Civil Rights Team Project benefit from this kind of sharing, so...

Please share.



From the Office:

New Teams!

We are starting the 2014-2015 school year with some new civil rights teams! Here's who's joining us:

- An elementary school civil rights team at Walton Elementary in Auburn.
- Middle level teams at Glenburn Elementary School, Richmond Middle School, and Woolwich Central School.
- High school teams at Baxter Academy in Portland, the Marti Stevens Learning Center in Skowhegan, and Richmond High School.



Welcome to the Civil Rights Team Project! (And we look forward to welcoming more schools in the next few months, too.)

Expanding Our Definition of “Sexual Orientation”

Starting now, whenever and wherever I use the term *sexual orientation*, I am including the parenthetical (*including gender identity and expression*).

In case you don't know what gender identity and gender expression are, here are some definitions (courtesy of GLSEN):

- *gender identity*: How we identify ourselves in terms of our gender. Identities may be: male, female, androgynous, transgender, genderqueer, and others.
- *gender expression*: An individual's physical characteristics, behaviors, and presentation that are traditionally linked to either masculinity or femininity, such as: appearance, dress, mannerisms, speech patterns, and social interactions.

So why is the Civil Rights Team Project including this parenthetical and adding gender identity and gender expression to our list of civil rights categories?

Reason #1: It reflects state law.

While gender identity and expression are not explicitly mentioned in the Maine Civil Rights Act, they are both included in the Maine Human Right Act:

§4553. Definitions 9-C. Sexual orientation. "Sexual orientation" means a person's actual or perceived heterosexuality, bisexuality, homosexuality or gender identity or expression.



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Of course someone's gender identity and expression are not *really* a part of their sexual orientation... but what's important here is that people are protected from discrimination based on their gender identity and expression.

And since the Maine Human Rights Act includes anti-discrimination protection in education, this means that schools are specifically expected to protect students from discrimination and harassment based on gender identity and expression.

Reason #2: It's the right thing to do.

We need to protect all of our students, and the new reality is that more and more students feel comfortable with gender identities and expressions that fall outside of what is considered the norm. We hear more and more about students who identify as transgender or trans*. (*Trans** is an umbrella term that refers to all of the identities within the gender identity spectrum... of which there are many.) These students are at increased risk of discrimination and harassment. We need to protect them.

Including the words *gender identity and expression* in our work is good for *all* of our LGBT students, and not just those represented by the T. Much of the harassment that's related to sexual orientation is *really* about gender expression. If a student does not conform to gender stereotypes and expresses themselves in ways that do not conform with these stereotypes... the general assumption is that they're gay. Whether they identify as trans* or not, our LGBT students are often treated, and targeted, in a similar fashion.

But this really isn't just about protecting our trans* or LGBT students; it's about protecting everyone. Even students who do not identify as LGBT face constant pressure to be a certain way based on their gender. A boy who talks with a lisp and a girl who likes to wear ties both benefit from these protections, too. And maybe, just maybe, including the words *gender identity and expression* in our work will encourage all of us to think a little bit more about all the ideas and boundaries surrounding gender that influence us all.

So expect to see the words *gender identity and expression* a lot more in the Civil Rights Team Project. Whenever and wherever you see our list of civil rights categories, they'll be there, included as a parenthetical after sexual orientation. (The one exception is when we're working specifically with elementary school students, as explaining the concepts may derail whatever work we're trying to do.) We won't always highlight gender identity and expression; we don't have to. We include the words for the same reason that we specifically include all the other civil rights categories (race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, physical and mental disabilities, gender, and sexual orientation):

Seeing and saying the words gives people, and issues, visibility.



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Hitting the Road to Promote the Civil Rights Team Project

I was out and about this summer trying to increase the profile of the Civil Rights Team Project and get more civil rights teams started in our schools. My travels included:

- Staffing a CRTP table display at the Maine Schoolsite Health Promotion Conference at Sugarloaf. We now have a nice, new table display outlining the need for civil rights teams in our schools. (Check out the picture!) The process of creating this thing helped me really think about the best way to communicate why we do what we do. We will be looking at the results of all this thought at the upcoming advisor trainings when we look at a new framework for understanding the work of the CRTP. (If you squint at the picture, you might get a preview!)



- Meeting with the [Maine Parent Federation](#). They do advocacy work for families of children with disabilities. The CRTP will be featured in their fall newsletter.
- Presenting at the Holocaust and Human Rights Center of Maine's [Summer Seminar: Teaching the Nazi Holocaust](#). There were almost 30 participants this year, including some of our advisors!



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- Attending the [Positive Youth Development Institute Conference](#) at UNE Biddeford. This annual conference aims to “support effective youth engagement and overall youth development.” I think that our subject matter and structure make us the perfect candidates to present at this conference! I’ll be looking for some civil rights teams to join me next summer...

Working with Administration

One of our goals for the 2014-2015 school year is to bolster administrative support for our civil rights teams and their advisors. With active support from administration, we are able to do more.

This year, we’ve added a simple question to our introductory e-mail to advisors:

- In an effort to increase administrator support for the CRTP and your civil rights team, I would like to send out some important information to your administration. Who should I contact, and at what e-mail address? (I will CC you on the e-mail, too!)

If and when I hear from advisors that their schools will be participating in the Civil Rights Team Project this year, I directly contact school administrators with information, philosophical and practical, on how they can actively support their civil rights teams and advisors. I think that this is something administrators are hungry for; they want to be supportive, but could use some specific ideas on what they can do to show it. It’s one thing to *be* supportive, and another to *show* it. I think that this process will help increase administrative showing of support for our civil rights team this year.

Resolved: We Are Getting More Press This Year!

Your midseason check-ins and end of year reports used to include a question about if you’d received any press. No more... I removed it. Why? Because I’ve done a lousy job getting press for the Civil Rights Team Project. How can I expect you to do something that I’m not doing myself?

Well... this year, *this year*, things are going to be different. We are getting the press we deserve at the Civil Rights Team Project. Look for it.



From the News:

This is a new section in our newsletter where we look at what's happening in the news and how it affects our work here in the Civil Rights Team Project.



Maine Human Rights Commission Rules in Favor of Student Claiming Discrimination

A recent decision from the Maine Human Rights Commission serves as an important reminder that Maine schools have a legal obligation to protect students from discriminatory harassment. This summer, the Commission ruled in favor of a student claiming discrimination based on his sex and sexual orientation. In ruling for the student, they ruled against the school and school district. If the student and the school district can't reach a settlement, this could proceed to trial.

The particulars of the complaint aren't especially important to our work, but the findings are. Here is an important passage from the Commission's findings:

With regard to Respondent's (the school and school district's) liability, Respondent was aware of most of the incidents reiterated by Minor in the Commission's investigation into this complaint. Respondent did, as it asserts here, take corrective action. It had good policies in place. However, it did not *do* enough in this instance. Due to the number of incidents that occurred specifically to Minor, it is sensible to think that Respondent should have honed in on that fact to see if there was a bigger issue instead of handling each incident on a case by case basis for more than two and a half years.

What exactly does this mean? Based on this ruling, it's not enough for schools to deal with claims of bias-based discrimination and harassment on a case-by-case basis. At some point, they need to connect the dots and address the school climate and culture. They need to do more than just respond to incidents; they need to work at addressing issues.

These decisions are important in providing precedent for other schools. Looming over all our work is the reality that schools can be sued for not adequately protecting students from discrimination based on their race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, physical and mental disabilities, sex and gender, and sexual orientation (including gender identity and expression). This is one of the many, many reasons why it's important that we talk about civil rights issues in our schools; we are legally obligated to guarantee equal access to education, free from discrimination.



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I'd like to think that all our schools are interested in doing this because it's the moral and right thing to do, but... bad publicity and legal decisions are powerful motivators, too. Let's hope that this decision pushes our schools to critically examine their own current practice and think about what they can do to promote a school climate that is free of bias-based discrimination and harassment for all our students.

Ferguson, Missouri

There is so, so much that could be said about recent and ongoing events in Ferguson, Missouri. We're going to keep it simple here...

People, and especially white people, need to develop the vocabulary and comfort level necessary to participate in meaningful conversations about race and racism. The basic ability to listen to other people's lived experiences, without feeling defensive and threatened, is critical.

We do not develop these abilities by avoiding conversations about race. Our civil rights teams can help students and schools develop these abilities through our own willingness to think and talk about race and racism.

We have to talk about race.