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TORCH (April 2017)

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The Civil Rights Team Project

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



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

From the Teams: Responding to ugly incidents of bias, promoting anti-bias messages through books, and civil rights vocabulary instruction... this is what our civil rights teams do.

From the Advisors: This time we're profiling Beth Higgins and Heidi Tolman, the wonderful co-advisors for the middle level civil rights team at Carrabec Community School in North Anson.

From the Office: There's renewed interest in the Civil Rights Team Project, and that means we're growing. Brandon's been out and about promoting the Project, too.

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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.

Brandon Baldwin—Program Manager, Newsletter Editor
Janet Mills—Attorney General



From the Teams:

At **Baxter Academy** in Portland, the civil rights team collaborated with the adults in the Identity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee (IDC)

and administration in responding to an incident involving a swastika in their school. The civil rights team drafted a letter that: (1) clearly named the incident, (2) included a statement about the school's commitment to protecting student civil rights and safety against hate speech, and (3) outlined the next steps in the school's response. School administration endorsed, signed, and sent the letter out to all Baxter students and families.

The IDC, civil rights team, and student senate then worked together in soliciting student reflections in response to the incident. They carefully went through the reflections, noted trends, and organized a program for a town hall meeting. At the meeting, the civil rights team and student senate led students in thinking about how their school must embrace and honor their differences, and that this is the best way to come together as Baxter Academy. The IDC, Brandon, and administration also spoke.

Hey, Baxter Academy civil rights team... it was inspiring sharing a stage with you at the town hall meeting. What I saw there was one of the core philosophies of the Civil Rights Team Project in action: collaboration between our office, adults in schools, and student voices. In my talk, I challenged the audience to think about how they'd use their voices. Thank you for using your voices to advocate for respect and inclusion. (And thanks to their advisor, Breanne Lucy, for sharing.)

At **Carrabec High School** in North Anson, well... I'll just let their civil rights team co-advisor, Katie Hall, explain:

Our school is very small, like many of the more rural school districts in Maine. We had an incident happen. Two students somehow got KKK recruitment flyers and left them in two classrooms at school.

On reflection, I want to let everyone know as advisers to civil rights teams that when something like this happens at your school, you are not alone.

I found out through experience that right after "an INCIDENT" it is normal to go through the classic Kubler-Ross stages of grief. It's hard to believe something like that happened in your community. It's angering. It hurts. It's painful and even traumatizing. You've been working with kids for years, and this is exactly the kind of thing you've been trying to prevent with your life's work. How did this happen?



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The truth is, it can happen anywhere. Even in a tiny little community where you know all the kids on a first-name basis. Kids need stability and they need to know that everything is going to be okay after a crisis. The most important thing is that the kids feel safe and welcome at school. They need to know that the majority of the student body is not “like that” and that they do want everyone to feel welcome at school.

What our civil rights team did was we decided to do a poetry installation with the theme “You are welcome here (at Carrabec).”

We typed up and printed the poems on color paper and made walls of them, many in a rainbow pattern. Students were invited to submit them either with a name or anonymously. Students with disabilities got help from adults or found a relevant existing poem to submit. Some of our English teachers made class assignments to do them. We accepted multiple poems for those who wished to write two or more. We're still getting poetry, and accepting poems all through March. We've heard a lot of positive feedback that both the colors and the message help brighten up the school and people have enjoyed reading them.

Brandon was very supportive to us throughout the process. I'm glad we had his wisdom and experience both from the view of the law and as an educator. It's a really awful thing when an “incident” happens at your school, but don't be afraid to ask for support and then focus on making the kids feel safe and welcome again. A crisis can be turned into an opportunity to turn things around and find a creative outlet to educate your students.

Hey, Carrabec High School civil rights team... you took something ugly and you made it beautiful. This isn't just about aesthetics, though. You took action to positively assert what kind of school community you want at Carrabec High School, and it came at a time when it was important to share and reaffirm that vision. (And thanks to their advisors, Katie Hall and Lisa Savage, for sharing.)





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At **Margaret Chase Smith School** in Skowhegan, the civil rights team has promoted the collection of Maine Humanities Council-gifted anti-bias picture books in their school. Before they started promoting the books, they first read all seven titles and thoroughly discussed them as a team. They then wrote book reviews focusing specifically on the anti-bias themes in each book, recreated the cover artwork, and organized a book display and bulletin board in the library encouraging students to “Browse Beautiful Bias-Free Books.” Civil rights team members recorded *Reading Rainbow*-style touting individual titles, which were then shared with the entire school. Once students read a book, they can fill out a review form that makes them eligible to receive a “Bias free is the way to be” bracelet.

Hey, MCS civil rights team... this is exactly why the Maine Humanities Council partnered with us in sharing these wonderful bias-free picture books with our elementary teams. We didn't know exactly what you'd do with them, but we felt like if we put them in the right hands, great things would happen. Not only are you reading and discussing those books; you're excited about them, and you're sharing that excitement with your school. We want you to get your school thinking and talking about civil rights issues, and you're making it happen with books! (And thanks to their advisors, Mary McCann-Baker and Kara Bubier, for sharing.)



At **Oxford Hills Middle School** in South Paris, the civil rights team is working in conjunction with the OHMS news team and sharing a “word of the week” on the school’s weekly news broadcast. Each week civil rights team members get on camera and share an important civil rights-related word/concept with the school. So far, they’ve researched, scripted, and delivered segments on *bias*, *equality*, *gender identity*, and *race*. (Want to see one? Check out 7:13 on [this link](#).)



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Hey OHMS civil rights team... this is the kind of vocabulary instruction I like. To have meaningful conversations about civil rights, we have to develop some familiarity and comfort with the vocabulary. But you are doing more than just teaching words; you are using these words to promote the mission and goals of the civil rights team. (And thanks to their advisors, Trisha Cherry and Kelley Hodgman-Burns, for sharing.)

At **Washburn District High School**, the civil rights team wants to see civil rights represented in their school's selection of literature. They initiated a project through donorschoose.org to fund the acquisition of books related to the civil rights movement. They raised the necessary funds in just seven days, and because the campaign was student-led, they received matching funds from a donor. They purchased fifteen titles and gifted them to the school's library. They enjoyed the success of the project so much that they've already started a similar drive, this time focusing on Holocaust survivor memoirs.

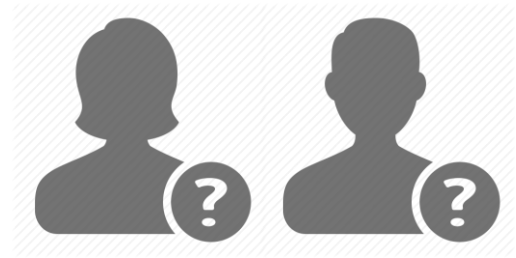
Hey, Washburn civil rights team... I understand that many of you are seniors this year. It's great that you are leaving something tangible behind for your classmates. You are creating opportunities for your classmates and future students at your high school to learn from the past, and create understanding between people of different identities. Not a bad legacy. (And thanks to their advisor, Laurie Moulton, for sharing.)





From the Advisors:

This month we're featuring Beth Higgins and Heidi Tolman, the middle level civil rights team co-advisors at Carrabec Community School in North Anson. Beth is a school social worker and is in her twelfth year of advising. Heidi works in special education and is in her tenth year of advising.



1. What do you like about being a civil rights team advisor?

We enjoy working with the kids. We love seeing the kids use the knowledge that they have learned and using that knowledge to teach others in our school.

2. What is your favorite moment or memory associated with the CRTP?

We like seeing our team interact with the other schools during conferences, trainings, and the Sea Dogs games! They talk about them for years after. We are such a small community that when we get together with other schools the students get to hear voices from others about the challenges they face. It is a confirmation for the students that the work we do as a team really matters and makes a difference.

We also enjoy pulling off successful projects. Sometimes we have really big ideas in our head, and they often take much more time than anticipated so when we accomplish those projects. It is a huge confidence builder to have the students finish big projects!

3. What do you see as the biggest civil rights issue in your school?

Language, language, and more language!!!

4. What do you like about your civil rights team this year?

We made some significant changes this year as far student members on our team on our team. In previous years we have had large teams (45), and have not had the opportunity to accomplish much as a result of having too many students to manage. This year we set a limit to 15-20 students max. The students had to fill out an application, and sign a civil rights pledge. (Parents sign as well). Students were chosen to be on the team based on their commitment and desire to be a civil rights member and role model for others. The decision to make these changes really gave us an opportunity to be a more productive, focused team. Another change we incorporated is to have the students take on leadership roles within the team. This has helped immensely to make the team student driven.



5. What makes you optimistic about our work in the future?

We feel that the work that the elementary school civil rights team does helps inspire students to join our team at the middle level. In past years we have had to recruit students to be part of the team, and now students want to join to make a difference.

6. What advice or wisdom could you offer to other civil rights team advisors?

Here are some of the things that we have found helpful over the years of being civil rights team advisors:

- Application process: This helps to really get a chance to see who is motivated to be on the team.
- Pledge: Enforces message of what the team represents, and holds kids accountable for their actions. This is something that we have also had parents sign to make sure they understand the purpose of the team.
- Student driven: The more you can get the students to come up with ideas of projects the better they are focused and driven.
- Provide food!: Students love snacks and fun meetings.
- Co-advisors: Have a co-advisor if possible. We work together great and always bounce ideas off from each other to make our team better.





From the Office:

New Teams!

There's plenty of interest in the Civil Rights Team Project right now. Since our last newsletter, we've started new civil rights teams in Freeport High School, John Bapst Memorial High School in Bangor, Morse High School in Bath, Presumpscot Elementary School in Portland T.W. Kelly Dirigo Middle School in Dixfield, and Yarmouth High School.



We are now active in over 175 Maine schools! We've also heard from numerous schools interested in starting teams next fall. This is an exciting period of growth for the Civil Rights Team Project, and we look forward to working with so many new participants.

Out and About: Attendance Matters! Regional Meetings

I've been out on the road presenting on issues of bias and harassment as a special guest at the Attendance Matters! regional meetings in Augusta, Bangor, Caribou, Lewiston, and Portland. Attendance Matters! is a continuing conversation sponsored by Count Me In and the Maine Department of Education, focusing on ways to increase student attendance in Maine schools. The Civil Rights Team Project believes that if we can create school communities that are safe, welcoming, and respectful for students of all identities, attendance should increase.

In my presentations, I framed issues of bias and harassment through the tried-and-true lens of the Dr. Seuss story *The Sneetches* before sharing examples of how civil rights teams are engaging their schools in thinking and talking about civil rights issues. At each regional meeting, I was joined by a civil rights team advisor(s) to offer a more in-depth case study of one civil rights team and the work they do. These advisors included:

- In Augusta, Messalonskee High School advisor Kellie Sanborn
- In Bangor, Holbrook Middle School advisor Joy Walters
- In Caribou, Presque Isle Middle School advisor Julie Stephenson
- In Lewiston, Washburn Elementary School advisors Jody Brier and Maggie Luce
- In Portland, Westbrook High School advisor Darcie Simmons

From all of the civil rights team initiatives we shared, I offered the following recommendations for schools, agencies, and organizations:

- *Go there:* talk about race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, disabilities, gender (including gender identity and expression), and sexual orientation.



- Don't outsource the work!
- Have a group who thinks about this stuff.
- Communicate that all are welcome.
- Be inclusive and intentional with language.
- Look at who is/isn't represented in your community.
- Challenge people to examine their own behaviors.
- Look at institutional practices.
- Recognize and celebrate different identities.
- When something terrible happens that might affect people of certain identities...
show support.

Of course it is my hope that my presence at these regional meetings may lead to more civil rights teams in our schools, but these recommendations and the philosophy behind them are useful and replicable anywhere, with or without civil rights teams. A major thank you to Count Me In and the DOE for inviting the Civil Rights Team Project to be a part of their work, and of course, to our wonderful civil rights team advisors for taking the time to organize and deliver some wonderful presentations.

Out and About: “The Silence of Our Friends” at the MYAN Conference

"In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends." -Martin Luther King, Jr.

What can and should a school do when there's a public incident of hate in the community? In this workshop, we'll look at what schools, and especially students, can do to reject hate and promote a safe, welcoming, and respectful school community where everyone belongs.

That's the description for a new workshop I unveiled at the Maine Youth Action Network Annual Youth Leadership Conference on March 30. The topic of responding to public incidents of hate feels especially timely and relevant, and should be useful moving forward.

This 75-minute workshop mostly consisted of participants organizing into small groups and exploring content at a series of six self-guided stations. These stations included video clips, newspaper articles, a cartoon, an open letter, and a brainstorming activity, as well as discussion questions to accompany the content. Participants were challenged to consider all the content from the stations in creating guidelines for how school communities can effectively respond to public incidents of bias.

I'm incredibly excited about this workshop. (At the end of the day, I even went so far as label it *a revelation*.) I'm actively thinking of ways to use it in the future: at advisor trainings? at student trainings? as an on-site staff training? with individual civil rights teams? The exact future of this workshop isn't immediately clear, but the content



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clearly has a place in the Civil Rights Team Project. And unfortunately, the topic will be one that will remain timely and relevant.

In the Next *Torch*

Our next *Torch* newsletter will be our last for the 2016-2017 school year, which means it will be packed full of end-of-the-year highlights, including:

- details from the eight school civil rights teams we (the CRTP and the Maine Humanities Council) paired with the street artist Pigeon to create art installations addressing the issue of belonging through a civil rights lens
- the sixth annual CRTP Night with the Portland Sea Dogs
- the statewide conference

We look forward to sharing it all here!