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Here’s what you can read about in the December edition of The Torch:

From the Teams:

Plenty to report from our civil rights teams as they settle into what promises to be a great 2017-2018 school year! Check out news from some of our participating teams from around the state.

From the Students:

Recently, we posed the following question to our student civil rights team members: “What civil rights issue or topic are you interested in learning more about? How come?” See a sampling of their responses here!

From the Advisors:

This month we profile Julie Stephenson, the civil rights team advisor at Presque Isle Middle School in Presque Isle.

From the Office:

We’ve been busy with a series of successful student trainings, and we’re excited to report out some of the many highlights!

From the Director:

Brandon reflects on the Civil Rights Team Project’s relationship with bullying.

We help schools think and talk about issues related to race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, disabilities, gender (including gender identity and expression), and sexual orientation.
At **Biddeford Middle School**, the civil rights team recently presented on their mission and work to the entire school. The presentation included 12 slides that were especially effective in using the words *race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, disabilities, gender (including gender identity and expression), and sexual orientation*.

The team talked about their mission, pointed out some of the work they’ve already done in the school, and promoted and celebrated the diversity that exists in their school community (doing a really good job of using pictures to add to the effect, too). The presentation was well received, and advisor Coleen Whitehurst-Hatt could not be more proud.

In **Farmington**, students from the **Cascade Brook Elementary School, Spruce Mountain Elementary School, and Spruce Mountain Middle School** civil rights teams marched together in the annual Chester Greenwood Parade. Thousands of onlookers cheered them on as they marched, held signs, chanted, and handed out cleverly-packaged treats with civil rights messaging.

They were even joined by our own Stacie Bourassa and the Attorney General, Janet Mills.

**Hey, Chester Greenwood Parade participants from the CRTP...** way to get out there! It looks like you had a lot of fun, but you were also letting your communities know more about your civil rights teams, and the CRTP. It helps you work on your message, and the publicity is great! (Thanks to Spruce Mountain Elementary School’s Jennifer Stone for sharing, and for all the advisors who marched with their teams: Martina Arnold and Tina Davis at Cascade Brook, Cathy Siggens at Spruce Mountain Middle School, and Meadow Sheldon at Mt. Blue High School, for marching with her son’s team.)
At Gorham Middle School, the civil rights team held a successful half-day of events with their Diversity Day-style event, branded as their “Celebration of Us.” The team worked to make sure all six of our civil rights categories were effectively represented in their 23 workshops. They used advisor periods the week before to frame the day’s events, sharing the “We Are America” PSA from the Love Has No Labels campaign to introduce conversations about inclusiveness in their school community. Students created paper links, highlighting something they could do to make their school more inclusive, which the team bound together in a chain to represent the strength they have in their school community’s growing diversity.

Hey, Gorham Middle School civil rights team... what an event! I was in attendance, and I had a hard time choosing which workshops I’d attend. (Ultimately, I picked the ones led by your civil rights team and your high school’s civil rights team. Good choice!) The work that you put into framing this event the week before made it much more meaningful than a one day thing, and by concluding the event with the chain, you helped show that this work is ongoing, and that when we’re celebrating diversity, we’re really celebrating us. (And thanks to their advisors, Meghan Rounds and Sarah Rubin, for sharing.)

At Greely Middle School in Cumberland, the elementary civil rights team decided to put a civil rights spin on the typical November focus on thankfulness. They researched the term(s) for “thank you” in a variety of languages, shared them through a colorful display in their lobby area, and created a handout for students to bring home, encouraging them and their families to use different languages to express their thanks.

Hey, GMS elementary civil rights team... it’s great that you shared some of the many languages that enrich American culture and the English language! It’s important, especially now, that we welcome and accept all national origins and ancestries, and celebrating languages is a great way to do that. Thank you! (And thanks to their advisors, Katie Campbell and Ali Waterhouse, for sharing.)
At Holbrook Middle School in Holden, the civil rights team is seeking visible support for the work they do in their school community. They created a bulletin board stating that they believe that every student should feel safe, welcome, and respected in school, paired it with our CRTP focus sign, and invited students, staff, parents, and community members to put up a color-coded dot to show their support. They e-mailed out an invitation to parents and community members, challenging them to show up and place a dot, or send in a statement or photo to show support (with instructions to put up a dot for us!). The display has lots of dots up in all four colors.

Hey Holbrook civil rights team... this is a great way to get people to understand what you do, but also to show that people like and support what you do. In fact, we like and support what you do so much here at the Civil Rights Team Project that we had to send in a picture ourselves. Keep sharing what you do! (And thanks to their advisors, Joy Walters, Hillari Morgan, and Amy Clement for sharing.)

At Sherwood Heights Elementary School in Auburn, the civil rights team put together a five-part presentation to share with their school. They stood in a line in front of everyone, holding signs with positive civil rights messages (and strategically hiding their scripts on the back... brilliant!). Each team member introduced themselves, saying “I am more than what I look like” and sharing some information about their national origin and ancestry, religion, gender, and/or abilities/interests. They shared their signs, their mission, encouraging messages about how even when we’re different from each other, we can be friends. They finished the way any good presentation should finish: with a song.

Hey, Sherwood Heights civil rights team... I really like how celebratory this was. It’s important to talk about our identities, and then look at how people who are different from each other can be friends. That’s the sort of encouragement we need more of in our schools. Keep talking, and singing! (And thanks to their advisors, Sheryl Baker-Hewey, Gretchen Slover, Renee Langis, and Angel Oliveira, for sharing.)

At Washburn Elementary School in Auburn, the civil rights team created and shared a public service announcement. The 75 second spot introduces the civil rights team to their school community and offers the team as a resource for anyone who needs someone to talk to in a judgement-free zone. The simple black-and-white text-based graphics keep the message clear: let’s accept others for who they are. They first showed the PSA at a school assembly, and now they play it on their school tv system. You can check it out here!

Hey, Washburn civil rights team... this is exactly what a PSA should be: short and direct. This is just the introduction to the civil rights team, but it tells everyone what they need to know in just 75 seconds. Well done! (And thank to their advisors, Maggie Luce and Danielle McCamish, for sharing.)
From the Students:

We asked student participants in the Civil Rights Team Project the following question:

“What civil rights issue or topic are you interested in learning more about? How come?”

Here is a sample of the responses we received from civil rights team members throughout Maine:

“Why do people stare at disabilities? I don’t know and I think everybody should be treated fairly.”
Grade 4, Mast Landing School

“I would like to discuss intersectionality and how to look at issues through many lenses.”
Grade 12, Mt. Blue High School

“I would like to learn more about national origin and ancestry because people get made fun of because their ancestors were from a place that the person doesn’t know much about.”
Grade 4, Leroy H. Smith School

“Why do some jobs pay more for men than women to do the same job. That’s unfair?”
Grade 5, Fairview School

“I want to learn about racism because people talk about other races and I don’t think those people know what they are talking about so I want to teach people more about civil rights.”
Grade 6, Jordan Small Middle School

“I want all students to know more about preferred pronouns, and sexual orientation to stop bullying, stereotypes, and labels towards all who have a different sexualities and sexual orientations than the majority of us.”
Winslow Junior High School

“I want to learn more about disabilities—what types there are, how to make my school accessible, etc. This affects my family personally.”
Grade 12, Piscataquis Community High School

“I would like to learn more about race, I go to a school where we have many foreign exchange students and I believe some of them feel unwelcome/unwanted and I want to change that.”
Grade 12, Lee Academy

“I’m interested in the gay pride movement because a lot of my family is gay; even my parents are gay. I love how strong gay people are…”
Grade 5, Fairview School

“I want to learn more about religion because there is so much to know about it and so many to learn about.”
Grade 7, China Middle School

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This month we’re featuring Julie Stephenson, a Library Media Specialist at Presque Isle Middle School. Julie has been advising the civil rights team there for two years.

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

I love working with the kids! Often times we don’t have enough opportunities in the school day to really hear what kids believe or want. The Civil Rights Team Project helps to create an environment where students feel safe and comfortable to share their opinions and ideas about themselves, their schools, and the world around them with not only an adult, but with each other.

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

When students or staff off hand mention that they love the new bulletin board, or when I hear from one of my kids that a teacher has engaged them in a conversation about an announcement they made that morning... the way the students’ faces light up as they tell me about the interaction makes it clear how important it is to them.

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

Language. I feel like we have a big case of not understanding that the words and language used are just as damaging as a physical altercation. We have a pretty big group that like to brush it off when told their words hurt because in their minds it was just a joke or someone is being too sensitive. Or they just don’t want to think about it or take responsibility.

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

These kids that we get to work with ARE our future. And they are so much more aware about everything that is going on in our world than ever before. I know 15 years ago, I wasn’t nearly as aware of news, etc. as the students are today. But what makes me optimistic is that not only are they aware, but they already have opinions and beliefs that they aren’t afraid to share. I can only do this work with the belief that they will continue to stand up for themselves and the world around them as they grow.

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

Listen to your students! They are more aware and creative than ever. They know what is happening in our halls far better than we do and they have a lot of ideas on how to address those issues.

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

Continuing into the 2017-2018 school year, we’re signing up new schools to participate in the CRTP. We’ve recently added:

- Bowdoinham Community School
- Falmouth High School
- Greene Central School
- Hall-Dale Middle School in Farmingdale
- Lawrence High School in Fairfield
- Maine Girls’ Academy in Portland
- Monmouth Middle School
- Penquis Valley Schools in Milo
- Phillips Elementary School
- R.W. Traip Academy in Kittery
- Shapleigh School in Kittery

Student Trainings

The Civil Rights Team Project is finishing a busy fall schedule of student trainings, with seventeen sessions in Auburn, Augusta, Brewer, Farmington, Presque Isle, and South Portland. (Unfortunately, the fall trainings have extended into the winter, as the October power outages forced us to reschedule several dates, one of which we again had to reschedule into January.) This year we added three new training sessions to the calendar, and our total participation numbers include 142 schools and 1545 students.

And just what did students do at these trainings? It depends on whether they attended an elementary, middle level, or high school session.

The theme for this year’s elementary training sessions was “Same Difference,” an exploration of similarities and differences to get students thinking and talking about civil rights issues. We introduced the theme and then applied it to disabilities. We watched a short film and discussed the similarities and differences between people with and without Down Syndrome. We looked at the arguments for inclusion, with a pointed emphasis on the positive contributions and abilities of people with disabilities. In the afternoon, we shifted our focus to food, celebrating America’s incredible regional and ethnic food diversity to open up a bigger conversation about immigration and what immigrants bring to America. We ended the training with a hands-on activity involving lemons, encouraging students to form their own conclusions about similarities and differences and how they relate to lemons and people. They didn’t disappoint!

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We used the “Same Difference” theme for the middle level trainings, too, but with a very different approach. We introduced the theme and thought about how there’s obvious danger in focusing too much on people’s differences, but that it’s also problematic to overemphasize similarities and insist we’re all the same. We’re not, and not only should we acknowledge this; we should celebrate it. We spent a considerable part of the training constructing a Venn diagram to represent our relationship with bullying, showing that while bullying and civil rights issues in our schools overlap, they are not the same thing. (For more on this, check out the “From the Director” section of this newsletter!) We spent the afternoon thinking and talking about religion: America’s religious diversity, the many similarities between most—if not all—religions, and the importance of interfaith friendship and conversation.

We did something different with our high school trainings this year. In the past we used the same content for middle level and high school groups. Not this year. Our high school training, Civil Rights in ME, looked at Maine’s civil rights history in three parts: (1) organized hate groups and the rise of the KKK in 1920’s Maine, (2) cultural genocide and language loss for Maine’s Wabanaki and Franco American populations, and (3) hate crimes, anti-LGBT violence, and the 1984 murder of Charlie Howard. With each topic we studied the past, but in an effort to better understand the present, also highlighted contemporary connections. A discouraging pattern emerged, but we concluded the day by looking at Maine’s history of positive resistance to bias and hate, and thinking about how the Civil Rights Team Project and our student civil rights teams continue this tradition.

At all seventeen of our training sessions, we were impressed by the enthusiasm and energy that the students brought to the work. They were open to meeting new people and discussing some difficult topics, in what we call “Mix It Up” groups at the elementary level and Community Circles with our middle level and high school students. We can’t wait to share some of the wonderful work students completed in what we call the “working lunch” activities. More than anything, though, we look forward to seeing how students embrace our fourth core value of commitment: seeing what ideas and inspiration they take away from these trainings to incorporate in their ongoing work.

To all the adult (superhero) advisors, chaperones, and especially the students, thanks for another great year of student trainings!
The most common misperception about the Civil Rights Team Project is that we are an anti-bullying organization. I can understand why people assume so; they are trying to understand what we do using the vocabulary the world has given them. But calling our work anti-bullying does not effectively encapsulate what we do, and it’s not just an issue of semantics.

A Venn diagram will be helpful in understanding our relationship with bullying. The circle on the left represents bullying, as defined by Maine state law. The definition is long and best summarized as *students doing mean things to other students*. It’s worth noting, however, that the definition includes the following language...

> “Bullying may be based on a student’s actual or perceived race, color, national origin, ancestry, religion, physical or mental disability, gender, sexual orientation, or any other distinguishing characteristic, or is based on a student’s association with a person with one or more of these actual or perceived characteristics...” We will revisit this part of the definition shortly.

The circle on the right represents our specific focus in the Civil Rights Team Project, what we call *civil rights issues in schools*. This is a concept that doesn’t lend itself to any easy definition, but a good way to understand it is *behaviors and practices that might make it so that students don’t feel completely safe, welcome, or respected related to their (or their loved ones’) race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, disabilities, gender (including gender identity and expression), and sexual orientation*.

We know that bullying can be related to race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, disabilities, gender (including gender identity and expression), and sexual orientation... it even says so in the state’s definition. We also know that bullying that’s specifically related to students’ identities makes them feel less than safe, welcome, and respected in school. There is an overlap, then, between the two circles where bullying *is* a civil rights issue: when it’s bias-based or identity-based bullying.

But there are many instances of bullying where it has nothing to do with race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, disabilities, gender (including gender identity and expression), and sexual orientation. When most people talk about bullying, *this* is what they’re talking about.

When we lump everything together under the same bullying label, though, we ignore what makes bias-
based or identity-based bullying different. It’s more damaging, because it’s connected with a culture of bias. The insults and taunts have the added weight of history and present-day prejudice. This is why we have specific civil rights laws protecting students: the laws are a remedy against a cultural pattern of damage done to specific populations related to their identities.

When we address bias-based or identity-based bullying, we need to address it differently. We need to specifically address the bias component of the behavior, and the added harm that is done to individuals and overall school climate and culture. Calling everything bullying reduces the chances of this happening, though. We recommend calling bias-based and identity-based bullying harassment to make this distinction clearer. (And in fact, Maine schools have separate harassment policies that are specific in their focus on behaviors targeting students based on their race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, disabilities, gender (including gender identity and expression), and sexual orientation.)

And what about all the civil rights issues in our schools that don’t fit into that middle section, because they’re not bullying? This includes unconscious and unintentionally bias-based behaviors and institutional practices. Examples include students use of the word *gay* to describe things, the belief that Islam and Muslims promote terrorism, a reading curriculum featuring no books written by authors of color, and the segregation of students with disabilities from the rest of the school. None of these could be described as bullying, but they’re civil rights issues in our schools, as they certainly might make it so that students feel less than safe, welcome, and respected related to their identities.

So, then, here are the reasons why the Civil Rights Team Project doesn’t focus on bullying, or even really use that word, with each number represented on the Venn diagram.

1. It makes us focus on behaviors that aren’t civil rights issues because they have nothing to do with race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, disabilities, gender (including gender identity and expression), and sexual orientation.

2. In the event that bullying is bias-based or identity-based, the simple act of calling it bullying equates it with other bullying. It is different, which is why we call it harassment.

3. A specific focus on bullying, whether it’s bias-based/identity-based or not, ignores other civil rights issues in our schools. These include behaviors and practices more prevalent than bullying.

4. Civil rights issues in our schools are different from bullying in that they are very much connected to the outside world. Racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, ableism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia are issues inside and outside of our schools, whereas bullying is really a school-based issue.

People will continue to assume that the Civil Rights Team Project is an anti-bullying organization. It’s important that we never accept this misunderstanding, and instead use it to open up a conversation so that people better understand what we do. We do look at bullying, but only when it’s related to race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, disabilities, gender (including gender identity and expression), and sexual orientation... and then we call it harassment. And there are also other civil rights issues we look at in our ongoing efforts to create school communities where all our students feel safe, welcome, and respected for who they are.