Spring 2-1-2018

The Torch (February 2018)

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

**From the Teams:**

Check out a sampling of the many diverse projects and initiatives being launched by our participating teams across the state.

**From the Students:**

We asked, and they answered! What do civil rights team members want to know more about? Check out the Ballot Box results from our fall trainings!

**From the Advisors:**

This month we profile Kellie Sanborn, the civil rights team advisor at Messalonskee High School.

**From the Office:**

Learn more about what we’ve been up to at the office, including highlights from this year’s No Name-Calling Week events!

**From the Director:**

Read Brandon’s reflections on how the focus of the 2017-2018 civil rights teams is direct, on point, and really getting people thinking and talking.

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From the Teams:

In **Bar Harbor, the Conners-Emerson Middle School** civil rights team participated in a community Martin Luther King Day celebration. They marched through town and then read King’s March on Washington address at the post-march reception at the YWCA. They’ve included a description of the event for inclusion in the district newsletter.

**Hey, Conners-Emerson civil rights team... of course Martin Luther King Day is a day off from school, but on your day off, you chose to engage. I can think of no better way to celebrate King’s life and legacy than this: sharing our time together as a civil rights team, and sharing our work with the community. (And thanks to their advisor, Carol Rosinski, for sharing.)**

At **Fairview Elementary School in Auburn**, the civil rights team is making sure students of all religious identities feel included in school and district holiday observances. When the team noticed a Santa-themed Christmas display in their school, they made additions to make it more inclusive, creating signs celebrating Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, and the Winter Solstice. They also noticed that school planners and monthly lunch menus only included two religious holidays, both Christian: Christmas and Easter. They successfully lobbied the district to include holidays from other religious faiths in next year’s planners, a change that will affect all Auburn schools that use the planner. They plan on meeting with food services to look at the lunch menus.

**Hey, Fairview civil rights team... that you were able to identify these things as civil rights issues in your school community shows a real understanding of what we do in the Civil Rights Team Project. What you did next, though, is even more impressive: you went to the adults in power and asked them to change these practices. Your voices matter, and I’m proud of you for using your voices to create welcoming and inclusive school communities for students of all religions. (And thanks to their advisors, Sue Davis, Stephanie Marris, and Jen Folker, for sharing.)**

At **Spruce Mountain Middle School in Jay**, the civil rights team created a two-part welcoming banner that now adorns a prominent column in the school’s lobby area. One side of the banner simply says welcome, while the other side gets specific about who exactly that includes: all cultures, all individuals, all religions, all colors, all sizes, all orientations, all abilities, all genders. The banner, in addition to the crt news and info that is promoted on the TV in the same lobby, is a part of the team’s strategy to increase their presence while fostering inclusion.

**Hey, SMMS civil rights team... what a lovely way to welcome people to your school! It’s colorful, prominent, and inclusive. Getting specific about who is welcome in your school is so important in the work we do. (And thanks to their advisor, Catherine Siggens, for sharing.)**

At **Noble Middle School in Berwick**, the civil rights team created an eye-catching and interactive bulletin board celebrating different identities. They included at least five examples from each of our six civil rights categories, printed the labels on cards
(color coded by category), and included definitions and/or facts on the insides. Examples include the “Asian” card in the race section including “5.7% of the US population,” and the “bisexual” card in the sexual orientation section including “attraction to two genders.”

At Yarmouth High School, the civil rights team hosted the community’s first-ever citizenship naturalization ceremony. On December 8, the crowd in the school’s packed auditorium saw 31 candidates from 22 countries take the official oath to become U.S. citizens. Civil rights team member and lead organizer Paige Reinfelder said, “We may not always have the same beliefs (and) we may not speak the same language, but we are united in our fundamental belief that each person should be treated fairly and with dignity and have equal opportunities.” Speakers included Yarmouth Schools Superintendent Andrew Dolloff, State Senator Cathy Breen, and Frank Harrison Middle School civil rights team advisor—and immigrant Mainer herself—Charlotte Agell.

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From the Teams:

At Lyseth Elementary School in Portland, the civil rights team celebrated the Martin Luther King holiday by sharing their thoughts about civil rights and racial equality. They spent some time learning about King and his work and then created an art display featuring their hand prints in customized paint colors to represent each team member’s skin color, and speech/thought bubbles where they reflected on King’s work and his connections to their work on the civil rights team. They then sent out an invitation to the rest of the school, sending an e-mail to teachers encouraging them to check out their display and create something similar, attaching speech/thought bubbles for them to use with their students. Some classrooms added on to the civil rights team’s display while others created their own unique versions.

At Thornton Academy in Saco, the civil rights team, inspired by what they learned at the student trainings about cultural genocide and language loss for Maine’s Wabanaki peoples, decided to learn more about the past and present of Native Americans in Maine. They researched Maine laws and invited guest speakers to come and talk about their experiences as Wabanaki Mainers. They also learned about national-level issues important to Native Americans, with a specific focus on the Dakota Access Pipeline. They are now sharing what they learned through a prominently-placed bulletin board, and plan on using a similar strategy moving forward: researching and learning an important issue related to one of our six civil rights categories and then sharing their experience and knowledge with their school community.

Hey Thornton civil rights team... it’s exciting for us to see the passion you have for better understanding civil rights issues. There’s so much to learn! As you said in your thank you letter to your guest speakers, many of us know “little to nothing about Native American culture.” Your willingness to learn, and then share your knowledge, is exactly how all of us should engage with civil rights issues. (And thanks to their advisors, Geoffrey Slack, Rebecca Wittman, and Elizabeth Sampson, for sharing.)

Hey Lyseth civil rights team... what a wonderful display! I especially like how you matter-of-factly engage people in thinking and talking about race and skin color, encouraging others to think about Martin Luther King and how his life and work relate to us in 2018. You are helping us move forward to a world where we can truly celebrate the beautiful diversity in skin colors among us. (And thanks to their advisors, Ellen Handelman, Kara St. Germain, Kate Kessler, and Merita McKenzie for sharing.)

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From the Students:

2017-2018 CRTP Student Trainings—Working Lunch Activities

Ballot Box:

During each student training, we asked every participant to cast their vote for the civil rights-related category they are most interested in learning more about. Below are the questions and results, broken down by elementary, middle level, and high school responses:

**Elementary**

I’d most like to learn more about the similarities and differences between people related to their:

- race and skin color (21.3%)
- national origin and ancestry (17.2%)
- religion (17.2%)
- gender (15.5%)
- sexual orientation (28.9%)

**Middle Level**

I’d most like to learn more about the experiences of people who are different from me in terms of their:

- race and skin color (13%)
- national origin and ancestry (13.5%)
- religion (14.3%)
- disabilities (16.3%)
- gender (21.3%)
- sexual orientation (21.6%)

**High School**

I’d most like to learn more about the history and experiences of people here in Maine related to their:

- race and skin color (12.7%)
- national origin and ancestry (19.6%)
- religion (11.8%)
- disabilities (18.7%)
- gender (17.6%)
- sexual orientation (19.6%)

We have a tie, folks!

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This month we’re featuring Kellie Sanborn, an English Teacher at Messalonskee High School. Kellie has been advising the civil rights team there for three years (plus three as a member of a CRT at Gray-New Gloucester High School!).

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

I love being able to see students really care about their school culture as well as the nation and world they live in. It is priceless to be able to see students take on leadership roles to put together projects—and not for the grade, or the credit, but because it is something that they feel is important.

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

My first year as an advisor (the 2015-16 school year), which was also our CRT’s first year, our team decided that we wanted to do something to work toward making our school culture more inclusive of students with disabilities. The students on the team took inspiration from the MPA’s Unified Basketball program, in which our school is an active participant. The thought was that we should not limit creating this fun, inclusive environment to just basketball season; it should extend school year-round. That year, try as we might, Unified Activities (what we decided to name the time we’d spend playing sports, games, Kahoot, etc.) just didn’t take off. However, when we came back for the following school year, a few team members in particular were incredibly dedicated to making Unified Activities happen. The first day that we successfully came together, we set up bowling in the gym. From a fairly simple concept, it was clear the impact that this effort had on this group of students. Not just the moment when it all came together, but also the build-up to it and the perseverance and dedication shown by our CRT during that period of time, is my favorite memory as an advisor.

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

From my perspective, the biggest civil rights issue in our school is the attitude that words don’t matter as long as there is no one around who will be openly offended by them. All teenagers struggle with finding acceptance on some level, and unfortunately, attacking “outsiders” (in many cases, people with disabilities or who are seen as having a different race, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, or gender than the majority) through seemingly harmless words can seem like an easy way to fit in with peers. This is an issue that I see regularly in my classroom and in school hallways and is one that our team attempts to address through our efforts and projects.

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

So many things! But here are a few:

- Our kids are awesome. They are choosing to take time out of days which are already busy with schoolwork, sports, play rehearsals, after-school jobs, and who knows what else to commit themselves to making a difference in their schools and communities. That is...
Midyear New Advisor Orientation

On February 12, we hosted an orientation for 45 new civil rights team advisors in Augusta. Attendees included advisors who already started teams this year, but mostly prospective advisors interested in starting teams in the future. This means we could have some new civil rights teams to report this spring and next fall, getting us closer and closer to 200 participating schools!

The new advisor orientation is one of the biggest changes we’ve made to the Civil Rights Team Project in recent years. Since the fall of 2016, we’ve conducted this training six times for a total of 201 attendees, helping our newest advisors understand the Civil Rights Team Project mission and philosophy, the role of the civil rights team, and exactly what we expect from our advisors. Everyone now starts with the same information, and a better understanding of the structures and supports that are available to them. The results? Our newest teams are highly focused and productive.

None of this could happen without our experienced advisors. Their collected knowledge is the most valuable resource we have in the Civil Rights Team Project. Every opinion, every idea, and every project initiative we share at the orientation comes from our experienced advisors and their efforts to make civil rights teams matter in their school communities. We honor this by concluding the training with a panel of experienced advisors.

Many thanks to our February 12 panelists:

Cathy Lovendahl and Gi Reed, Albert S. Hall Elementary School
April Gay, Chelsea Elementary School
Kellie Sanborn, Messalonskee High School

And many thanks to all our experienced advisors for continuing to inform our work with insight and inspiration. You make us look good!

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From the Advisors:

cool. The coolest, actually.

- The world is always changing, and I’d like to think that most of it is for the better. Certainly, we see pushback in many places, but hopefully we can see that as an invitation to keep pushing forward.
- Civil rights team advisors are fierce and dedicated. I have an e-mail in my inbox with 69 responses (all from CRT advisors) in it from the end of last school year, when it was proposed that funding the Civil Rights Team Project be cut from Maine’s budget, to prove it.

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

The best advice that I can give is something that I have to remind myself of frequently: that even when it feels like you are trying hard but hardly making a difference, you are. Just by being there and having a presence, we (the Civil Rights Team Project) are changing the game for acceptance, diversity, and welcoming climates in Maine schools.

From the Office:

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No Name-Calling Week!

The Civil Rights Team Project office partnered with ten different middle level and high school civil rights teams around the state to celebrate and promote No Name-Calling Week in January and February. Teams hosted weeklong events with a specific focus on bias-based name-calling and insults in their school communities. Our office supported the teams by offering a framework of expectations for the week, consulting in developing an action plan and initiatives, and a school visit from Brandon to deliver his “The Power of Words” presentation.

We saw some great work, as teams really took the opportunity to explore this important issue in depth. Some of the more impactful moments of No Name-Calling Week came towards the end of my presentations, when I reported the results of the surveys civil rights teams were responsible for administering. The surveys included questions on whether students hear specific bias-based insults in their school community and if they think it’s OK for people to use those insults.

The surveys included what we call the “Do you hear it?” questions:

⇒ Do you hear the word *gay* used as an insult in our school?
⇒ Do you hear the words *retard* and/or *retarded* used as insults in our school?

The surveys also included what we call the “Are you OK with it?” questions:

⇒ Do you think it’s OK for people to use the word *gay* as an insult in our school?
⇒ Do you think it’s OK for people to use the words *retard* and/or *retarded* as insults in our school?

We’ve compiled the results from all ten schools below...
The trend is eye-opening. Students hear bias-based insults, but an overwhelming majority of them are not OK with the fact that people use this language in their school communities. They are not surprised by the first part—they know what they hear—but they are always surprised by the second part. It’s entirely reasonable to assume that when you hear your peers using bias-based insults, most of them are doing it, and must be OK with it... but our survey data indicates that this is not the case. Sharing the data creates positive peer pressure to eliminate bias-based insults from their vocabulary, and to use their voice to influence others to do the same.

In the days and weeks following my presentation and No Name-Calling Week, we encourage civil rights teams to keep sharing their data and the clear conclusion that a majority of students are not OK with the use of bias-based insults in their school community. This simultaneously encourages students to eliminate these insults from their vocabularies and use their voice to influence others, knowing that a majority of their peers agree with them.

Thank you to the ten civil rights teams we partnered with in 2018 for their efforts to create school communities free of bias-based name-calling and insults!

A special thanks to our participating schools:

* Bangor High School
* Camden Hills Regional High School
* Carrabec High School, North Anson
* Chelsea Elementary School
* Falmouth Middle School
* Jordan Small Middle School, Raymond
* Mt. Ararat Middle School in Topsham
* Piscataquis Community High School, Guilford
* Presque Isle Middle School
* Samuel L. Wagner Middle School, Winterport

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Much of my January and February has been spent reading and responding to the midyear check-ins civil rights team advisors complete and submit to our office. I always enjoy and appreciate this opportunity to get a read and pulse on the state of the Civil Rights Team Project, as our work is ultimately the collective of work being done by our individual civil rights teams. Reading through more than 100 check-ins, with plenty more still to come, one thing has struck me about our civil rights teams this school year: we are focused. Civil rights teams are doing an excellent job making sure their ideas and initiatives are on civil rights issues specifically related to race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, disabilities, gender (including gender identity and expression), and sexual orientation.

This has not always been true in the Civil Rights Team Project. The number one objective out of our office in recent years has been refining the focus of our civil rights teams. We adopted an unofficial mission statement, explaining that “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.” Ongoing training efforts have challenged advisors and teams to think about how their work relates to this statement, and emphasized the importance of using these words in our work. We’ve revamped our promotional materials and the sign-up process for schools interested in starting new civil rights teams, creating a clearer series of expectations that are then reemphasized at our new advisor orientation sessions. We’ve also created a more formal registration process for returning advisors and teams asking them to indicate that they understand our expectations, and especially our focus.

Nothing represents these ongoing efforts quite like our Stacie Bourassa-designed focus signs we handed out at the advisor trainings this fall. They are bold, colorful, direct, and inviting... and civil rights teams are using them: in team meetings, as we intended, but also in promoting their project initiatives in their school communities. It’s exciting to see so many teams using the signs and the language that helps focus our work.

The check-ins make it clear: never before have we been so open and direct in talking about race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, disabilities, gender (including gender identity and expression), and sexual orientation. In a time when civil rights issues feel especially important, our focus is right where it needs to be. I have never felt so optimistic about our work.

**From the Director:**

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