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The Torch (October 2017)

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

From the Teams:
Our civil rights teams are doing a little bit of everything; check out news from four of our participating teams from around the state!

From the Students:
Recently, we posed the following question to our student civil rights team members: “Why are you on your school’s civil rights team?” See a sampling of their responses here!

From the Advisors:
This month we profile Kayla Marston, the civil rights team advisor at Elm Street School in Mechanic Falls.

From the Office:
We’ve been busy with the start of the 2017-2018 school year, and with a series of successful advisor trainings and orientation sessions behind us, we’re excited to report out some of the many highlights!

From the Director:
Brandon reflects on how he creates consensus with an audience before engaging in the topic of civil rights-related 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.
The Narraguagus Jr./Sr. High School civil rights team were the stars of the show at the concluding panel/workshop for the Maine Department of Education’s 106th Annual Commissioner’s Conference for Superintendents on June 27 in Bar Harbor. Team representatives co-presented with Sarah Ricker, Student Assistance Coordinator in the DOE, and Brandon on “What Does a Safe School Look and Feel Like?” They highlighted some of their team initiatives, including their “Equal, Not Special” event, which focused on LGBT equality in their school community. Sarah and Brandon then highlighted what was good about the team’s work: Sarah looking at their use of data to drive decisions, and Brandon looking at their specific focus on issues related to race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, disabilities, gender (including gender identity and expression), and sexual orientation.

Hey, Narraguagus civil rights team... you were wonderful representatives for Maine’s civil rights teams and the philosophy of the Civil Rights Team Project. You were polished and professional, and your presence supported the idea that student voices matter in this work. I know that it was a different crowd from what you’re used to, but it was clear to everyone in that room that you very much belonged there. Thanks for making the Civil Rights Team Project good! (Also, thanks for making me look good in my new Narraguagus civil rights team t-shirt! And of course, thanks to the advisors, Elizabeth Holub and Tom Absalom, for sharing and coordinating this opportunity.)

“The 2017-2018 student handbook now includes the words!”

At Riverton Elementary School in Portland, the civil rights team welcomed everyone back to school with an inclusive entryway display. At the end of last year, they created a series of six signs to welcome people of all races and skin colors, national origins and ancestries, religions, abilities and disabilities, genders, and types of love. The six signs celebrate the diversity that exists in their school community, and frame the school’s welcoming nature as a community value. The signs are prominently featured inside the main entrance, underneath a banner welcoming visitors in different languages.

Hey, Riverton civil rights team... this is exactly what I like to see when I enter a school! It communicates clearly that all are welcome in your school. That may seem like a simple message, but it’s an important one. What a great way to start the 2017-2018 school year at Riverton! (And thanks to their advisor, Amanda Atkinson-Lewis, for sharing.)

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At Telstar High School in Bethel, the student handbook now makes it clear that harassment of students related to their gender identity or gender expression is prohibited. Last spring, the civil rights team researched district policies to see if they specifically offered protections to students based on all the civil rights categories protected by Maine law. In doing so, they noticed that the school handbooks made no mention of gender identity or gender expression. (Both are included in the Maine Human Rights Act definition of sexual orientation.) They initiated conversations with administration, did lots of research, and offered reasons why the handbooks should include the words *gender identity* and *gender expression*. The 2017-2018 student handbook now includes the words!

**Hey, Telstar High School civil rights team... changing policy, even just a few words, is hard work. It is detail-and process-driven work, but it’s important. Your school now clearly communicates that discrimination and harassment based on gender identity and gender expression are not OK. That language is a great foundation for putting the policy into practice, and seeing the words included in the policy is an important first step. (And thanks to their advisor, Kate Rideout, for sharing.)**

At Westbrook High School, the civil rights team partnered with their art program to highlight the growing religious diversity in their school community. The project started last spring when the school principal approached the team and asked them to create a bulletin board to periodically feature religious holidays on the calendar. The team got to work on displays for Ash Wednesday, Passover, and Ramadan. Meanwhile, students in the art program created tiles for different religious identities to frame the display. In the fall, it all came together: the tiles show the many religious identities in Westbrook High School, and the civil rights team will keep updating the information on religious holidays.

**Hey, Westbrook High School civil rights team... what a wonderful way to celebrate the diversity that exists in your school community! This display is a perfect mixture of permance and customizable space. Keep updating those holidays, and keep finding clever ways to partner with others on your project initiatives. (And thanks to their advisor, Darcie Simmons, for sharing.)**

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From the Students:

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

**Why are you on your school’s civil rights team?**

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

- **“To help make the school community better.”**
  
  Grade 3, Drinkwater Elementary School

- **“I like doing it because I can make a difference (and it is awesome!).”**
  
  Grade 5, Phippsburg Elementary School

- **“I want to stop racism because it is still going on a lot in the world. I am bilingual and I am part Hispanic, and I notice the racism having to do with Mexico.”**
  
  Grade 5, Riverton Elementary School

- **“Because I think that everyone deserves to be treated equal, as a queer girl myself I witness a lot of hate that needs to be ended.”**
  
  Grade 9, Mt. Blue High School

- **“Because it helps others and makes them feel comfortable. I feel comfortable here.”**
  
  Grade 10, Telstar High School

- **“I heard a story about a teacher with white skin getting pulled over and he didn’t get a ticket. My dad who has dark skin, got pulled over and got a ticket, even though he was really nice and apologized. This made me sad. I want to stop discrimination and that is why I’m on the team.”**
  
  Grade 5, Riverton Elementary School

- **“I joined the Civil Rights Team because I want our school to be a safe place. I want to make a difference in making our school welcome to all!”**
  
  Grade 8, Jordan Small Middle School

- **“To be an ally**
  - To help people get through their day
  - To open others’ eyes and inform
  - To influence against hatred
  - To make school safer
  - To learn what diversity is
  - To increase acceptance; to promote tolerance
  - To talk about areas that are not in someone’s everyday reality
  - To help people see their own greatness
  - To be willing to examine own biases and practices
  - To teach about stereotypes
  - To educate and learn how to exist in diversity

  Collective team response, Maranacook Community High School

Thank you to everyone who shared responses!

Be on the lookout for the next opportunity to add your voice in *The Torch*!
This month we’re featuring Kayla Marston, a School Counselor at Elm Street School in Mechanic Falls. Kayla has been advising the civil rights team there for three years.

1. **What do you like about being a civil rights team advisor?**
I love that as a civil rights team advisor, I get to lead a group of students towards becoming more aware of diversity, tolerance, respect for differences, and help them develop the confidence to bring up the tough topics.

2. **What is your favorite moment or memory associated with the CRTP?**
My favorite moment was seeing my team take on a huge project and working hard to finish it! We had the idea to make a video for our school and our topic was gender stereotypes. Because our school has students in preK-6, we knew our video had to reach a pretty varied age group. Well, the team worked on making posters to show to go along with the words, so that even our youngest students would get something from the video. The team was passionate and involved from start to finish, and the end result was AH-MAZING!

3. **What do you see as the biggest civil rights issue in your school?**
In my school, the biggest issue relating to civil rights is probably that many students are not regularly exposed to diversity that they can see, and so having conversations with 5th and 6th graders about civil rights issues becomes an abstract activity, instead of feeling real. I try really hard to bring civil rights into their everyday life by discussing examples and having them think about how civil rights are important for us, our school, and our larger community.

4. **What do you like about your civil rights team this year?**
While my team this year is still being formed, I like that I will have returning members who will serve as the “experts” and role models for all of our new members. I also like that many 5th graders have been looking forward to their shot to join the team!

5. **What makes you optimistic about our work in the future?**
I feel optimistic about this work each year because I know there are a great group of kids who are being primed to continue the important conversations about civil rights! As they grow, they will be able to draw from their experiences on the civil rights team to propel them forward into understanding how their words and actions can make a difference.

6. **What advice or wisdom could you offer to other civil rights team advisors?**
I would say that this work is important, tiring, and inspiring. Even when it feels like you’re getting nowhere, or struggling to help your team understand the heavy issues, just keep going. Civil rights teams plant seeds of hope and acceptance that our communities can grow from when we least expect it!

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Welcome to the Civil Rights Team Project!

Early on in the 2017-2018 school year, we’ve been signing up new schools to participate in the CRTP. We’ve recently added:

- Bath Middle School in Bath
- Bristol Consolidated School
- Harrison Lyseth Elementary School in Portland
- Maine Central Institute in Pittsfield
- Mattanawcook Junior High School in Lincoln
- Mill Stream Elementary School in Norridgewock
- Mt. Ararat Middle School in Topsham
- Narragansett Elementary School in Gorham
- Oceanside High School in Rockland
- Sacopee Valley High School in Hiram
- Telstar Middle School in Bethel
- Thornton Academy in Saco

Advisor Trainings

The Civil Rights Team Project recently concluded a busy training schedule for our adult advisors, with five training sessions (including two orientation sessions for new advisors) in Augusta, Brewer, and South Portland. In total, 214 advisors attended, (including 70 new advisors at the orientation sessions) up from 194 last year.

Here are a few of the interesting stories behind some of our training participants:

- Martina Arnold, from Cascade Brook Elementary School, and Kate Rideout, from Telstar High School, were delighted to discover that they know each other, and not because of the Civil Rights Team Project. They met several years ago as volunteers for a Nordic ski race at Black Mountain. We’re glad we could reunite them (in a warmer environment, too).
- Robyn Gray, from Fort Fairfield Middle/High School, couldn’t attend the training in Brewer, so she attended the one in Augusta. (And she was the first one there, too!)
- Anna Peterson is the new advisor at SeDoMoCha Middle School, but she’s not new to the Civil Rights Team Project. She was one of the first civil rights team advisors, 21 years ago when we were a pilot project in just 18 schools. After a hiatus, we’re happy to have Anna back.
- Amelia Reinhardt is a student teacher at Holbrook Middle School. Not only did she attend the training, but she also participated in the book group by getting a copy of the book and reading it in the two weeks before the training. We hope to be working with Amelia in the future, wherever she ends up!
- Lucille Rioux, from Oak Hill Middle School, has been with us for all 21 years of the CRTP. She attended her last advisor training this fall, as she’ll be retiring at the end of this school year.
- Jen Whitehead is the community advisor for the new team at Narragansett Elementary School. She has three children who attend school there, and when she heard about civil rights teams last year, she decided that they needed to get one started.
- A full six-pack of advisors from Kittery schools attended the orientation. They’re moving forward in

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starting elementary, middle level, and high school civil rights teams following a CRTP in-service training there to start the school year. We’re impressed with this district-wide commitment to civil rights issues!

- Eight of the Maine Youth Action Network (MYAN) District Youth Coordinators attended the trainings and shared information about how they can work with middle level and high school civil rights teams this year. We are excited by the possibilities for collaboration, and encourage our advisors to reach out to their local District Youth Coordinators.

Our online evaluations indicate that attendees received a lot from these trainings. It started right upon arrival, as many met Stacie Bourassa, our new Project Coordinator, for the first time. They can now attach a face to the name they’ve been corresponding with since the end of last year.

The highest-rated part of the training for experienced advisors was the sharing of our new focus signs. Each civil rights team got a full color, 8.5 x 14 inch, laminated sign, inviting people to think and talk about race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, disabilities, gender (including gender identity and expression), and sexual orientation. These signs are designed to redirect students when meetings stray away from our civil rights focus, but also to promote our work in our school communities.

The focus signs helped introduce our theme for these trainings, too: constant presence. Throughout the day, we looked at ways we can make sure our work is ongoing and embedded in our school communities. This included sections on establishing visual presence through best practice in bulletin boards, easy things advisors can do to increase their team’s presence, and a read-aloud of Stella Brings the Family, which we used to open up conversations about how civil rights issues are everywhere, including events, traditions, and practices.

The training culminated with a celebration of the action advisors took last May to protect the Civil Rights Team Project from proposed budget cuts, and the fact that we’re back for our twenty-first year, a constant presence ourselves. (This also included a dramatic sharing of Whitney Houston’s “I Will Always Love You.” You had to be there.)

We were joined at these trainings by Nicole Rancourt from the Maine Humanities Council. Like last year, she shared a collection of picture books with our elementary advisors. This year’s titles include All the Colors We Are, Everybody Bakes Bread, Let’s Talk about Race, and Party in Ramadan. Nicole also introduced the CRTP Advisor Book Group on Ta-Nahisi Coates’ Between the World and Me. Participating advisors read the book this summer and remained past the training’s conclusion for small group discussions on their reading experiences. (And we at the CRTP thank the Maine Humanities Council for this continued partnership!)

We the advisor trainings always leave us energized and excited for the upcoming school year. We can’t wait to see what our advisors take from the trainings and put into practice this school year.
The start of every school year means opportunities for me to share the Civil Rights Team Project in-service training, “Challenging Bias and Harassment in Our Schools.” This year I conducted trainings with Kittery Public Schools, Mt. Ararat Middle School in Topsham, and Spruce Mountain High School in Jay. With each of these trainings, and every staff training I do, I emphasize the need for everyone to be on board. Past experience, however, indicates that this isn’t always easily achieved. Over the years, though, I’ve added elements to the training to help create consensus and make sure all our participants are working together and towards the same thing. These have proven successful, and are instructive in how we can talk about civil rights issues in our schools.

1. Start by showing that we all agree with the general idea of the training.

I open every training with an activity I call the “underline challenge.” It starts with a simple sentence: “School should be a place where everyone feels safe, welcome, and respected for who they are.” I then inform workshop participants that they are to add emphasis to the sentence with three underlines. Each underline will emphasize one word. They can choose three different words, or put extra emphasis on a word by putting two or even all three of their underlines there.

The results are always interesting. People put their underlines in all sorts of different places. We discuss where they add emphasis and why. I then talk about why we start with this activity. Of course it’s a great conversation starter, but it also represents something of great importance for the training. We all agree with the idea presented in that sentence. We may disagree on the points of emphasis, and how we arrive at this shared vision. What’s most important, though, is that we agree on what we want, and that as long as we can keep returning to that idea, in the training and beyond, we should be OK.

2. Prevent politically divisive comments before they happen.

Without specific prevention strategies, it is almost guaranteed that in a three hour training on civil rights issues, someone will make an explicitly political comment or reference. As soon as this happens, the subject matter, and the entire content of the training, becomes politicized, and an entire swath of the participants have a reason to disengage. We can’t have that.

Rather than address these comments as they happen, then, I try to prevent them. Early in the training, I share a simplified version of the CRTP guidelines on politics: We should not talk specifically about

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politicians, political parties, or political ideologies. The reasoning is simple: it’s too divisive. We must be able to come together and agree on the focus of the training: that school should be a place where everyone feels safe, welcome, and respected for who they are. There is nothing inherently political about that, and so we keep politics out of it, because we can’t achieve that goal with a plurality or a majority of the workshop participants agreeing to it. We need everyone on board.

3. Be ready for the attitude that “We don’t have those issues here.”

This attitude takes many forms. Sometimes I see it in someone who is physically disengaged from the training, arms crossed, a scowl on their face. Sometimes I hear it in the idea that there isn’t much diversity here, or we have great kids here, or we don’t have any real problems here. It can come in many forms, but the connecting thread is essentially a question: Why are we doing a civil rights training?

The answer to that question can’t come from me. I’m an outsider. I don’t know their school community. So I offer time, space, and opportunity for the workshop participants themselves to identify and talk about the issues that exist in their school communities. Specifically, we do two activities early on in the training:

- We rate the school community, on a scale of 1-10, on how “safe” a place it is to be different. Workshop participants give a rating, and then stand along a continuum of numbers posted up on the walls. Inevitably, there are people clustered in the middle, but also people closer to the extremes. We then have an extended discussion where individuals talk about their decision-making process and reasoning for their ratings.

- We do a “Get up if...” activity, where participants respond to five prompts, getting up from their seats if they are aware of bias or bias-based behaviors in their school related to: race or ancestry, religion, disabilities, gender (including gender identity and expression), and sexual orientation. At every single training, a significant number of participants (and often an overwhelming majority) get up for each of those five prompts.

These two activities make it so that anyone there who thinks “We don’t have those issues here” can see, from their peers, that they are in the minority. With the “Get up if...” activity, I even state that one of the reasons why we do it is to shred people’s denial. They need to see that civil rights issues aren’t issues that exist somewhere else, but issues that exist right there, in their school community.

* * *

These strategies helped make all three of the Civil Rights Team Project in-service trainings this fall engaging and productive, and we’re adding four new civil rights teams in these schools. The same strategies that work for the Civil Rights Team Project can help civil rights teams engage their school communities in this work, too.

In the upcoming editions of The Torch, I look forward to directly addressing two issues that have the potential to derail and distract from our real work: the conflation of civil rights issues with bullying, and the idea that socioeconomic bias is the real issue.