

# THE TORCH

## CIVIL RIGHTS TEAM PROJECT NEWSLETTER

May/June 2007

Newsletter Editor: Amy Homans

### THE STATEWIDE CONFERENCE



On May 7<sup>th</sup>, more than 1400 of you gathered at the Augusta Civic Center for a day of workshops and multi-cultural entertainment. Judging from your evaluations and the responses we received from the participants, the Civil Rights Team Project's Statewide Conference was a great success.

As always, we came away with ideas on how to make the 2008 conference even better. Given the fantastic turn out by the middle school teams, we will definitely be adding more middle school works shops next year. If anyone has a suggestion for a workshop for next year's conference, please pass your suggestion on to your regional coordinator or to Debi Gray at [debi.gray@maine.gov](mailto:debi.gray@maine.gov)

Thanks to all of you who made the trip to Augusta and participated in this exciting day. It is the highlight of the year for those of us who work with the CRTP and it always a pleasure to see so many old and new faces gathered for a day of learning and celebration.

ARE CHILDREN IN YOUR SCHOOL THE VICTIM OF SIZE BIAS? THE ANSWER IS MOST LIKELY, YES.



**"It is amazing that so many fat children survive adolescence, given the hatred and meanness directed at them."**

**Michael Loewy, *Working with Fat Children in Schools***

**WHY IS THE CIVIL RIGHTS TEAM PROJECT TALKING ABOUT BODY SIZE?**

**BECAUSE DISCRIMINATION AND HARASSMENT COMES IN ALL SHAPES AND SIZES.**

**Discrimination based on body size is not a protected category under the law, but it is a major contributor to the social isolation and low self esteem of overweight of children in schools. As a direct result of our society's harmful fixation on body size, size bias is present everywhere in our**

# THE TORCH

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**society. Overweight children are present in all of our schools and schools have been determined to be a primary location for this form of discrimination. Developing an awareness of how size bias is communicated and the harm it causes and providing teachers and students with tools to address that issue can have a substantial effect on the climate in every school.**

**The Rudd Center for Food Policy at Yale University recently had this to say about the social stigma of being an overweight child:**

Negative attitudes towards obese children develop early hence they become frequent targets of social stigma. Children as young as three years old associate overweight children with the characteristics of being mean, stupid, ugly, unhappy, lazy, and having few friends. Overweight and obese children are frequently targets of weight-related teasing, jokes, and derogatory names. Peers are common perpetrators of harmful comments, and very often school is the most frequent venue where stigma occurs.

The impact of stigma on a child's emotional well-being is significant. Not only do obese children feel badly about themselves, but the more they feel they are to blame for their obesity, the worse they feel overall. Research shows that obese children attribute their weight as the reason

for having few friends and being excluded from social activities, and that they believe harassment from peers would stop if they could lose weight. This suggests that obese children blame themselves for the negative social experiences that they confront. Research on overweight adolescents shows that teasing about body weight is related to low self-esteem and depression, and that overweight teens are more likely to be socially isolated. Most alarming are the increased reports of obese youth who are committing suicide. This is supported by recent studies demonstrating a positive association between obesity and suicidal attempts among youth.

As a means of helping children to overcome the stereotypes and stigmatization associated with being overweight, the Rudd Center offers *12 Ways to Reduce Weight Bias in Your Classroom*.

### ***1. Educate students about the multiple causes of obesity.***

Genetic, biological, environmental & behavioral factors all contribute to obesity.

### ***2. Emphasize positive associations with obese people.***

De-bunk negative stereotypes that place blame and stigma on obese individuals.

### ***3. Increase awareness of how the media perpetuates negative***

# THE TORCH

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**body image and bias.** The media communicates unrealistic ideals of thinness, and stereotypes overweight individuals.

**4. Use examples of weight bias to evoke empathy in your students.** Discuss examples of weight bias among youth, and encourage students to intervene and stand up for their peers.

**5. Be sensitive to situations of potential embarrassment for overweight students.** Are the desks or chairs in your classroom large enough to accommodate your overweight students?

**6. Enforce a zero-tolerance policy of weight-based teasing in your classroom.** Be a role model and promote awareness of weight bias in your classroom by enforcing this policy.

**7. Question your own assumptions and use of language about weight.** Be aware of disparaging comments about your own or other people's weight, such as "These pants make me look fat". Challenge your own assumptions about body weight.

**8. Intervene to reduce teasing of overweight students.** Be alert to both overt and subtle forms of peer harassment that occur in the classroom and on the schoolyard, and intervene when you see weight-based teasing.

**9. Encourage overweight students to succeed in school activities.** Encourage students of all weights to participate in sports teams, student council, and extracurricular activities.

**10. Include examples of overweight role models in your teaching.** Help your students challenge weight-based stereotypes and learn that many overweight individuals are successful and accomplish important goals.

**11. Treat the importance of weight tolerance as you would racial or religious tolerance**

**12. Emphasize the importance of HEALTH, rather than being thin.** The goal for all children is improved health through physical activity and healthy eating, regardless of their weight.

*These tips appear in the April issue of Teaching Tolerance's monthly online newsletter, courtesy of the Rudd Center for Food Policy at Yale University.*

**For more information on how to raise awareness and reduce the impact of size bias in your school community, visit the Rudd Center for Food Policy's website at [www.yaleruddcenter.org](http://www.yaleruddcenter.org).**

# THE TORCH

## CIVIL RIGHTS TEAM PROJECT NEWSLETTER

May/June 2007

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### THE ABC'S OF SIZE BIAS

Teaching Tolerance has also taken a stand against weight-based discrimination and provides an out standing resource with The ABC's of Size Bias. The ABC's of Size Bias includes a detailed overview of how social attitudes towards body weight and size have changed over time and differ from culture to culture. This overview provides an excellent basis for a project for any Civil Rights Team looking for a way to raise awareness of the issues relating to body size. To read "Size Bias as a Social Construction" go to <http://www.tolerance.org/teach/activities/activity.jsp?p=0&ar=825&pa=2> .

The Spring issue of Teaching Tolerance's online magazine also contains excellent resources on this subject. Click on <http://www.tolerance.org/teach/magazine/features.jsp?p=0&is=40&ar=779> to take a confidential online quiz to assess your own

level of size bias, learn why the word "fat" is the preferred adjective in the size acceptance community, find more tips for making your school a more inclusive place, and check out some guidelines for creating your own workshop on discrimination based on body size.

These are all truly exceptional resources and ones that you and your team can use to make your school a safer, more welcoming place for every student.



### The Portland Freedom Trail: A commemoration of Maine's role in the Anti-Slavery Movement and the Underground Railroad

The Portland Freedom Trail, a historical tribute to the role of Portland in the Anti-Slavery movement and the Underground Railroad is nearly completed. The grand opening of the Freedom Trail will take place on July 14, 2007 on which date sixteen granite markers will be dedicated at locations important to Portland's freedom movement.

# THE TORCH

## CIVIL RIGHTS TEAM PROJECT NEWSLETTER

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Volunteer opportunities are available for anyone interested in being a docent (tour guide) at the Grand Opening Ceremony on July 14<sup>th</sup>. A training for docents will be held on Thursday, June 14 at 6:00 at Casey Family Services, 75 Washington Street, Portland. This is a rare opportunity to participate in an historical civil rights event in Maine. Food and refreshments will be available. Anyone interested in the docent training should RSVP to Wells Staley-Mays at 774-1110 or wells369@hotmail.com.

The Portland Freedom Trail will be the first project to be completed by Maine Freedom Trails, Inc., a non-profit organization with a broad mission. According to its website Maine Freedom Trails, Inc. is dedicated to accomplishing the following goals:

- Establishing a network of marked sites across the state that acknowledges individual, organizational and community participation in the Underground Railroad and abolitionist movement;

- Linking the state's network of sites to national Underground Railroad routes and the related activities of the National Park Service;

- Producing materials related to this period of Maine's history;

- Engaging the community in the ongoing research, identification and documentation of the Underground Railroad and anti-slavery movement in Maine to best interpret, commemorate and preserve this legacy;

- Advancing the public discourse on the many struggles for social justice, economic justice and human rights – past and present – thereby connecting the history of the Underground Railroad to global movements for freedom; and

- Collaborating with other efforts to preserve Maine's African American history and culture.

We are fortunate to have a group dedicated to making this outstanding contribution to Maine's African American



# THE TORCH

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history. The Freedom Trail will make an outstanding field trip for Civil Rights Teams and classroom teachers interested in a civil rights experience close to home. For more information about the Freedom Trail, go to [www.portlandfreedomtrail.org](http://www.portlandfreedomtrail.org). or call 591-9980.



### Goodbye and Best Wishes to Peter Rees

This month marks the end of Peter Rees' tenure as the CRTP's regional coordinator for Hancock and Washington Counties. Peter began with the CRTP in 2000 and has been a wonderful colleague and a great resource for his schools.

In addition to folding up his tent with the CRTP, Peter is also retiring from his practice as a psychologist. Given Peter's passion for justice and civil rights, we all expect that his retirement will allow him more time not only for his

family, but also for the organizations that he selflessly donates his time and energy to. Peter has been a passionate contributor to the efforts and success of the CRTP and he will be missed.

***It's also time to say goodbye to you.***

**This will be last issue of *The Torch* for the 2006-2007 school year. Look for your September issue when you return to school in the fall. The September issue will include information on the regional fall trainings for faculty advisors and students as well as information and ideas to get you and your team off to a great start for the new year.**



**"Extra, Extra, Read All About It!"**

And no one can read about it if you don't tell anyone!!! *The Torch* is always looking for information to print about what is happening in the CRTP's schools. Please share your successes so other teams can benefit from your hard work. Take the time to email [amy@maine.rr.com](mailto:amy@maine.rr.com) before the end

# THE TORCH

## CIVIL RIGHTS TEAM PROJECT NEWSLETTER

May/June 2007

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*of the school year and the bliss of summer wipes your mind clean of all the great things you did this past year! Give your team the thrill of reading about its endeavors in an upcoming issue of The Torch.*

**HAVE A GREAT SUMMER, FROM ALL OF US AT THE CIVIL RIGHTS TEAM PROJECT. SEE YOU IN THE FALL!**

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*This newsletter is written and distributed by the Civil Rights Team Project, a statewide 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 high school, middle school and elementary school students and to reduce the incidence of bias-motivated harassment and violence in schools.*

**G. Steven Rowe --- Attorney General**  
**Thomas A. Harnett—Director, Civil Rights**  
**Education & Enforcement Unit**  
**Debi Gray, Civil Rights Project Administrator**