



The Civil Rights Team Project

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



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

From the Teams: In spite of the barrage of winter weather and all the snow day disruptions to school schedules, our civil rights teams have been busy.

From Our Friends: A new feature this month! We have a unique opportunity to preserve the important work of our civil rights teams through the Jean Byers Sampson Center for Diversity in Maine.

From the Office: My responses to midseason check-ins have spurred me into action on three projects that will connect our advisors to some great resources.

From the News: The Americans with Disabilities Act turns 25 years old this year! It's worth looking at what exactly the law accomplished, and what more there is to do.

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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.

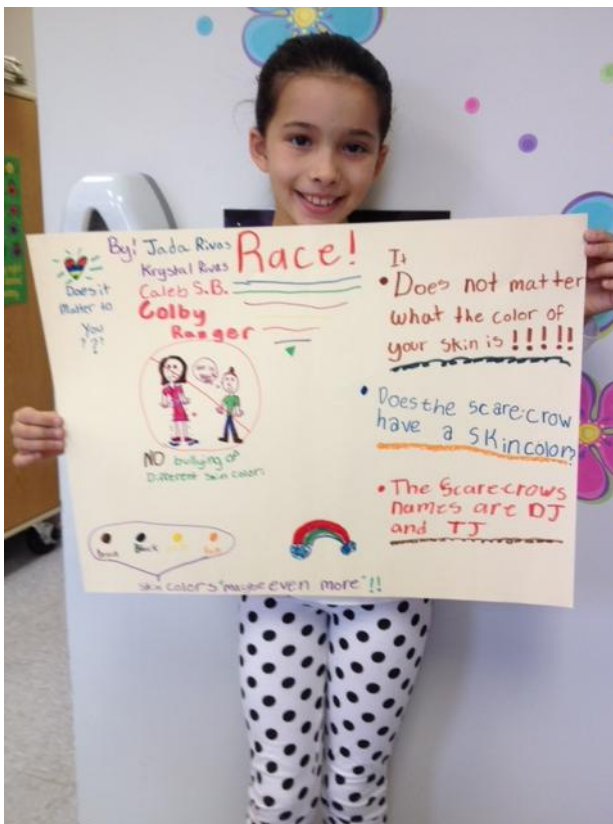
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From the Teams:

At **Cascade Brook Elementary School in Farmington...** the civil rights team has been making posters that directly address civil rights issues.

Rather than describe the posters, how about we just let the students *show* you what they've done?



Hey, Cascade Brook civil rights team: these are great! It's not always easy to talk about things like race and disabilities... but you've shown that we can do it. It's OK to talk about the ways that people are different from each other; in fact, *that's* how we eliminate bias. (And thanks to their advisor, Martina Arnold, for sharing.)

At **Belfast Area High School...** the civil rights team spent the whole month of January highlighting the impact of bias-based language on their school community. The central feature of these efforts was a 42-minute film they created. The film consists of



THE TORCH

(CRTP NEWSLETTER) MARCH '15

interviews with BAHS students and staff, with their words and thoughts organized around topics. The project began in the fall and included writing, interviewing, organizing, and editing. The civil rights team collaborated with the peer leadership team to show the film to small groups of 25-30 students. They facilitated viewing with a brief introduction and follow-up questions. They now want to share the film with their district middle school and get them thinking about bias-based language and initiate discussions about starting a civil rights team there.

You can check out the BAHS civil rights team film [right here](#).

They also wrote a [press release](#) for the local newspaper, the *Penobscot Bay Pilot*.

Hey, Belfast Area High School civil rights team: this is really impressive! Your video promotes the sort of open and honest dialogue we need to be having in our schools around these issues. Interviews featuring real people from your school community are a great way to engage an audience. It's real. You also did a great job securing the time and space to make sure every BAHS student saw this important work in a meaningful context. And using it to get a team started at the middle school? *Heck, yeah.* (And thanks to their advisor, Tonya Ballard, for sharing.)

At **Connors Emerson School in Bar Harbor...** the middle level civil rights team wanted to learn more about the bias-based language that is heard in their school. They created the Anti-Bias Box and invited their peers to anonymously fill out brief forms describing what they hear (including what and where, and a checklist of civil rights categories). The box was introduced to students in classrooms, where they all had opportunities to fill out a "practice" form. It now sits in the cafeteria with a stack of forms and an open invitation for students to share what they hear. The civil rights team plans on using the information to instruct future decisions and will share with administration when necessary.

Hey, Connors Emerson civil rights team: this is a great way to identify the issues that exist in your school. You have opened up the lines of communication between the student body and the civil rights team. The information you gather will be useful, but perhaps more important is what the box represents. *Just having it there is meaningful.* It is a signal of support for anyone affected by bias-based language, and an important reminder that such language is not OK in your school. (And thanks to their advisor, Carol Rosinski, for sharing.)

At **Greely Middle School in Cumberland...** in their first year of sharing a grades 4-8 building, both the elementary and middle level civil rights teams simultaneously celebrated "A Lot Alike" Week. Elementary team members served as ambassadors all week, wearing easily identifiable nametags each day and handing out stickers highlighting ways that we are all alike. They also introduced Brandon's presentation to the school by lining up in front of their peers and creating a chain by voicing a



THE TORCH

(CRTP NEWSLETTER) MARCH '15

connection they had with the student standing next to them and linking arms. They explained that the chain represented the idea that by seeking out and finding connections, we create a stronger community. The middle level team, meanwhile, had different projects and activities going on, including one where students researched their ancestry and created a sun display highlighting the diversity and commonalities in students' family backgrounds.

Hey, Greely Middle School civil rights teams: nice work coordinating your schedules and having grades 4-8 taking part in the same big picture event. It makes it feel bigger when you have two teams doing it! (And thanks to their advisors, Katie Campbell, Roberta Goodwin, and Kate Olsen-Pietrowski, for sharing.)

At the **Leroy H. Smith School in Winterport...** the civil rights team celebrated "Be Yourself" Week. They created a pledge that they shared with the student body, "I pledge to demonstrate tolerance, empathy, and kindness for everyone in the Smith School community and beyond and encourage everyone to BE YOURSELF." Signed pledges are on display in the cafeteria. They also led an activity where every student in the school received a white paper hexagon with instructions to decorate it in a way that demonstrated who they are. The team collected hundreds of hexagons and pieced them together to form a large honeycomb, representing the way students' individual differences come together to create their school (whose mascot just happens to be a honeybee!).

Hey, Leroy H. Smith civil rights team: these are great activities! They highlight important civil rights messages from "Be Yourself" Week: (1) It's important to respect others for being themselves, and (2) Being yourself leads to diversity, which benefits the whole school. The best part, though, is that your activities included everyone in the school, from kindergarten to fourth grade. That's not easy to do, but you did it! (And thanks to their advisor, Kim Raymond, for sharing.)

At **Pemetic Elementary School in Southwest Harbor...** the middle level civil rights team promoted No Name-Calling Week with a series of events including flash mobs and classroom presentations. They choreographed a flash mob routine to "Brave" by Sarah Bareilles, which they performed during three lunch periods. (You can watch one of the performances [right here](#).) They specifically referenced the song's lyrics in encouraging their peers to stand up against name-calling and harassment and show support for those who are targeted. The team also did classroom presentations on food allergies to illustrate the larger issues of teasing and name-calling targeting those with disabilities. (Their school has transitioned to nut-free this year.)

Hey, Pemetic civil rights team: *you* are brave! Your performances in front of your peers embody everything you were promoting. I especially like how you took a topic that has local meaning and connected it with bigger issues of bias related to disabilities. Using what's happening in your school community to help students understand the bigger



THE TORCH

(CRTP NEWSLETTER) MARCH '15

picture is just good teaching. (And thanks to their advisors, Sonja Philbrook and Carolyn Todd, for sharing.)

At **Riverton Elementary School in Portland...** the civil rights team highlighted the idea that in spite of real differences, people have much in common during their “A Lot Alike” Week event. Programming included classroom sessions where students interviewed each other to discover some of their hidden commonalities, a whole-school activity exploring the many cultures represented in the student body, and special morning announcements where two civil rights team members with an obvious difference (like gender, religion, or ancestry) would highlight something meaningful that they have in common.

Hey, Riverton civil rights team: I’m really impressed with the way your team taps into the strengths and skills of all the individual team members. With all the different committees on your team, you have students teaching, writing, creating artwork, and performing. You are showing your classmates that civil rights issues are *everywhere* in life, and making sure that everyone gets the message behind “A Lot Alike” Week. Diversity in our messaging is a good thing! (And thanks to their advisors, Amanda Atkinson-Lewis and Teddy Valencia, for sharing.)



The new Anti-Bias Box at Connors Emerson School...



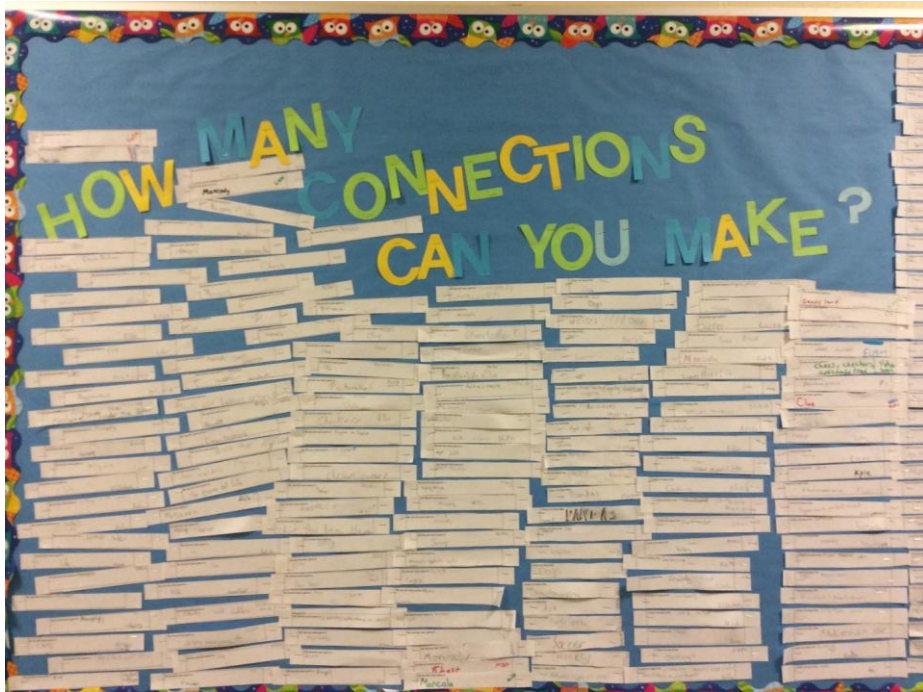
The individual hexagons combine to form a honeycomb at Leroy H. Smith...





THE TORCH (CRTP NEWSLETTER) MARCH '15

A bulletin board asks elementary school students at Greely Middle School to use collected survey data to make connections between students...



A sun display at Greely Middle School highlights students' ancestry...





THE TORCH (CRTP NEWSLETTER) MARCH '15

Some of the Riverton civil rights team in front of their new art installation...



The Mentoring Group from Riverton's civil rights team reads *Black Is Brown Is Tan* to kindergarten students.





THE TORCH

(CRTP NEWSLETTER) MARCH '15

From Our Friends:

Here is a special message from Susie Bock at the Jean Byers Sampson Center for Diversity in Maine. She has a wonderful opportunity for all of us.

(And please note that this opportunity is open to ALL civil rights teams: all age levels and all geographic regions of the state!)

Become Part of History

History is based on what society creates. The written documents, photographs, DVDs, films, posters, trophies, and all the “things” humans produce tell our story, our history. The Maine Civil Rights Teams create history every day. When you make posters and stage events, you make history. Minutes of your meetings, photographs of your activities carry the history of civil rights and social justice in 21st Century Maine.

But those objects must be saved or the history will be lost.

The Jean Byers Sampson Center at the University of Southern Maine Libraries is working to preserve that history. For instance we have the Lewiston Auburn Gay Youth Collection which is material created by *Outright Lewiston/Auburn*, a group of young people and adults who came together in 1996 to form an organization where LGBTQ and allied young people could find support and community, a mission that has expanded to people of all genders and sexualities. As well as items from the *Edward Little High School Gay-Straight Alliance*, which serves Auburn students grades 9 through 12. The Collection contains print material, including an Outright Lewiston/Auburn brochure, the 'zine leftOUT, a Safe Zone sticker, pages from the publication Latitude 44, and a poster for a GLBTQA Dance Party; a CD containing photographs and color prints of the photographs.

The Sampson Center would like to collect the records of the civil rights teams. If you are interested in saving your work and becoming part of Maine's history, or learning more about our collections and the process of donating please contact Susie R. Bock, 207-780-4269 or bocks@usm.maine.edu.

You can also visit our webpage:

<http://usm.maine.edu/library/specialcollections/sampson-center>

Your work matters. Your story should be saved.



From the Office:

New Teams

No new teams to report at this time, but I'm getting ready to start my spring recruitment efforts.

Midseason Check-Ins

I spent most of January and a good chunk of February reading and responding to our civil rights team advisors' midseason check-ins. I remain impressed with what we are able to accomplish here in the Civil Rights Team Project. In spite of great constraints and winter weather that has wreaked havoc on school schedules, we keep plugging along and creating opportunities for our schools to talk about issues related to race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, disabilities, gender, and sexual orientation (including gender identity and expression). The circumstances are rarely ideal, but we make the most of them.

In responding to many of these check-ins, I kept informing advisors about all the future projects I'm planning and how they'll make the advisor's work that much easier. At some point I had an epiphany: make the future happen now! Rather than keep talking about these projects, then, I've decided to get to work on them.

Here are resources you can expect in the near future...

Video Sharing

We need a virtual toolkit of high quality civil rights-related videos... so that's exactly what I'm creating. I'm putting the best video resources I know of in one easy-to-access place: our new video folder on Dropbox. You can watch them in high definition right there, where they'll always be available.

The folder currently has 20 videos. I plan on adding many more and indexing them and coding them for easy reference. Coding information will include:

- Appropriate age level (young elementary, elementary, middle level, high school)
- Appropriate audience (team, wider school audience)
- Subject matter (by civil rights category)

Interested? Check out our new CRTP video folder [right here](#).





Book List for Elementary Education

I'm currently working with the [Maine Humanities Council](#) to create a list of the very best picture books for teaching civil rights concepts to elementary school students. Rather than overwhelm you with titles, we are adhering to the idea that less is more and emphasizing quality over quantity. Our target is 3-5 recommendations in each of the following subject areas:

- Race and skin color
- National origin and ancestry
- Religion
- Abilities and disabilities
- Gender
- Sexual orientation and family diversity

For each of these six civil rights categories, the selected books must accomplish *at least one* of the following four objectives (where x = the civil rights subject area):

1. Teach the concept of x.
2. Recognize and celebrate differences in people's x.
3. Highlight similarities between people of different x.
4. Show that bias and prejudice exist in relation to x.

We are reading through lots and lots of titles and plan to have our recommendations ready for the fall.

Middle Level Bias Scenarios

Keeping middle level civil rights teams focused on bias-based behaviors isn't always an easy task. Middle level students don't always recognize the bias around them; it often operates in subtle ways. It is important, then, that we expand their understanding of what bias looks like in a school setting. An effective way to accomplish this is by sharing realistic examples of bias-based behaviors with them and then challenging them to make connections with what they see in their school community.

We've already created a [packet of bias scenarios](#) for use with elementary school teams. We are now working on a similar packet for middle level teams. It is very, very tempting to just take the elementary school content and make it more "mature." We're not going to do that, though. We want lots of content and no chance of students memorizing the scenarios after repeated use year after year.

Expect the new series of middle level bias scenarios later this spring.



From the News:

The Americans with Disabilities Act at 25

“Our problems are large, but our unified heart is larger. Our challenges are great, but our will is greater. And in our America, the most generous, optimistic nation on the face of the Earth, we must not and will not rest until every man and woman with a dream has the means to achieve it.



“And today, America welcomes into the mainstream of life all of our fellow citizens with disabilities. We embrace you for your abilities and for your disabilities, for our similarities and indeed for our differences, for your past courage and your future dreams.”

-President George Bush at the signing ceremony for the Americans with Disabilities Act

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act. This legislation, unique in the world at the time of its inception, is a landmark moment in our civil rights history. But what do people really know about it? Just what did the ADA accomplish?

The ADA secured tangible benefits for people with disabilities by prohibiting discrimination based on disability status in employment, transportation, public accommodations, communications, and governmental activities. The ADA is about access, then, and making sure that people with disabilities have the same access to the stuff of life as anyone else.

As a result of the ADA, people with disabilities have been more able to fully participate in American life. With increased access has come increased visibility. Visibility very much matters; when people are visible, they gain in influence. The increased visibility that resulted from the ADA has helped the disability rights movement by increasing American awareness and consciousness around issues related to disabilities and equal access. The law has helped us all learn, not just because of the underpinning philosophy and the specific protections that it provides, but because it has worked and made it so that more and more Americans have meaningful contact with people with disabilities.

The Americans with Disabilities Act is an important piece of civil rights legislation, but the law can only do so much to make change. At the signing ceremony for the ADA, President Bush distinguished between the physical barriers we have created and the social barriers we have accepted. The law addresses the physical barriers... but what



THE TORCH

(CRTP NEWSLETTER) MARCH '15

about the social barriers? Are people with disabilities *fully* included in American society, our communities, and our schools?

We know that students with disabilities do not always feel safe, welcome, and respected in our schools. We have laws guaranteeing equal access to education, but we can do better by refusing to accept the social barriers that exclude so many of our students from full participation in school life. Our civil rights teams can take a leading role in making this happen.

The Civil Rights Team Project is currently meeting with the Disability Rights Center to think of ways our civil rights teams can celebrate the passing of the ADA and highlight the idea that American society and our schools benefit from full inclusion. Like with any other civil rights issue, we should celebrate the progress we've made while highlighting that there is still important work to be done. Expect to hear more about this collaboration in the fall.

In the meantime, I high recommend that you check out President Bush's excellent speech at the signing ceremony for the Americans with Disabilities Act [right here](#).

