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Torch (December 2015)

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Civil Rights Team Project

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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 (including gender identity and expression), and sexual orientation.



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

From the Teams: A nice variety of schools and initiatives featured here.

From the Office: A look back at the 2015 student trainings.

From the News: We're not quite ready to talk politics... yet.

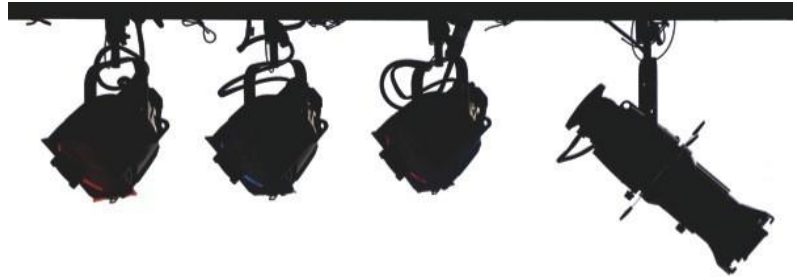
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This newsletter is written and distributed by the Civil Rights Team Project, a state-wide program under the auspices of the Maine Office of the Attorney General. The mission of the Civil Rights Team Project is to increase the safety of elementary, middle level, and high school students by reducing bias-motivated behaviors and harassment in our schools.

Brandon Baldwin—Program Manager, Newsletter Editor
Debi Lettre Goodheart—Civil Rights Project Administrator
Janet Mills—Attorney General



From the Teams:



At **Narraguagus High School** in Harrington, the civil rights team honored LGBT History Month by giving students and staff

opportunities to show their support for the LGBT community. On October 29 they invited their school to wear stickers and a designated color (specific to their class) represented on the rainbow flag. More than 75 students wore stickers and more than 50 wore their designated color.

Hey, Narraguagus High School civil rights team... you have done something really important. You have created space and opportunities for students in your school to voice their support for LGBT folks. We know that school isn't always a welcoming place for LGBT students and staff. Never underestimate the power of these kinds of symbolic gestures. (And thanks to their advisor, Tom Absalom, for sharing!)

At **Noble Middle School** in South Berwick, the civil rights team celebrated the idea that "superheroes are for everyone." The team was inspired by the [Wear Your Superheroes campaign](#) (created in response to a young superhero-loving girl being told that superheroes are for boys). The civil rights team created posters showcasing superheroes of different genders, races, and abilities. They hosted a special day where they encouraged students to dress up as their favorite superheroes, celebrating the idea that "superheroes are for everyone."

Hey, Noble Middle School civil rights team... this is fun! But it's more than just fun. It's a great way to get students thinking about stereotypes and issues of representation. Our superheroes should be as diverse as we are, and you are helping to make it so. Keep using your superpowers for civil rights! (And thanks to their advisor, Amy Malette, for sharing!)

At **Washburn Elementary School** in Auburn, the civil rights team was inspired to replicate an activity from our fall trainings and create a poster welcoming people to their school. The poster explicitly welcomes people of all races, skin colors, ethnicities, national origins, cultures, abilities and disabilities, genders, sexual orientations, and ages. It cleverly incorporates Auburn's 04210 zip code, too, with each digit becoming a part of an acrostic-style recommendation for how students can make Washburn more welcoming.

Hey, Washburn civil rights team: this is exactly the kind of thing we hoped you'd do after attending the trainings! It's really important that civil rights teams take a leading role in welcoming everyone to our schools. Your poster has a clear civil rights focus and



makes it clear that *everyone means everyone*. I'd love to see posters like this in all our schools. (And thanks to their advisor, Maggie Luce, for sharing!)

At **Windham Middle School**, the civil rights team has been using public spaces to spread civil rights messages. They have a "Civil Rights Reads" display outside the library featuring an extensive selection of age-appropriate books highlighting diversity. They created an October bulletin board with the "[We're a Culture, Not a Costume](#)" campaign, challenging their peers to think about issues of cultural appropriation with Halloween costumes. They also created a bulletin board highlighting the language trend of people using disability labels to describe everyday behaviors and events, thus trivializing or stigmatizing the disabilities. The display asks students "What are you REALLY saying?" They've also used the student body, literally, to promote the school's LGBT-friendly Safe Spaces program, handing out ally pins and stickers to their peers.

Hey, Windham Middle School civil rights team... I don't even know where to start complimenting you! That is its own compliment, because your team is so active in addressing a wide variety of issues. You are embracing everything and making sure that your work includes initiatives related to all the civil rights identities. Keep challenging your school to think about these issues! (And thanks to their advisor, Meg Rooks, for sharing!)

Students and staff at Narraguagus High School show their support for the LGBT community...





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The Noble Middle School civil rights team highlights diversity within the ranks of superheroes, showing that superheroes are for *everyone*.

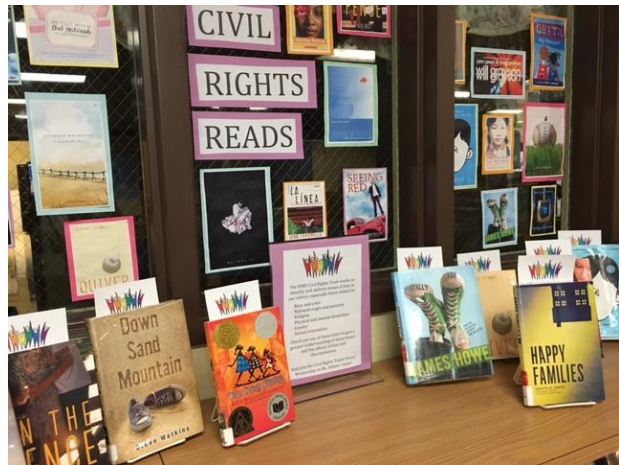


How inviting! This poster welcomes *everyone* to Washburn Elementary.



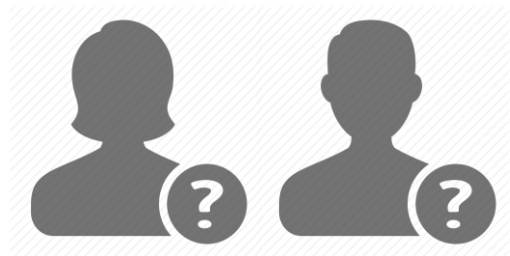


Some of the great displays at Windham Middle School...



From the Advisors:

This month we're featuring Tonya Ballard, an English teacher at Belfast Area High School. Tonya is in her sixth year of advising the civil rights team there.



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

I love all parts of the work with the civil rights team, but the part I love most is figuring out the students I have on the team each year and how to best utilize them to do the work. Each year the dynamics change. Students have their own agendas and passions, and I just facilitate the group, challenge them, and promote their growth as leaders. That is the fun part.

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

My favorite moments are tough, but I have to say I was super proud of the work the students did to create a film last year about language and how it affects others. The students crafted interview questions, filmed staff and students in the spring during study hall times, organized the filming, and then edited the film and worked on sound and music, etc. over the summer. We also did a lot of work to organize the viewing. I love when the students are invested in a project and work hard to see it through.

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



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The biggest issue in our school is probably similar to many other schools in Maine: biased-based language and attitudes (use of the r-word, aspersions on sexual orientation, gender issues, and sometimes ethnic and racial slurs). We constantly look at how we can raise awareness and gain allies as we address these issues.

4. What do you like about your civil rights team this year?

I love the big hearts of the students I work with. We did a little fundraising this fall, worked on how to address language in the halls, buses, etc. when we hear it, and now we are working on raising awareness in our school around more national issues as well as local. We have a conservative Muslim family in our district. One of the children in the family currently attends the high school as did her siblings. She has experienced hateful comments in social media, so we are working on displays to put up in the hallways in support of Muslim families. We find some coverage in the media around the Muslim religion truly offensive and want to initiate discussion around this problem. The students also are sharing a good news board display for the month of December – January with headlines around civil rights issues that are positive. Many students feel overwhelmed with negative news stories and wanted to share hopeful/ positive changes in civil rights.

I am also happy to have a group of ninth graders who have joined the team, and I am encouraging the older students to welcome them and include them in planning. The younger students are the future of the team and need to feel welcomed and involved.

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

Recent media coverage of intolerance around race and religion has left me less optimistic some days. However, when I look at our students at BAHS in general, I am very hopeful. We have students who openly express their affection for same sex friends by hand holding. I cannot imagine that happening even ten years ago. We have had students who express their gender identity... sometimes with harassment from others, but mostly students have been accepted by their peers. I feel more education is needed about gender identification in our school as most other schools in Maine and I am concerned about negative comments about the Muslim faith due to backlash against Muslim extremism and terrorism this fall. I believe this generation is more accepting about personal choices than previous generations, but of course there is always work to do.

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

Listen to the students to find out where the problems are in your school and listen to what their passions are. Expose the students to enlightening and inspirational films, video clips, and ideas that other schools have tried. Let the students lead, but offer them



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guidance and tips for time management so they can complete ideas for projects. Figure out the personalities of the student leaders so you can best utilize their styles in order to accomplish the work. (For example I have had a president who didn't like to talk in front of groups and was shy. We figured out her comfort zone was secretary!) Take time to celebrate periodically—food is always great!





From the Office:

New Teams!

Since our last newsletter in October, we have welcomed new civil rights teams at Caribou High School, Elm Street School in Mechanic Falls, Minot Consolidated School, Skowhegan Area High School, and Westbrook Middle School. We're happy to have these five new schools participating in the Civil Rights Team Project.



Student Training Numbers

On November 13 we concluded a busy 4 ½ weeks of student trainings that included a total of 13 sessions in Augusta, Brewer, Farmington, Portland, and Presque Isle. Our trainings included student groups from 129 schools (including 31 elementary level schools, 58 middle level schools, and 40 high schools) and a total of 1782 participants.

It's always exciting to add up these numbers at the end of the fall training schedule. It's especially exciting this year, though, as the numbers suggest that the Civil Rights Team Project is growing! Compared to last year, we had 14% more schools and 20% more participants. This increase is consistent at all age levels, too.

So what exactly did we do with our increased numbers at the student trainings this year? The same thing we do every year: find innovative and engaging ways to 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.

Here's what that looked like in 2015...

Elementary Level Trainings

This year's four elementary level trainings focused on the theme of *welcome*. After a series of introductory activities, we read the Teaching Tolerance story "[The Day I Swam Into a New World](#)," by Margaret Auguste. The story centers around Francis, an African-American girl who isn't sure if she's going to be welcome at her new community swimming pool. There's a banner proclaiming that everyone is welcome, but it's also 1950, and racial segregation is very much a reality in American life. Frances wonders, "Does everyone include me?"

We specifically looked at the welcoming banner and how it could have answered Francis's question with more inclusive language and specific references to race. We connected this idea with American history and how our country has not always lived up



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to its ideals of all men being created equal. If we really want to welcome everyone, we have to get specific with our language and make our welcoming messages as inclusive as possible.

We also have to work to eliminate the things that specifically make people feel unwelcome. During an activity where we were identifying behaviors that might make people feel unwelcome in school, we had three powerful moments:

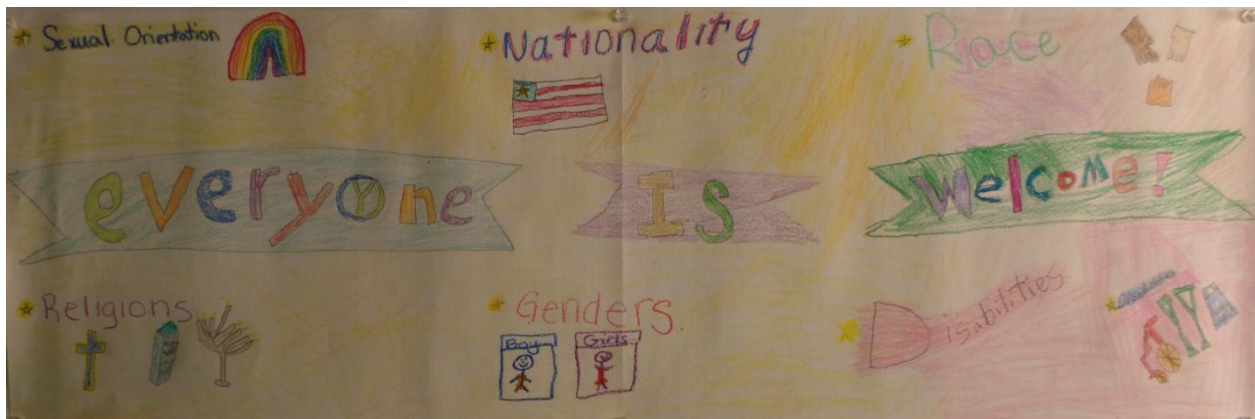
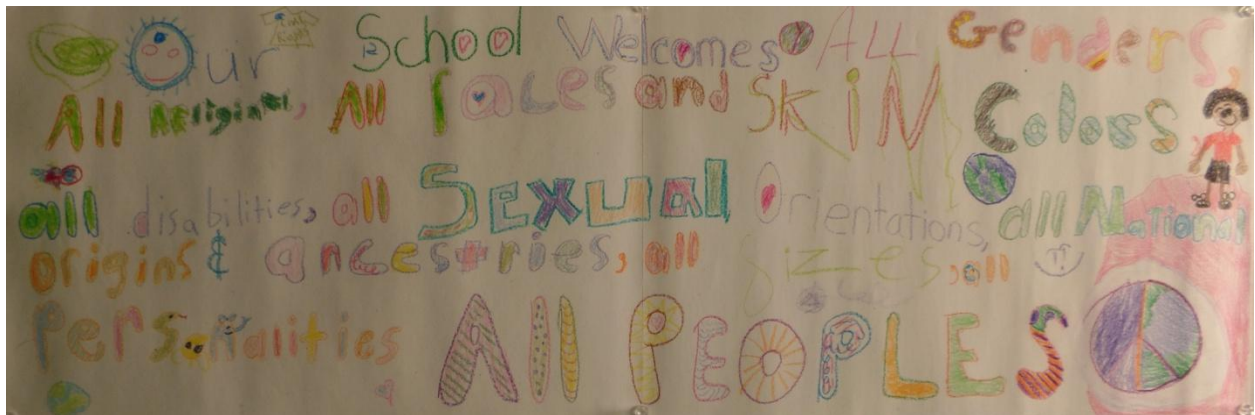
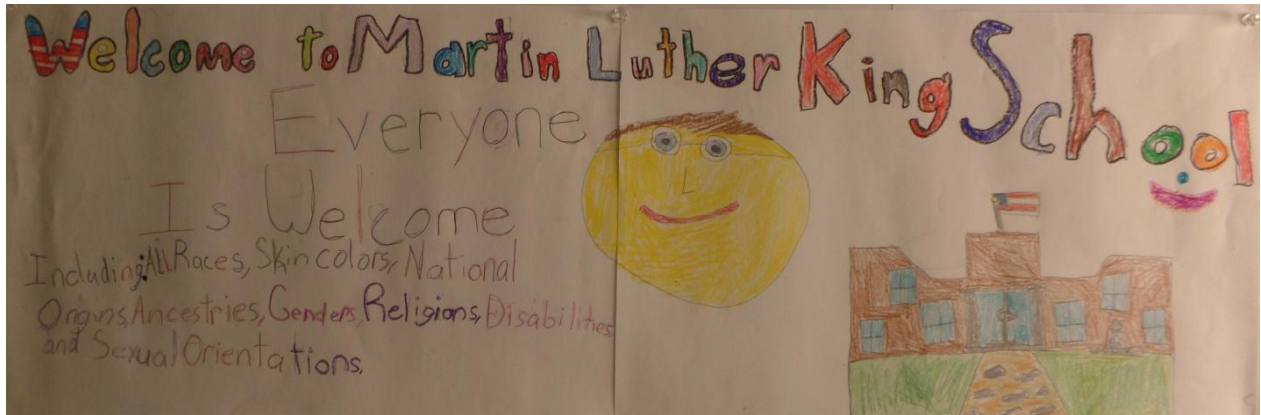
- When asked to explain how someone saying that it's un-American not to celebrate Christmas might make someone feel unwelcome at school, a boy explained that he was Jewish, so he doesn't celebrate Christmas, but he is definitely American.
- When asked to explain how someone saying that it's a waste of money to put wheelchair ramps in schools might make someone feel unwelcome at school, a girl told the group about her younger brother. He needs to wheel a cart around to accommodate his disability, and without wheelchair ramps he probably wouldn't be able to attend school.
- When asked to explain how someone saying that gay people are gross might make people feel unwelcome at school, a boy shared that his uncle is gay, and that he's not gross, but beautiful. When asked how it would make him feel to hear something like this, he replied, "It would make me angry!"

These three moments were important reminders to everyone at our trainings that the stuff we talk about isn't fictional and abstract; it has personal meaning to many of our students.



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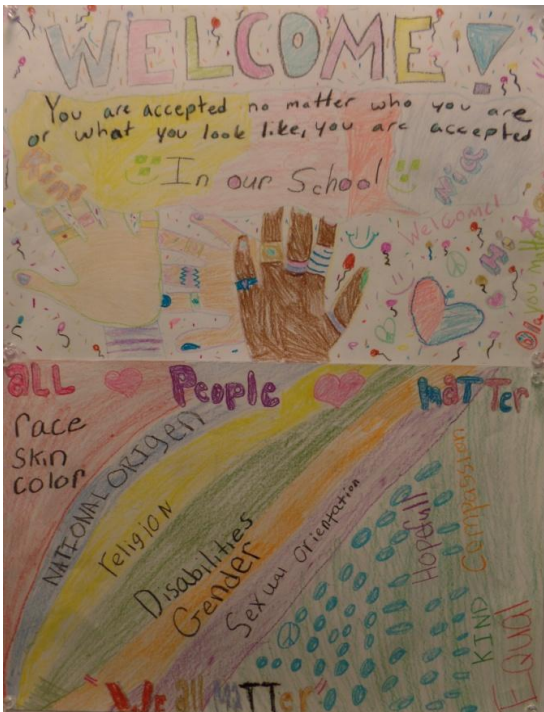
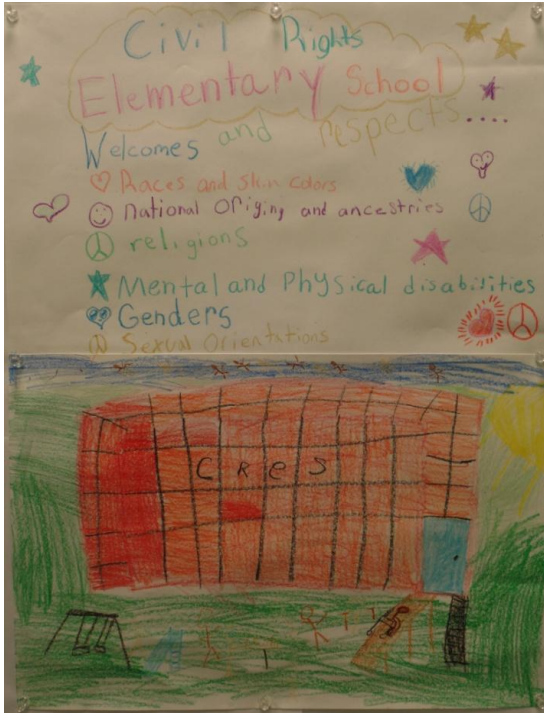
We ended the day in mixed-school groups creating banners that let everyone know that our schools welcome everyone... and that this includes people of all races and skin colors, national origins and ancestries, religions, mental and physical disabilities, genders, and sexual orientations. In spite of very limited resources, unfamiliar groups and environments, and not nearly enough time, the students created some wonderful banners. We've shared some of our favorites here.





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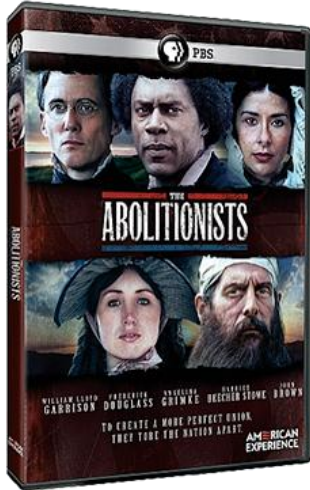
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Thank you to all the students and advisors for making our 2015 elementary trainings so wonderful, and for your ongoing work in making our schools more welcoming for all our students.



Middle Level and High School Trainings



The centerpiece for our eleven middle level and high school trainings this year was the PBS American Experience docudrama [*The Abolitionists*](#). We watched about one hour of clips focusing on Angelina Grimke, Harriet Beecher Stowe, William Lloyd Garrison, and Frederick Douglass. We looked at how they were drawn to the movement to abolish American slavery, the tactics they employed in their work, and their successes and failures.

Rather than focus specifically on civil rights issues, then, we focused more on how we get people thinking and talking about civil rights issues. The abolitionists were our examples and inspiration. Throughout the day, we repeated a schedule pattern of watching film, brief whole group activities, and then breaking into community circles for small group discussion and processing.

The community circles offered students structured opportunities to connect with the film and interact with students from other schools. Our community circle prompts used the film to get participants thinking and talking about their own work in the Civil Rights Team Project. Here are a few sample prompts:

- The abolitionists were a diverse group (meaning that they were different from each other in many ways). In what ways is your civil rights team or student group diverse? In what ways could you be more diverse?
- The abolitionists' work is very difficult. It's not easy to change people's minds about something. People resist change. How do we continue on with difficult work when people resist us?



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- Angelina Grimke wants to make gender equality and women's rights part of the abolitionist movement. She is basically told that it's not the right time, and that everyone needs to be united in fighting against slavery. What do you think of this argument? Is unity ever more important than doing what's right?
- Both Frederick Douglass and Harriet Beecher Stowe tell stories. Why do you think this storytelling is a good idea for the abolitionist movement? Why do stories work so well?

We also compiled student voices in three "working lunch" activities that students completed during their lunch break. The first activity asked students to think about some basic guidelines, with a specific focus on *actions*, for being good allies and advocates in the world of civil rights. Students then took markers and wrote their guidelines on a large sheet of paper we had taped up on the wall, creating a group graffiti wall. We are now reading through all eleven of these with plans to compile them all into one master set of guidelines.

In another of the working lunch activities, students wrote things they'd like to see abolished in our schools on sticky notes and put them on a mural. We now have a collection of hundreds and hundreds of student-identified civil rights issues in our schools. There's no way to share them all, but we'd like to share some of what the students wrote.

There were lots and lots of sticky notes focused on:

- Specific forms of bias (like racism or transphobia and many other -isms and -phobias)
- Specific examples of bias-based language
- Categories of jokes related to people's identities

And then there were some things that were powerful because they were so specific...

- Stop the racism towards Somalis
- Jokes about Asians eating cats and dogs
- Jokes about black people being drug dealers or thugs
- Indian mascots
- ELL in the basement
- Mexican jokes (yes they happen a lot)
- We shouldn't say "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance because not everyone follows a religion that worships God
- The use of the Arabic phrase "Allahu Akbar" (god is great) to make fun of Islam
- Not recognizing Eid as a school holiday
- The assumption that people with physical and mental disabilities are stupid



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- People being called out on their learning disabilities
- No insulting language around disabilities, not “bound” to a wheelchair, not “suffering from” anything
- Gender or sex determined colors for graduation gowns
- “You’re pretty good for a girl.”
- “Ladies and gentlemen” (there’s a lot in between)
- Purposely misgendering people
- Calling a guy who wears pink gay
- “Wanna see the gay way of doing/saying this/that?”

This wide range of responses shows that there are plenty of civil rights issues in our schools. That can be discouraging... but it’s encouraging to think that our students have identified these issues as the things that we need to abolish in our schools. Even better, they are working to make it happen.

Finally, with our third working lunch activity, the “quote vote” activity, students voted for their favorite of four quotes. The four quotes came from our four featured abolitionists, but students did not know this when they voted; the quotes were unattributed. Their four quote choices were:

- If a law commands me to sin I will break it. (Angelina Grimke)
- It’s a matter of taking the side of the weak against the strong, something the best people have always done. (Harriet Beecher Stowe)
- We may be personally defeated, but our principles never! (William Lloyd Garrison)
- Without a struggle, there can be no progress. (Frederick Douglass)

Students *overwhelmingly* chose the Frederick Douglass quote as their favorite. This was true at all nine of our middle level and high school training sessions. It’s exciting to think that the words of an escaped slave and leading abolitionist are inspiring the work of our student civil rights teams today! Perhaps some of the students who attended these trainings will go on to write something that will one day be remembered by others who are continuing on with our vision of safe, welcoming, and respectful communities for all our people.

We finished with a session facilitated by Nicole Rancourt from the Maine Humanities Council. She helped students identify some of the many ways we can get students in our schools thinking and talking about civil rights issues. We thought about the ways the abolitionists got people thinking and talking, and how they might accomplish that today. We also thought about how we got participants thinking and talking at the trainings. In the end, students went back to their schools with plenty of ideas and inspiration. And what will they accomplish? The example of the abolitionists is our model: it may not be easy, but through their commitment, they’ll achieve great things.



From the News:

The Dilemma with Politics

It's been difficult, almost impossible, figuring out what to write about in this "From the News" section for this December newsletter. Civil rights issues have *dominated* the news for the last few months... but all of these issues have been intertwined with politics. The general rule in the Civil Rights Team Project is that we don't talk politics.



But there's a dilemma with this sort of blanket ban on all things political. A lot of us have questions. Everything seems politicized now, so what can we talk about? How can we be good allies and advocates, and true to our civil rights focus, if we have to avoid anything with even a hint of politics to it? Is there a responsible way for us to talk about political issues?

These are good questions... and questions we're not quite ready to address here. We'll have a thoughtful, clear set of answers (and even some guidelines) ready for you in the next edition of *The Torch*, though. Thank you for your patience.