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Torch (April 2016)

Brandon Baldwin

Civil Rights Team Project

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Recommended Citation

Baldwin, Brandon and Civil Rights Team Project, "Torch (April 2016)" (2016). *Torch: The Civil Rights Team Project Newsletter*. 74.

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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 April edition of *The Torch*:

From the Teams: All kinds of good stuff happening with No Name-Calling Week, and plenty of other civil rights team activities and initiatives.

From the Office: Working on resource guides, getting ready for the state conference in May, and continuing collaboration with the Maine Humanities Council.

From the News: Another terrorist attack, the entirely predictable response, and the things we really need to hear.

* * * * *

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:



No Name-Calling Week

In January and February ten middle level and high school civil rights teams collaborated with me in addressing the issue of bias-based name-calling and insults with No Name-Calling Week events. I contributed my voice to these events with my “The Power of Words” presentation. The planning for these events started in November, with each team agreeing to:

- Collect survey data on bias-based name-calling
- Crowd source something, with a direct appeal to non-civil rights team members to contribute something for the week’s event
- Run an encouragement campaign, where the team actively encourages students to avoid the use of bias-based insults
- Highlight the school’s harassment policy
- Publicize the event

Overall, the teams did a great job in following through with their plans. The survey data was especially eye-opening and effective. The teams asked their peers a number of questions about bias-based name-calling and insults, including questions on the use of the words *gay* and *retarded*. Specifically, they asked if students hear these words in school and if they think it’s OK to use these words. The results were consistent in every school: students hear the words but *don’t* think it’s OK to use them. I incorporated these survey results into my presentations, highlighting the idea that just because we hear the words, that doesn’t mean that everyone uses them or is OK with them.

Many of the teams combined their crowd sourcing and encouragement campaigns, inviting individuals to pose with signs explaining why they don’t or won’t use specific bias-based language. The signs were sometimes created in advance or featured elements of customization. Pictures of students and adults holding the signs were then put on bulletin boards or the walls of the school, offering real-life examples of how individuals choose not to use bias-based language.

Here are some other great ideas and activities civil rights teams included in their No Name-Calling Week events:

- At **China Middle School** students got to observe some serious symbolism with the “dissolving bias” activity. In their homerooms on the morning of my presentation, students used markers and slips of scrap paper to write down words they never want to hear in their school again. Civil rights team members



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collected these papers as students filed into the gym and put them in a fish tank filled with water. The water sucked the ink out of the papers, making the words “dissolve.” The green-colored water offered all kinds of symbolism: green can represent sickness and the effects of name-calling, but also the color of spring and the opportunity for a new beginning.

- At **Hermon High School**, the civil rights team offered their peers some alternatives to using the words *gay* and *retarded* as insults. They brainstormed alternative words and created posters questioning why anyone would want to use *gay* and *retarded*. Their design was professionally printed by a local printer, and their 12 x 18 posters now hang in every classroom in the school.
- At **Holbrook Middle School in Holden**, the civil rights team created an interactive *Jeopardy!*-style game to review the school harassment policy. Students played it during their guidance classes. The game featured a whole board of 25 questions, including video scenarios showing incidents of harassment that game participants had to specifically connect to the language of the policy.
- At **Madison Area Memorial High School**, the civil rights team used Google forms to collect more than just survey data from students; they also collected stories. They asked for stories where students felt targeted based on their identities or witnessed bias-based behaviors. With the respondents' permission, the team then anonymously shared some of these stories at a school-wide assembly.
- At **Massabesic High School in Waterboro**, the civil rights team invited students to create artwork celebrating the week's theme. They provided advisory groups art materials and the prompt to “create something that would make students feel safe, welcome, and respected in school.” The resulting work decorated the halls during No Name-Calling Week.
- At **Whittier Middle School in Poland**, the civil rights team challenged their school to sign a pledge banner stating “I will do my part to end name-calling now.” The banner is an extension of their No Name-Calling Week bulletin board, featuring a play on their school slogan of “Choose to lead” with “Don't just choose to lead; choose your words, too.”

Thank you to all the schools that celebrated and promoted No Name-Calling Week in 2016. I look forward to working with more schools next year as the Civil Rights Team Project continues its commitment to eliminating bias-based name-calling and insults from our schools. (And thanks to all the advisors who sent me information and pictures to include in this space!)



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HHS Civil Rights Team

That's...

uncool trivial
pointless fruitless
useless senseless unnecessary foolish
careless irrational illogical
ignorant immature

...and you chose to say

RETARDED?

#bekind

HHS Civil Rights Team

That's...

dumb silly
annoying ridiculous
stuffy dull aggravating
idiotic uninteresting
absurd unnecessary
foolish irritating boring

...and you chose to say

GAY?

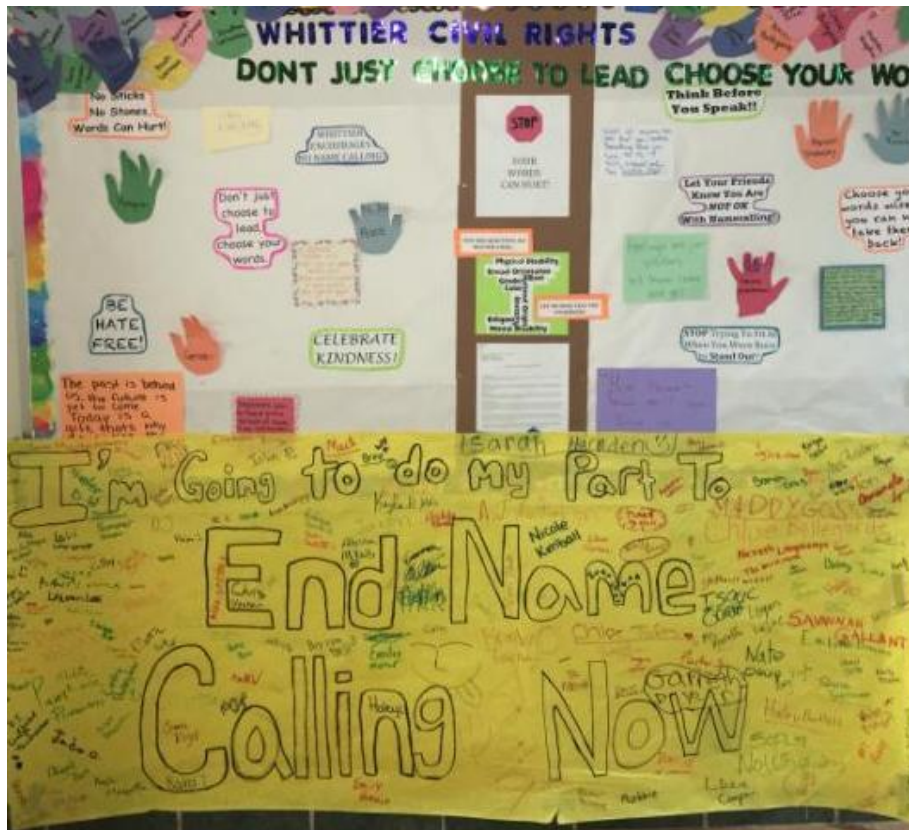
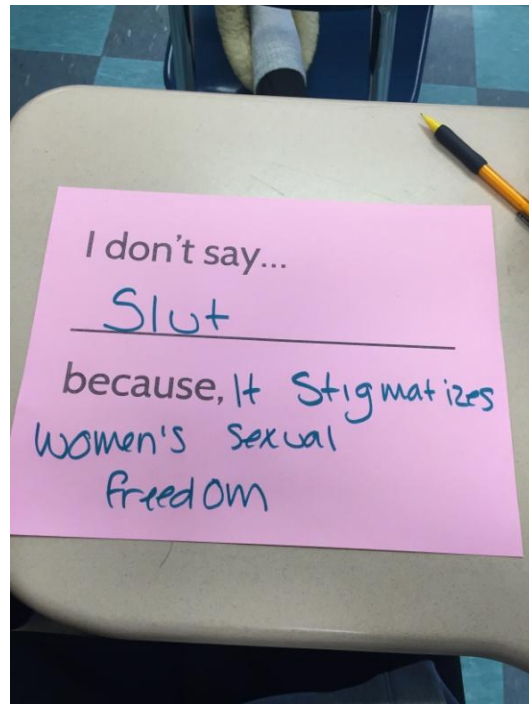
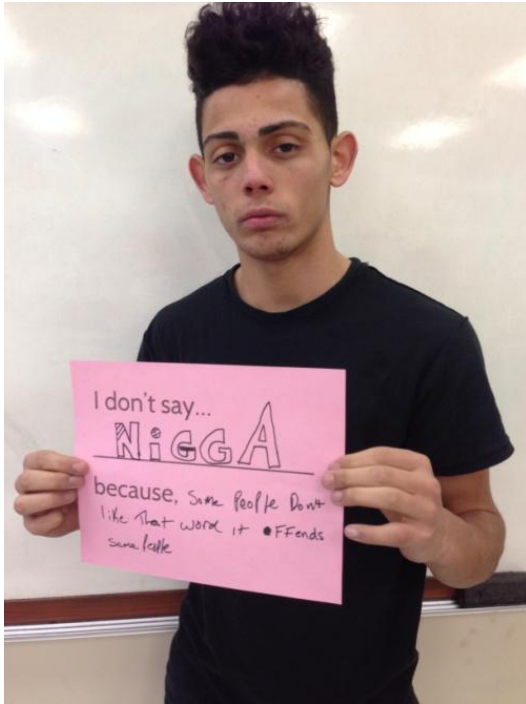
#bekind





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At **Memorial Middle School in South Portland**, the civil rights team planned and led a half-day of activities around the theme of “understanding bias.” Their ninth annual Civil Rights Day event included five 20-minute workshops for each grade (6-8). That’s a total of fifteen different workshops! The workshops included readings, videos, discussion, and interactive activities on topics ranging from different family structures, stereotyping and labeling, Islamophobia, gender bias and sexism, and recognizing different forms of bias.

Hey, Memorial Middle School civil rights team... it’s wonderful that you do this event every year. It’s especially important that your workshops are student-run, too, with 31 (!) of you facilitating activities. That takes a lot of planning and work, but it’s worth it. It’s really smart to have different activities for every grade level, as you already have a great starting point for next year’s event... which will be your tenth year! (And thanks to their advisors, Wendy Mann and Nancy Sparacio, for sharing!)



At **Mt. View Middle School in Thorndike**, the civil rights team encouraged their classmates to stop using the r-word by promoting the Special Olympics’ Spread the Word to End the Word Day. They truly spread it, too, making it into a two-day event. On the first day, they showed a video they had made for the occasion and then set up a station in the lunch room where they asked students to sign the End the R-Word pledge. Students who signed got some official “End the Word” swag. On the second day, the team used advisory periods to facilitate a lesson on “people-first” language and again



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promoted the pledge. Including staff and a few high school students, more than 340 pledges were signed.

Hey, Mt. View Middle School civil rights team... this is a great initiative! The r-word has got to go. Any work you can do to help make it happen is important... but you've gone a little further. You have connected this issue with something bigger: showing respect for people with disabilities. (And thanks to their advisor, Sara Converse, for sharing!)



At **Pemetic Elementary School in Southwest Harbor**, the civil rights team has diversified their school's reading options by creating a mobile civil rights library. They secured a \$1000 grant from the Mount Desert Island Education Enhancement Fund, researched and chose age appropriate books for their K-8 school, ordered them, resurrected an old cart, developed a system for loaning out books, and put everything together. Once completed, the team showcased the new library at a staff meeting and in homerooms. They plan on using some of the picture books to spark civil rights conversations in their elementary classrooms.

Hey, Pemetic Elementary School civil rights team... the former literature teacher in me loves this project! (The rest of me think it's pretty great, too.) Just having diverse books in your school is important because it increases the visibility of people of different identities. But the real value of this library will come when students go ahead and read the books. Literature can serve as a window into the lives of other people, increasing understanding and reducing prejudice. Keep promoting diverse books! (And thanks to their advisors, Sonja Philbrook and Carolyn Todd, for sharing!)



At **Riverton Elementary School in Portland**, the civil rights team highlighted the incredible diversity that exists in their school and promoted the idea that their diversity is something worth celebrating. Their third annual Civil Rights Celebration Week featured each of the team's subgroups presenting to their peers:

- The theater group performed an interactive skit about discrimination, where the “new girl” at school looks different from what students expect.
- The arts and crafts group shared the story [“The Day I Swam Into a New World”](#) and helped students make banners welcoming everyone to their school.
- The culture club group joined forces with Michael Winfield to offer African drumming lessons.
- The mentoring group read a selection of anti-bias themed picture books to younger students.
- The newsletter and arts group worked with students to create a “Hall of Flags,” with flags representing students’ ancestries.

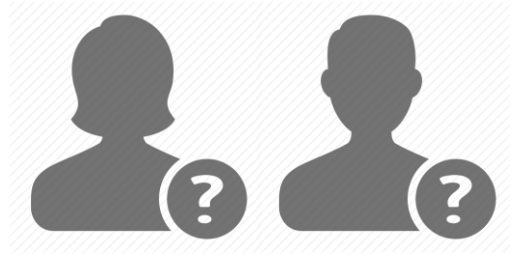
Hey, Riverton Elementary School civil rights team... you packed a lot into one week! You've found so many different ways to engage your school in thinking and talking about civil rights issues. I think that every single student in your school enjoyed something about this week. Just as importantly, you are showing that you connect anything and everything to civil rights somehow, because civil rights issues are all around us. (And thanks to their advisors, Amanda Atkinson-Lewis and Teddy Valencia, for sharing!)



From the Advisors:

This month we're featuring Ellen Pinkham and Judi Bouchard of Winslow High School. Ellen teaches English, Reading, and Career Prep. She is in her fourth year of advising the civil rights team.

This year, she is joined by Judi, a Jobs for Maine Graduates specialist.



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

Judi: I enjoy talking with the kids about the different issues and educating the student body. It's great to be a resource for the students also.

Ellen: I love being able to introduce students to how alike we all are and yet, how wonderfully different. Being able to channel students' energies about behaviors by others that upset them into enacting positive change within our school and community is affirming.

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

Judi: My favorite moment this year was seeing the members' faces when they handed out the civil rights team bracelets to students taking them.

Ellen: I can't pick one favorite moment, but every time one of the kids has a light bulb moment during a meeting, my heart lights up with joy. (Corny, I know, but I'll take it.)

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

Judi: I struggle with students who don't understand the depths of the ramifications of how their biased actions can affect many others. It's no joking matter.

Ellen: I think our biggest civil rights issue is biased language. I still hear students speak in an effeminate tone to indicate negativity towards others. It's common to hear students say, "I could say something but I would be accused of being racist so I won't," which isn't much better. The ongoing attitude of students toward each other can be disheartening and exhausting.

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

Judi: I like the particular group of kids, but this is my first year so I don't have anything to compare it to.



Ellen: I love that we have begun to spread into a larger population of the school and that our presence is a positive one.

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

Judi: I think approaching it by educating the student body is going to make huge strides in the students accepting and understanding one another, but maybe this is me wearing rose-colored glasses.

Ellen: I'm hoping that with each passing year our team will grow as more and more students recognize the importance of civil rights.

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

Judi: Reach out to other student groups to gain membership and thus reaching more of the student body.

Ellen: Try to make your team and its work as visible as possible in the school. The more students who see posters, bracelets, t-shirts, etc., the more talk there will be around our mission and vision.

From the Office:

Recruitment Efforts

We don't have any new civil rights teams to tell you about here, but our recruitment efforts will be ramping up soon. If there's a school that you'd like to see start a civil rights team, be in touch. We can work together in recruiting them.

What I'm Working on Now

Back in February I sent out a survey asking our civil rights team advisors what I should be working on this spring. Advisors were asked to rank the following options in terms of what I should prioritize:

- Creating space and opportunities for increased collaboration between advisors and teams
- Generating more project ideas and initiatives (similar to what is already on Dropbox)





- Organizing useful resources to help you and your teams address specific age-level topics (like "that's so gay," white privilege, gender stereotypes, etc.)
- Scouring the internet for useful videos
- Working on the "nuts and bolts" operational stuff to help advisors with their teams (like letters home to parents at the beginning of the school year, pledges and contracts, tools to train your own team, etc.)

The overwhelming “winner” was “Organizing useful resources to help you and your teams address specific age-level topics.” It received the most first-place votes, and 74% of the survey respondents said it should be my first or second priority.

So guess what I’ve been doing lately? I’ve completed resource guides on [the confederate flag](#), [use of the r-word](#), and [pronouns for gender non-conforming folks](#). These guides take some time to create, as I’m trying to be both thorough and highly selective about what’s included, but expect to see more of these in the future. Eventually, I’d like to have guides for all the important civil rights issues that exist in our schools.

Right now, the guides only exist as PDF files on the Dropbox. (Check them out by clicking on the links above or visiting the folder titled “Resources Arranged by Topic.”) We are investigating other options on how to best share them; we want these to be as user-friendly and accessible as possible.

The State Conference

It’s really happening! For the first time since 2010, the Civil Rights Team Project will be having a statewide event. On May 23rd we’re inviting middle level and high school civil rights teams to come together in Augusta to celebrate the wonderful work we’ve done during the 2015-2016 school year.

This year’s conference will feature a nice mix of student voices from within the Civil Rights Team Project and some exciting outside voices, including:

- Attorney General Janet T. Mills
- Winners of the first-ever Civil Rights Team Project essay contest
- Civil rights teams sharing some of the cool things they’ve done this year
- The Lewiston High School civil rights team
- Portland-based street artist Pigeon
- Vishavjit Singh, a New York-based cartoonist and creator of Sikhtoons
- A special surprise keynote

Expect to see more about this special event in the June edition of *The Torch*.



Collaboration with the Maine Humanities Council

Back in December the Maine Humanities Council received word that they'd be receiving a \$145,000 grant from the National Endowment of the Humanities to further public dialogue around ideas and issues associated with the 14th Amendment to the US Constitution. (For more details, you should read the [official press release](#).) Some of those grant funds are specifically marked to further the [recent collaborative work](#) between the Maine Humanities Council and the Civil Rights Team Project.

And just what might that look like? It looks like opportunity and resources, specifically:

- An honorarium to bring Vishavjit Singh, creator of [Sikhtoons](#), to Maine to conduct workshops at our upcoming statewide conference
- Copies of a selected text for all our returning advisors next fall, which we will incorporate into the advisor trainings through a book talk
- A bundle of picture books for every elementary-level civil rights team next fall
- Funding to bring a special guest to ten schools next year to collaborate with their civil rights teams on a project

Expect more details on all of these opportunities in the upcoming months. We are excited to gain access to all of these wonderful resources, but just as importantly, to continue our collaboration with the Maine Humanities Council.

From the News:

In Response to Terrorist Attacks

On March 22, terrorists detonated explosions in the Brussels airport and subway. The death toll reached the thirties. The Islamic State (ISIS) claimed credit for the attacks.

And then, of course, we got all the predictable responses.

Here are the things we don't hear, but really need to.

1. There are other terrorist attacks that don't grab our attention.

What happened in Brussels triggers memories of Paris, and the Boston Marathon, and Madrid, and of course 9/11. These are the ones we remember.





But in the days before the Brussels attacks, there were terrorist attacks in the Ivory Coast, Turkey, and Nigeria. On Easter, there were terrorist attacks in Pakistan killing 69 people. The day before the Paris attacks suicide bombers killed 43 innocents in Beirut, Lebanon.

Why don't we remember those? Why don't we even *hear* about those?

Is it because the victims aren't white enough? Is it because these attacks happened in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia? Is it because we can imagine ourselves in Brussels, or Paris, or Madrid, but never over there? Is it because we expect that sort of thing there?

Are we willing to ask these tough questions, not just of others, but of ourselves?

2. Most victims of terrorism are Muslims.

Most of the innocent victims of what many call Muslim or Islamic terrorism... are Muslims. The ISIS, al Qaeda, and Boko Haran attacks of recent years target mostly Muslim civilians.

And so you know who really hates these terrorist groups? Muslims.

But we don't hear their stories much, do we?

3. Muslims will condemn this attack, *just like they always do.*

I was reading something in one of our local news outlets about how Maine's Muslims are frustrated by the inevitable backlash they see against Islam following attacks like these. They were unequivocal in condemning the attacks. Someone in the online comments said that this was the first time they'd ever seen Muslims condemn terrorist attacks.

Really? I've seen [fatwa](#) after [fatwa](#) after [fatwa](#) against terrorism. A fatwa is an Islamic religious ruling, issued by a religious scholar. And fatwas keep coming, from all around the world, condemning terrorism.

I've seen and heard the go-to Muslim talking heads get on the airwaves, over and over again, and condemn terrorism because Islam is a religion that teaches peace.

Every single Muslim I have ever spoken to for more than 5 minutes has made it perfectly clear that they and their religion are against terrorism.

They keep doing this. Patiently. Firmly. Repeatedly. And increasingly, with a greater sense of frustration.



Is the problem that this online commenter had never heard this sort of condemnation before, or that they just aren't listening?

4. The *Islam vs. The West* narrative is a false binary.

There are many problems with the idea that Islam is *at war* with The West. It suggests that the two are incompatible. It ignores the fact that Islam is part of the The West. It has history in The West, including [history right here in America](#). Muslims have been here in this country for many, many years, but we don't know much of that history.

And the problem with this Islam vs. The West idea, of course, is that it makes us ignore #1, #2, and #3... because they don't fit nicely into that narrative.

Neither does #5...

5. Muslim Americans are extremely patriotic.

The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding did some [recent surveying](#) of different American religious groups (Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and Protestants). And you know what they found? American Muslims are just as patriotic, if not more so, than other religious Americans. They identify themselves as American, and their American-ness is an important part of their identity. The more religious they are, the more this is true.

And check this out: Muslims are the most optimistic about our country's future, and it's not even close. 68% of American Muslims surveyed were satisfied with the direction of our country. This is true even though they reported experiencing the highest levels of discrimination.

That's amazing. You can easily understand why American Muslims might feel negatively about their country; but they don't. They love it, even though it must sometimes feel like unrequited love.

We can do better than this. Let's work to create the idealized version of America that our Muslim citizens believe in, and deserve.