



**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.**

## Addressing Bias-Based Language

We hear it again and again, and especially when we hear directly from youth: bias-based language is the most pervasive and pressing civil rights issue in our school communities. It’s a tough issue to address, but civil rights teams were up to the challenge this school year! While they employed many strategies in their work, it can be summarized through three distinct approaches.

### Education

One way civil rights teams address this issue is through education, helping their peers to understand it better. They identify specific bias-based language in their school communities, how prevalent it is, and why it’s considered harmful.

**Mountain Valley High School in Rumford:** Shared results of monthly poll questions on the use of language related to each of the six civil rights categories. They presented graphs and explanatory text about the results on school TVs and a bulletin board. The team included locally relevant and nuanced information, such as why the term *exchange students* is preferable to *foreigners*.



**Mt. Blue High School in Farmington:** Talked to

teachers at a staff meeting about a recent uptick in the use of the r-word. They followed up with [classroom posters](#) explaining (1) why the word is harmful, and (2) why calls to acknowledge its impact are not the problem.

**Reeds Brook Middle School in Hampden:** Created a [slideshow](#) on the r-word that they shared in a schoolwide virtual assembly. The slideshow was followed with discussion questions and a challenge for students not to use the word.

## Words Matter:

Eliminate the "r-word"  
from everyday conversation.

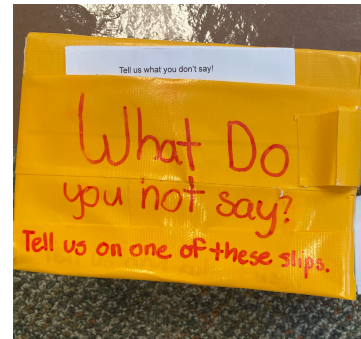
End the  
R-word

By RBMS Civil Rights Team

## Encouragement

Civil rights teams use encouragement campaigns to create positive peer pressure and show that not everyone uses bias-based language.

**Durham Community School:** Created a [display](#) highlighting some bias-based language that might seem harmless but actually perpetuates stereotypes and division. Team members explained why they don't use that language and invited others to write down what bias-based words they don't use. They also created a slideshow with more age-appropriate content to share with younger students during a morning meeting. Two team members later presented the project to the school board, who was impressed with their work.



**Sanford Middle School:** Surveyed students to ask if they hear bias-based insults related to each of the six civil rights categories and if they think it's OK to use those insults. The results consistently showed that students do hear the insults, but do not think it's OK to use them. The team was encouraged by these findings and used them to inspire a poster campaign. It featured civil rights team members and advisors explaining why they don't use bias-based insults, as well as some of the statistics from their survey.

I don't say the "R-word" because it is a form of bullying and a way of making people with mental disabilities feel less than and excluded.

- Ms. Scarano



Nearly 70% of SMS students reported hearing the "R-word" or other related slurs here at school.

**Sumner Memorial High School:** Printed signs in school colors, which they laminated and hung up around the school. The team chose not to feature photos of team members, opting instead to emphasize the group sentiment behind their messages. School staff offered positive feedback, saying the campaign offers them reinforcement in addressing the issue.

We don't say  
you speak funny  
because there is nothing  
comical about one's  
nationality.

SMHS civil rights team

## Effective Response Strategies

What should you do when someone uses bias-based language? Civil rights teams offer ideas and support for students and staff on how to respond.

**Central High School in Corinth:** Presented at a staff meeting, directly asking for adult assistance in interrupting bias-based language. They explained why they were focusing on the issue, acknowledged how difficult it can be to challenge the behavior, and shared response strategies from Learning for Justice. They gave out "[Speak Up Against Bias](#)" [pocket guides](#) and modeled each of their strategies. Next fall, they'll reinforce these with laminated classroom posters. Staff responded positively, noting that the guide was a useful resource and that the team's presentation was positive and polished.

**Falmouth High School:** Created and shared a [short video](#) in advisory groups. In the video, the civil rights team defined identity-based harassment and outlined the 5 D's for responding (Distract, Delegate, Document, Delay, and Direct; all info from [Right To Be](#)). They concluded with information on how to report harassment and how to get support if you're experiencing it.

**Maranacook Community Middle School in Readfield:** Surveyed students to figure out where and when they were hearing bias-based language most frequently. Results indicated the hallways. Since adults are generally not present there, the team decided to focus on empowering students to respond. They printed, folded, and distributed Learning for Justice "Speak Up Against Bias" pocket guides to their teachers to share with students. (This also reinforced the importance of adult intervention!)

**At CHS we ...**

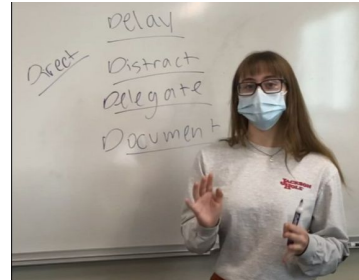
**Stand up against bias-based language**

**INTERRUPT**  
Try saying, "I don't like that word."

**QUESTION**  
Try saying, "Why do you say that? What does that mean?"

**EDUCATE**  
Try saying, "Do you know the history of that word?"

**ECHO**  
Try saying, "Thanks for speaking up! I agree with what you said."



<b>INTERRUPT</b> Speak up against every biased remark - every time, in the moment, without exceptions. Think about what you'll say ahead of time so you're prepared to act instantly. <b>TRY SAYING</b> "I DON'T LIKE WORDS LIKE THAT" OR "THAT PHRASE IS HURTFUL."	<b>QUESTION</b> Ask thoughtful questions in response to hateful remarks to find out who the speaker made the offensive comment and how you can best address the situation. <b>TRY ASKING</b> "WHY DO YOU SAY THAT? WHAT DO YOU MEAN?" OR "TELL ME MORE."	<b>EDUCATE</b> Highlight who is hurt or absent in offensive. Encourage the person to share a different perspective. Have not believed all harmful speech, stereotypes, ignorance is at work, or lack of exposure to a diverse population. <b>TRY SAYING</b> "DO YOU KNOW THE HISTORY OF THAT WORD?"
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## Civil Rights Team Spotlight

### Gorham High School

The GHS civil rights team was especially active and visible this spring. The crowning achievement for their school year was putting together a series of videos to address the issue of bias-based language.

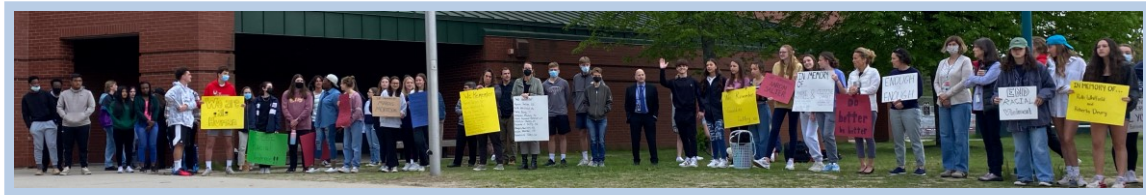
The team prioritized the issue through a follow-up survey to their Day of Welcome,



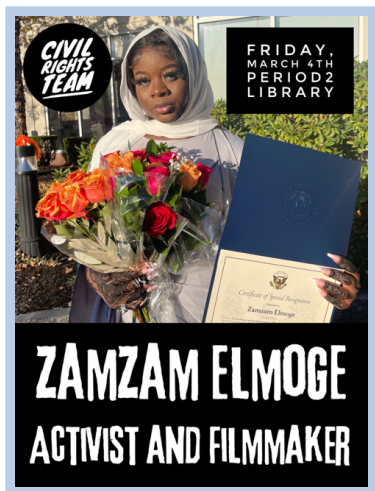
as students clearly identified it as the thing that makes them feel most unwelcome in their school community. The team created four short videos (one to [introduce the concept](#) of bias-based insults, and then three others on specific words) for showing in advisory groups.



They packaged their videos with talking points and suggested questions to encourage discussion. Advisory groups offered positive feedback, stating that this was the kind of conversation they need more of in school.



The team also held a morning vigil to honor the victims of the May 14 mass shooting in Buffalo and protest racism. They worked quickly and held it before school on the Thursday following the attack. Participation was excellent, especially considering the time of day, with about 100 people there to show support.



Throughout the school year, the team also remained visible through their ongoing speaker series and announcements. For the speaker series, they partnered with Aspire Gorham (their Jobs for Maine Graduates program) to connect students with professionals of marginalized identities. Announcements were shared twice a week for the whole school year and highlighted content connected to civil rights-related calendar dates. Recent announcements recognized Pride Month, asking students and staff to show their pride and support LGBTQ+ students and families by wearing rainbow colors or a Pride shirt. For Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month, they recognized important and influential AAPI folks like poet and writer Ocean Vuong.

This was a great year for the GHS civil rights team, and their future looks especially bright. Advisors Trisha Cherry and Kerry Herlihy report that they only lost one senior to graduation. We look forward to seeing how they can build on this year's success!

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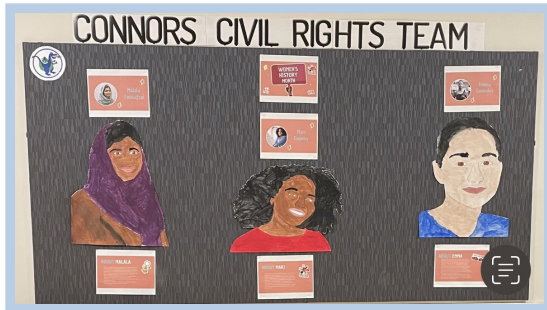
## Robert V. Connors Elementary School in Lewiston

The Connors civil rights team used some of their recent work to engage staff. After a team activity identified significant levels of bias-based behavior at school, advisors Nesrene Griffin and Kelsey Boucher decided to create a professional development session centering student voices.



They asked their colleagues to identify some of the civil rights issues they were aware of in their classrooms, shared what the students on the civil rights team had previously identified as issues, and spent time in community circles processing and responding to what they learned from each other.

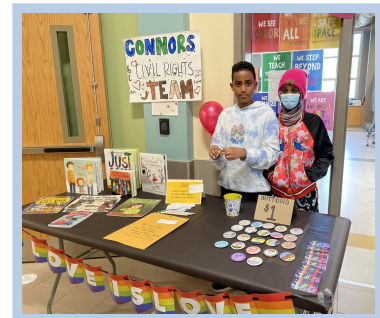
The session concluded with a video of civil rights team members reading their own poetry. Their poems were inspired by our “Just Because” poem templates and directly addressed some of the assumptions others might have about them based on their identities. Exit slips indicated that it had a real impact, as staff rated the session as highly relevant and effective.



The team worked hard to maintain their visibility throughout the year, updating their bulletin board with calendar-themed content they researched. For Women’s History Month, for instance, they featured youth activists (and *current* history makers) Malala Yousafzai, Mari Copeny, and Emma Gonzalez.

They also tabled at the school’s recent Literacy and Arts Night, where they raffled off civil rights-related picture books and sold handmade Connors CRT buttons. The buttons are all one-of-a-kind, featuring pronouns, anti-racist messaging, welcoming language, and rainbow imagery. The team has sold hundreds of them at \$1 each, and recently sold out.

Proceeds from the buttons exceeded their expectations, so they decided to donate some of the funds to local organizations doing civil rights work. The team selected the YWCA of Central Maine and Maine Immigrant and Refugee Services. The remaining money went towards attending CRTP Night with the Portland Sea Dogs, where the team represented our work well by sporting John Lewis-inspired “good trouble” t-shirts.



## St. George School



The middle level civil rights team at St. George is deep in the process of advocating for gender neutral restrooms in their school. In the winter they researched the issue and reached out to other schools they knew had engaged with the process to get a feel for what they needed to do.

The team wrote a [letter to their administration](#) requesting the change this spring. They recently met with administration, received encouragement to meet with the Wellness Committee, and are preparing to bring their proposal to the school board.

The team was also successful in advocating for staff training, as the CRTP will be visiting the school for “Challenging Bias and Harassment in Our Schools” next fall.



While this work has been happening behind the scenes, the team has maintained their presence through a series of connected campaigns. Each month they updated a bulletin board with thematically-linked civil rights heroes, vocabulary and book/movie recommendations.

They also recently started a series of small, laminated [bathroom posters](#) focusing on vocabulary. The first one included terminology related to disabilities, like *ableism*, *people-first language*, and *neurodivergence*. While they didn't get these out until the end of the school year, the team is excited to continue the campaign next fall.

Perhaps the greatest sign of the middle level team's success is the recent formation of an elementary team in their school. Younger students were curious about what they saw and wanted to do something similar! The new elementary team is off to a great start, recently completing their first project with their own version of an inclusively welcoming display. Their advisor Amy Palmer reports that several teachers have told her they love the new sign.



The middle level team celebrated the end of a successful school year together with pizzas and tie-dyeing t-shirts. Advisors Ashby Bartke and Stephanie Simmons report that this year's team was a dream, and that the kids are already thinking about how they want to start the 2022-2023 school year.

**Civil Rights Team Shoutouts**



**Buckfield Jr./Sr. High School:** The civil rights team attended an RSU #10 board meeting to share a prepared statement in response to some potentially harmful, bias-based comments made at the previous meeting. The statement read, in part, “The Team and its members welcome all who enter the building and will continue to work to create a safe place for anyone... We believe that school communities are for everyone.”

**Gardiner Area High School:** The civil rights team is developing a wonderful relationship with their local synagogue, Temple Beth El in Augusta. The team reached out to express their sympathies following the anti-Semitic attack in Colleyville in January. Since then, members of the congregation attended a team meeting and they held a joint screening of the film [Big Sonia](#). The team plans on attending a service later this summer!

**Harrison Lyseth Elementary School in Portland:** For Black History Month the civil rights team studied the African American tradition of quilting. They then chose some of their favorite MLK quotes and stitched them in to their own quilt. It was [on full display](#) for CRTP Night with the Portland Sea Dogs!

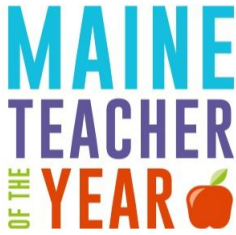
**Lake Region High School in Naples:** For their initial project of creating an [inclusively welcoming display](#), the new civil rights team at LRHS did something we’d never seen before: ceramics! Advisor Miranda Shorty reports that “the school community thinks it is beautiful and engaging to people entering our building.” We agree!

**Lebanon Elementary School:** The civil rights team made a wonderful connection with Pixar Animation Studios. It started when they watched a [YouTube video](#) about script supervisor Jessica Heidt and her efforts to address gender imbalance in Pixar films. Advisors Mark Hubbard and Andrea Couture wrote to Jessica to let her know how her work had inspired the team to look at gender representation in the books they read in school. Unexpectedly, [they got a reply!](#) Jessica sent a book and a hand written note to thank them for their work as a civil rights team. Cool!

**Lincoln Middle School in Portland:** The team got new t-shirts to celebrate a successful first year. [The shirts](#) highlight the seriousness of their work with a provocative design and slogan: *Bias is no joke*.

**Spruce Mountain High School in Jay:** The civil rights team successfully lobbied administration to end the practice of gender-coded graduation gowns. On June 12, the Class of 2022 all wore the same color: forest green.

## Other Shoutouts



**Maine's 2022 County Teachers of the Year:** The Maine Department of Education recently announced the [county teachers of the year](#), and two of them are civil rights team advisors! Congratulations to Kelsey Boucher at Robert V. Connors Elementary School in Lewiston and Ashley Bryant at Sacopee Valley Middle School in Hiram.

**Portland Sea Dogs:** Many thanks to the Sea Dogs for again hosting CRTP Night at Hadlock Field. We had to cancel this annual event in 2020 and 2021, so it was good to be back! We had 33 teams attend the game on May 6 (including Deer Isle-Stonington Elementary School and Sumner Memorial High School, who deserve their own shoutouts for traveling so far).



**Retiring Advisors:** The *ultimate shoutout* goes to our retiring advisors:

- Charlotte Agell, Frank H. Harrison Middle School in Yarmouth (6 years as an advisor)
- Donna Driscoll, Mt. View High School in Thorndike (10 years)
- Amy Malette, Noble Middle School in Berwick (12 years)
- Regina McCombs, Hodgdon Middle/High School (10 years)
- Laurie Moulton, Washburn District High School (7 years)

These five advisors have a combined 45 years of advising civil rights teams in Maine schools, and more than 150 years in public education! We will miss their accumulated knowledge and passion for this work, and wish them well in retirement.

## Golden Apple Award

The Civil Rights Team Project is proud to be a recipient of the Maine Education Association's 2022 Golden Apple Award. The award recognizes "an individual or group that has demonstrated a strong commitment to the local school(s) and/or to the children of a community." While our office accepted this award, it's really recognition of all the adult advisors and students participating in the CRTP. Our office provides structure and support, but the real work is done by the civil rights teams in our school communities.

This award is for all our civil rights teams, and it is well deserved.



### From our acceptance speech:

*"This work has always been important, but it feels especially important today with so many people, so many of our teachers and students, under attack simply because of who they are.*

*"Our school communities are for everyone, and we must work to make it so. Bias, prejudice, and hate thrive in silence. Use your voice, refuse to be silent."*



## Our work with the Maine Humanities Council

Our ongoing partnership with the Maine Humanities Council helped bring great books, lively discussion, and big ideas to our civil rights teams this year. Programming highlights for the 21-22 school year included:

- Another year of sharing civil rights-related picture books with our returning elementary teams. This year's selections were *It Feels Good to Be Yourself* and *Just Ask!* And for the first time ever, we offered a virtual "picture book preview" event for advisors to get together and talk about the books and how they might use them to engage their civil rights teams and school communities.
- Getting the book *Being the Change* into the hands of advisors and talking about how they might use it. This event has been in the works for a long time—boxes of these books have been in the basement of the MHC for the entirety of the pandemic! A total of 56 advisors got the book and attended our preview events, where we shared our guide for how they might use it with their civil rights teams and in engaging their school communities.
- Our first ever multi-title discussion project. A small group of 20 advisors read three young adult books and met monthly for guided discussion with trained facilitator Cait Vaughan. MHC provided a copy of the books *We Are Not Free*, *New Kid*, and *Felix Ever After* free to each advisor who participated.



Many thanks to the Maine Humanities Council, and especially their Program Manager Nicole Rancourt, for their continued support of our work! Here's some of the feedback we received from our programming:

*"So many great resources to engage students and faculty. And allow for personal reflection and growth!"*

**100%** of advisors who attended the picture book preview event said it was worth their time

*"I love having the opportunity to talk to other educators. Talking about pedagogy, connecting teaching to the world, and learning new strategies for teaching recharges me and reminds me of the love I have for my job as a teacher."*

*"It's been a long, lonely, strange school year so far, and it's so good to re-build the network a bit."*

**100%** of attendees plan to use *Being the Change* for their personal growth, **98%** plan to use it with their teams, and **95%** plan to use it to engage their school communities

*"I have been feeling a bit defeated recently, and this event gave me access to the support, inspiration, and space for collaboration needed to do this work."*

**Thanks for reading!**

**That's all the recent news from the CRTP! Expect more news during the 2022-2023 school year. Until then...**

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Administered by the Office of the Maine 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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