Nuts and Bolts

Practical Matters about Civil Rights Teams



The Civil Rights Team Project Office of the Attorney General

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This "Nuts and Bolts" guide offers basic information about creating a civil rights team in your school. It is designed to address some of the commonly-asked questions we hear from schools without teams. It is by no means exhaustive, but we will be happy to answer any additional questions.



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Your Obligations and Our Expectations

Perhaps you are wondering what you and your school's obligations would be in joining the Civil Rights Team Project and having a civil rights team. Here is a list of your obligations and our expectations:

Great News: No Cost Attached!

Participation in the Civil Rights Team Project costs nothing. All of our support services come to you at no cost.

Attend Fall Trainings

Every fall we offer trainings for adult advisors in late September and early October and student team trainings in late October and early November. We expect advisors and teams to attend, but understand that budgets and schedules don't always allow for this.

These trainings are valuable for everyone, but especially for new advisors and team members.

Select a Team

Get information out about the team and get students signed up. There is more information on different ways to do this later in this packet.

Meet Regularly

You have to get your team together for regular meetings. Any questions you have about meetings are probably covered later on.

Keep the Team Going

Sometimes student enthusiasm wanes. Sometimes students seem incapable of getting anything done. This is a student-led program, but all students need guidance and leadership. Step in, take charge, help, coax, coerce... whatever. Play the adult and keep the team focused and productive.

Serve as Our Primary Point of Contact

For communication purposes, we need updated and current contact information. Please read all communications and respond when appropriate.

Understand What We Expect of Civil Rights Teams

Make sure the school's civil rights team is working towards achieving the goals of the Civil Rights Team Project. We have specific expectations of teams outlined separately.

Adult Support

The Civil Rights Team Project is student-centered, but student civil rights teams need adult support.

Faculty Advisors:

Every team needs an identified primary faculty advisor. It is important that this person is stationed in the school. This faculty advisor is the only advisor required for participation in the Civil Rights Team Project. Leading and advising a civil rights team is much easier with multiple advisors, though. Co-advisors make the job much easier and allow for more flexibility.

Community advisors:

It's important that the primary advisor is stationed in the school, but we encourage teams to look outside the school for community advisors. A community advisor can be a bridge between the school and community, offering good connections and networking opportunities.

School administration:

Your school's administration needs to sign off and support the existence of a civil rights team. We certainly prefer that their support extends beyond this baseline requirement. Keep them updated and encourage their involvement.

School staff and faculty:

Make sure all the adults working in the school know about the civil rights team and what they do. Once your team is selected, circulate a list of who is on the team.

Parents:

You certainly want the parents of your team members to know about the civil rights team. As an absolute minimum, send home a notice or letter informing them about the team and the fact that their child is participating. You may want to send home permission forms. You may also decide to inform all parents of the existence of a school civil rights team.

Community:

Once your team is up and running, you are encouraged to become a visible presence in the community. Generate publicity and let people know what you do. It's a great way to generate support for the team, school, and Civil Rights Team Project.

Selecting a Team

So what kinds of students are ideal for civil rights teams? All types, as long as they believe in the mission of the Civil Rights Team Project. They must believe that all students should feel safe, valued, and welcome in school, and be willing to work towards that goal. Ideally, the students on the civil rights team reflect the diversity of the school population.

There are different ways to select students for participation on a school civil rights team. Here we outline different philosophies and the positives and negatives associated with them:

Come One, Come All

Defined: Anyone who wants to be on the team is on the team.

Positives: You never have to turn anyone away from the civil rights team. This puts into practice the idea of inclusion, and makes civil rights open for everyone.

Negatives: This can lead to an unmanageably large team. You may end up with students who aren't really interested in civil rights issues or the civil rights team. Some students will never take the initiative and join.

Show Me Something

Defined: Students do more than simply show up and must demonstrate that they have an interest in participation. This can be done through an application process, or mandatory training or meeting attendance.

Positives: You will end up with a committed core of students who are truly interested in civil rights issues and the team. Also allows you to control the size of the team more.

Negatives: This can make the team overly-exclusive. It might also discourage qualified students from participating.

We Will Find You

Defined: Adults identify the students they think should participate based on who would make the civil rights team most effective and successful.

Positives: This may encourage some students to participate who wouldn't otherwise. You can target and control different student populations for team membership. It also allows you to control the size of the team.

Negatives: This can make the team highly-exclusive, and sometimes makes it so that the same students who participate in everything else are on the civil rights team, too. Some

students interested in participating may not have the chance. Adults don't always understand the purpose of the civil rights team, and may not select the best individuals.

Combination

You can combine strategies. You can have a "come one, come all" approach, but also send invitations to students recommended by school staff. You can have adults identify certain students, and then give them an application. You can make up your own approach. There is no one right way to do this.

The Wrong Way?

While there is no one right way to choose who is on a civil rights team, there are some things we <u>actively</u> discourage:

- Do not use the civil rights team as punishment. No one should ever feel forced to participate.
- Do not use the civil rights team to rehabilitate students who are exhibiting problem behaviors. This is not what it's for.
- Do not draft students as representatives of groups. You want the team to reflect the diversity in the school, but no one should feel like they speak for others.
- Do not morph some other student organization into a civil rights team. There is no guarantee that the participants in this other organization share in the mission of the Civil Rights Team Project.
- Do not hold elections. This is not a popularity contest, and sometimes doing what's right won't be popular.

Nothing Is Absolute

Keep in mind that you can try different approaches over time. You are not committed to anything, and we encourage you to experiment until you find what works for you and your school.

The Ideal Team Size

The ultimate, ideal, perfect civil rights team size is... completely up to you. We have civil rights teams of all sizes, varying from as small as three students to as large as one hundred. There is no perfect size.

There are certain advantages to a small or large team. Let's consider...

A Small Team

Positives: These students are probably committed. They care deeply about the civil rights team and its success. You will develop close and personal relationships with each team member, and they are capable of incredible focus.

Negatives: The team lacks the bodies you need to get some things done. The team is highly unstable. If a few students miss a meeting, you have no team that week. If a few team members graduate or move, you might not have a team at all. Also, the small team may not effectively represent different populations in the school.

A Large Team

Positives: Your team has enough bodies to get things done, and can accomplish great things. Students will bring diverse viewpoints and talents to the team. The team has a high profile, and it's less of a struggle to get the school's buy-in on initiatives and events. The school is well represented by the team.

Negatives: Team meetings can be <u>chaotic</u>. Team members might feel a bit anonymous, and individual accountability may suffer. Some team members may lack passion in civil rights issues.

In-Between

Of course you can always have a medium-sized team. But perhaps you can also creatively find ways to combine the best of both worlds. You can have a large team with committees. You can have a large team with a core group that meets more frequently. You can have a small team that holds open meetings for outside participation, or discussion groups, or general assemblies.

It's up to you: whatever works best for your school and your students is the best approach. And once again, nothing is absolute: feel free to experiment.

Scheduling Team Meetings

Civil rights teams need to meet on a regular basis. Here are some specific questions you may have about team meetings.

How often?

The short answer to this is on a regular basis. Weekly or bi-weekly meetings work. For the sake of continuity and productivity, we like weekly meetings, but they aren't a must.

What's most important is that the meetings are predictable and regular. There should be a clear schedule so that students can work civil rights team meetings into their lives.

It's sometimes a good idea to hold supplementary meetings if events require it. You may have a large project that needs extra attention, or there may be some event that requires immediate emergency response. Students should know that these are always a possibility.

For how long?

Schedules often dictate how long team meetings will be. If you have the option of choosing, though, we recommend a good 30-60 minutes, depending on the age of your students. It always takes students time to get there and settle in. For any meaningful work to get done, you need to have a good block of time together.

If you don't have much time together, you can always assign civil rights team homework, hold supplemental meetings for big events, or have an occasional extended team meeting. There are ways to create more time together.

When is the best time?

The best time to have a civil rights team meeting is whenever you can get your team together for a block of time. Most teams are less-than-happy with their meeting schedule, and do the best they can with what they have.

Different schools have different schedules, but the most popular times for team meetings are:

<u>In the morning</u>: There won't be any scheduling conflicts here, but students might not be too enthusiastic about an early morning meeting. Some won't be able to get to school on time, even if they want to.

<u>During lunch/recess</u>: This is time built into the schedule every single day. It reduces conflicts, but takes away social time from your students. The process of getting lunch and bringing it somewhere for a meeting, and then eating, can be a great distraction.

<u>During study hall, activity period, or advisor groups</u>: If these time periods are available they can be great for meetings. All your kids are at school, and most won't feel like they're missing anything. You may have scheduling conflicts with band and chorus, or other school activities/groups/classes, though. And of course, not all schools have this time in the schedule...

<u>After school</u>: You don't have to worry about any conflicts during the school day. Meetings can go longer. But other after-school activities, especially athletics, create scheduling conflicts for students to the point that they may have to choose one activity over another. Students will also need a way to get home after the meetings.

<u>Supplemental meetings</u>: Some teams have had success with long, event-style meetings. These can be work-focused or celebratory. Evenings, weekends, and even vacations can be a great times for these occasions.

<u>During class time</u>: Maybe your school will really commit to the idea of the civil rights team and offer class time for meetings. We have a letter suggesting this possibility that you can share with your administration.

Expectations of Team Members

Once you and/or the students themselves have selected who is on the civil rights team, you should consider your expectations of them. We have two specific expectations of civil rights team members, and a third you may want to consider:

1. They understand the philosophy and purpose of a civil rights team.

Students need to know why they are on the team. They need to buy in with the basic philosophy that all students deserve respect and should feel safe in school. If they don't believe this, they are damaging to the team.

Students should also understand that being on the civil rights team is work. This is not to say that it won't be any fun, but to improve the school climate requires work. Team members must be willing to do the work.

Students may not arrive with all the knowledge they need. Part of your role is educating them. We have designed activities and lessons that will help you with this. We also offer fall trainings for civil rights teams.

2. They conduct themselves in a way that supports the mission of the civil rights team.

Nothing damages the credibility of a civil rights team like hypocrisy. You can't afford to have students talk about respect and then act with great disrespect. Bias and harassing behaviors are especially unacceptable from civil rights team members.

This is not to say that civil rights team members need to be perfect. Tardiness for class and playing video games on a laptop aren't civil rights issues. What matters most is bias behavior, harassment, and how civil rights team members treat other students.

Team members may not always conduct themselves appropriately. It's up to you and your team to decide on how to address this, but it's important that you have expectations, and that they are clear. Discuss these issues before they happen.

Some teams make these expectations more formal. You and your team can develop specific expectations, pledges, or contracts. Student input is especially valuable here.

3. You may want to develop some other team expectations or rules.

It's absolutely necessary that civil rights team members understand the point of the civil rights team and then showcase the important and appropriate behaviors. You and your team can go beyond these basic expectations, though. You may want to develop team rules related to:

• Academic performance

- Attendance
- ParticipationProtocols during team meetingsSchool behaviors

Again, this is up to you and your team.

Expectations of Civil Rights Teams

The most common question we get asked about the Civil Rights Team Project is what exactly a civil rights team does.

1. Create a Team Identity

This includes basic education at the beginning of the year. Students need to understand why they are on a civil rights team. They have to want to be there, and they need to believe in the core mission of the Civil Rights Team Project. After that, they can come together as a team.

2. Increase the Team's Profile

We think it's important that your school knows about the civil rights team. Everyone should know that the school has a civil rights team; as much as they know that there's a basketball team. Not only should everyone know that the school has a team, but they should know what the civil rights team is for and about. Ideally, everyone knows who is on the team and what they do.

The civil rights team should primarily be active in the school, but it's important that the community knows something about the team, too. We do great work, and should advertise it more.

3. Identify School Issues

The civil rights team shouldn't be operating under any assumptions. You need to know what's going on in the school. Each school is unique, and so it will take some work to identify the civil rights and climate issues most relevant to your school.

4. Address School Issues

This is the most important thing that civil rights teams do. They need to be active in addressing the important issues <u>in the school</u>. This should not be abstract or indirect; there should be clear activities and projects that take dead aim at civil rights and climate issues relevant to the school.

The work should be ongoing. Nothing gets fixed through a single event. Whatever you do... it needs proper framing. People must understand why they're doing it.

5. Respond When Things Go Wrong

Teams should be ready to respond when something goes wrong in the school or community environment. Incidents deserve immediate attention. This might mean dropping whatever the team is working on to offer some sort of public and visible response.

Support Services from the Attorney General's Office

Perhaps this whole process seems a bit intimidating. Don't worry. We provide you with plenty of resources and services. Here is an overview of what our office has to offer:

FA Trainings (Fall):

Every fall, early in the school year, we offer training sessions for faculty advisors. These trainings are held in multiple locations around the state. While these trainings are not specifically targeted towards new advisors, they are always successful in making everyone feel energized and encouraged about the school year.

Student Team Trainings (Fall):

A few weeks after the FA trainings, we hold training sessions for student civil rights teams. These are for you and your teams. They are held at multiple locations around the state. These trainings are engaging, educational, and age-appropriate. They always have an eye towards action.

Statewide Conference (Spring):

In the spring, we have a statewide conference. It celebrates the work of teams throughout the year and the goals and mission of the Civil Rights Team Project.

Our Bi-Monthly Newsletter, The Torch:

Every other month we will send you a copy of our monthly newsletter, *The Torch*, through e-mail. *The Torch* includes information about other civil rights teams, activity ideas, valuable resources, and much more.

Additional Communications:

A bi-monthly newsletter isn't enough, so we also send out bi-weekly e-mails with information and updates. Additional e-mails are sent out as needed.

School Visits:

We are available to visit your school to support your civil rights team in any way possible. This includes school assemblies, team meetings, and anything else that will help you and your team fulfill the goals and mission of the Civil Rights Team Project.

In-Service Trainings:

We offer trainings for school administrators, faculty, and staff.

Moving Forward: Next Steps

When should we start?

"The time is always right to do the right thing." (Martin Luther King, Jr.)

As soon as possible! Right now!

Of course the ideal time to start a civil rights team is at the beginning of the school year. This is most convenient, and makes the most sense. The team will be together all year and have the opportunity to attend our fall training sessions.

But civil rights teams can do great work *whenever they form*. If, for whatever reason, your school can't or didn't get a team up and running in the beginning of the school year, you don't have to wait until next year. Start one now or whenever you are ready.

If and when you are interested in moving forward and starting a civil rights team in your school, here's what you'll have to do:

1. Get Administrative Approval

Talk to your building administrator(s) and get their permission/blessing to start a civil rights team. You don't need to figure out all the details at this point, but make sure they understand the philosophy and mission of the Civil Rights Team Project and just what a civil rights team is. Feel free to share our contact information.

2. Get a Registration Form

Contact us and we'll get you a registration form.

3. Talk with Us

We hope that in the process of contacting us for a registration form, you'll take some time to talk with us. You may have some questions that aren't answered in this packet.

4. Submit Your Registration

Complete your registration and send it our way! You don't even need to have a team up and running just yet... as long as it's something you are committed to doing.

5. Reap the Benefits and Get Started!

Once you send in your registration, we'll be in contact with you to welcome you aboard in this exciting and valuable work. We'll hook you up with some resources and get you pointed in the right direction.

Contacting Us

If you have any questions, concerns, or comments about anything in this packet, or your civil rights team, school, or the Civil Rights Team Project in general, please do not hesitate to contact us.

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