

# Nuts and Bolts

## Starting a Civil Rights Team in Your School



### **Our Mission**

The mission of the Civil Rights Team Project (CRTP) is to increase the safety of elementary, middle level, and high school students by reducing bias-motivated behaviors and harassment in our schools.

This “Nuts and Bolts” guide offers basic information about starting a civil rights team in your school. It is designed to address some of the commonly-asked questions we hear from those interested in starting teams. It is by no means exhaustive, and we will be happy to answer any additional questions.



# The Civil Rights Team Project Office of the Attorney General

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# **The Civil Rights Team Project: An Overview**

The Maine Office of the Attorney General administers the Civil Rights Team Project, a school-based preventative program. The mission of the Civil Rights Team Project (CRTP) is to increase the safety of elementary, middle level, and high school students by reducing bias-motivated behaviors and harassment in our schools.

The CRTP accomplishes this by supporting student civil rights teams in our schools. The CRTP and student civil rights teams are active in engaging our school communities in thinking and talking about issues related to:

- race and skin color
- national origin and ancestry
- religion
- disabilities
- gender (including gender identity and expression)
- sexual orientation

Started in 1996 as a pilot program with 18 participating schools, the Civil Rights Team Project has since expanded to include more than 200 schools statewide.

Interested in joining this network? Become a part of the Civil Rights Team Project by officially registering your school with our office and then starting a school-supported civil rights team. This guide will help prospective advisors understand the mission and philosophy of the CRTP, as well as the “nuts and bolts” of starting a civil rights team.

# **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 summary of your obligations and our expectations:

## **Great News: No Cost Attached!**

Participation in the CRTP costs nothing, and our support services come to you at no cost.

## **Attend Annual Advisor Trainings**

New advisors must attend one of our orientation sessions in the fall or later in the winter. After attending this orientation, you are then expected to attend an annual training every fall for experienced advisors.

## **Select a Team**

Use our recruitment and kickoff resources to share information about the team and get students interested and signed up. For more information on the strategy and philosophy behind team selection, see the section on [Considerations for Getting Started](#).

## **Meet Regularly**

You have to get your team together for regular meetings, at least once every other week. For more information on how to address this expectation, see the section on [Considerations for Getting Started](#).

## **Serve as Our Point of Contact and Maintain Communication with Our Office**

You are our connection to your civil rights team and school, so it's important that you stay in contact with us throughout the school year. This includes opening our biweekly e-mail, the CRTP Communiqué, as it's our primary mode of sharing important information and resources with you.

As the team's advisor, you will also complete online seasonal check-ins to keep us updated on your team initiatives and accomplishments. When provided, we ask that you consider and accept feedback and constructive criticism from our office, especially if your work is not clearly aligned with the Civil Rights Team Project mission and philosophy.

## **Keep the Team Focused and Active**

Being a civil rights team advisor is an active role. While this is a student-centered program, all students need guidance and leadership. Be the adult in the room. Keep the team focused on civil rights issues and moving forward to get things done.

# What Civil Rights Teams Do

The most common question we are asked is what exactly civil rights teams do. Teams have considerable autonomy and independence in how they operate. It is important, however, that as participants in a statewide program, each of our civil rights teams reflects the mission and philosophy of the CRTP. The following are defining features of civil rights teams:

- Each team is specifically called the *civil rights team*, and has an established relationship with the CRTP through registration with our office.
- The focus is engaging the school community in thinking and talking about issues related to race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, disabilities, gender (including gender identity and expression), and sexual orientation in an age-appropriate manner.
- Teams do not engage in anti-bullying work, kindness promotion, or partisan political activity. (For more guidance on politics, consult our [CRTP Guidelines on Politics](#).)

Ultimately, civil rights teams are defined by what they do. Our resources and the CRT Action Plan (provided upon registration) will guide you and your team through our series of five expectations:

## 1. Create an Identity as a Civil Rights Team

Civil rights teams need to focus on civil rights issues. Individual team members may not own all the specific vocabulary yet, but they need to support the general mission and philosophy of the CRTP. Over time and with education, teams will develop a more complex understanding of civil rights issues, what they look like in their school communities, and the role of civil rights teams in addressing them. One of the most effective ways to foster this growth is by doing the actual work. This should be an ongoing process.

## 2. Increase the Team's Profile

It's important that schools know about their civil rights teams. Teams need to introduce themselves, explain their role, and be seen and heard. They should strive for constant and consistent presence in their school communities.

Teams should also communicate who they are and what they do outside of their schools in the community. This helps promote the great work being done throughout Maine in the CRTP.

## 3. Identify Civil Rights Issues in the School Community

What are the behaviors and practices in our school communities that might make it so that students don't feel completely safe, welcome, and respected based on their (or their loved ones') race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, disabilities, gender (including gender identity and expression), and sexual orientation?

This is the question teams must ask, over and over again. Teams must never succumb to the idea that “we don’t have those issues here.” Civil rights issues are often subtle and do not affect everyone equally. Issues are more than just individual behaviors; they are issues of culture. Teams must be willing to *look* for these issues and make the invisible visible.

#### **4. Engage the School Community**

This is the most important expectation and where civil rights teams should devote the most time and attention. Teams should be active and visible in addressing civil rights issues within their school communities; in fact, it’s why we have civil rights teams.

Our CRT Action Plan specifically guides teams to engage their school communities through:

- Participation in our statewide CRTP Day of Welcome in the fall (for experienced teams only; new teams do a modified version at a later date)
- Launching and continuing an Ongoing Visibility Project from our list of options
- Completing other projects with a specific focus on engaging the school community

Projects can be small or large. They should offer education, engagement, and encouragement, but never enforcement — civil rights teams are not the civil rights police. In combination, these initiatives help establish a consistent and meaningful civil rights team presence.

The CRT Action Plan is available upon official registration with our office (or for review before then upon request).

#### **5. Respond to Major Public Incidents of Bias**

Civil rights teams should be ready to respond to major public incidents of bias, prejudice, or hate that may occur in their greater school communities. The key word here is *major*; individual team members are not expected to respond to every instance of bias that occurs in their school communities. This is about harnessing the power of the team to respond to high profile incidents that demand a public response.

These are opportunities for teams to take action, but they need not go it alone. Adult advisors are strongly encouraged to contact our office for consultation and support.

# Considerations Before Getting Started

## Co-advisors

Have you thought about sharing the advisor role and responsibilities? Co-advisors allow for collaboration, scheduling flexibility, and the division of labor. At least one advisor must be stationed in the school, but others can come from the greater school community.

## Who Should Be on the Team

Students on the civil rights team should:

- Be there by choice.
- Believe in our general mission and philosophy.
- Be ready and willing to do the work that is expected of the civil rights team.

Students on the civil rights team should never:

- Be there to intentionally challenge or undermine our work.
- Be put on the team as punishment or for education/rehabilitation purposes.

## How to Select Students to Participate

There is no one right way to select students for participation on the civil rights team. You can invite anyone and everyone to be on the team, or have a more selective process. Whatever you decide, we have resources available to aid with the process.

## The Ideal Team Size

The ideal team size is whatever works best for you and your school. There are positives and negatives to small-and large-sized teams, and ways to include elements of both. (And of course it's entirely possible that student interest will ultimately decide the size of your team.)

## When to Meet

The civil rights team needs consistent and meaningful meeting time. The ideal meeting time allows for maximum participation. School schedules often make this difficult, though, and so it's important to be flexible and creative in making the most out of what's available to you.

## Your Team Structure

Access [this guide on considerations for getting started](#), and you'll see there is no *one* right way to do this! We have worked with schools all around the state and can help you figure out what will work best for your school. Consider our information and recommendations and reach out to us with your questions.

# Support Services from the Civil Rights Team Project

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

## **Advisor Trainings**

We provide specific training for our new advisors through orientation sessions, and annual training for experienced advisors. These trainings help us grow our knowledge and skills as individuals and as a collective group.

## **CRT Action Plan and Resources through CRTP Drive**

We have easily accessible and comprehensive resources available to you online. These resources will help you with every aspect of working with your team, including the selection, planning, and execution of projects.

## **Our Bi-Weekly Email, The Communiqué**

Every other week we send out an e-mail with information, resources, deadlines... everything you need to stay connected and up to date.

## **Our Newsletter, *The Torch***

Every few months during the school year we share the CRTP newsletter, *The Torch*. With information about what's happening with civil rights teams and the Civil Rights Team Project, it's full of ideas and inspiration.

## **Statewide Conference (Spring)**

Each spring, we hold a statewide conference for our middle level and high school civil rights teams to celebrate their work throughout the school year and the goals and mission of the CRTP.

## **Work with the Maine Humanities Council**

We work with the Maine Humanities Council in sharing resources and programming opportunities to highlight best practices in thinking and talking about civil rights issues in our schools.

## **On Site Staff Trainings**

We offer a three-hour training on [Challenging Bias and Harassment in Our Schools](#) for school administrators, faculty, and staff. (Currently unavailable.)

## **Direct Consulting**

Working with civil rights teams and schools is what we do. We are available and accessible, so reach out to us with your questions!

# Moving Forward: Next Steps

## When Should We Start?

There are two windows of opportunity for starting a civil rights team: in the fall (between September and November) and in the winter (between January and March). When you start will be influenced by whether you attend the fall or winter advisor orientation and your overall sense of readiness, but here's what the process entails:

### 1. Get Administrative Approval

Talk with your building administrator(s) and get their approval 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 general mission and philosophy of the Civil Rights Team Project and the role of the civil rights team in the school community. Administration will ultimately need to sign the official registration form.

### 2. Think About How and When You'll Start

Before you get started, it's important that you think through the process, including when you can attend one of our advisor orientations, how and when you'll recruit students for participation, and when you'll hold team meetings.

### 3. Request a Registration Form

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

### 4. Submit Your Registration

Complete your registration and send it our way! (And please note: this needs to happen before you get started.)

### 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 connect you with our resources, including a detailed action plan to get you pointed in the right direction for a successful first year.

If you have any questions, concerns, or comments about anything in this packet, or anything we *didn't* include, please do not hesitate to contact us:



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