

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **Equality Illinois Urges School District to Stand Fast Against Hate Group**

CHICAGO – Equality Illinois on Friday urged the East Aurora school board to stand fast against pressure from designated "hate group" the Illinois Family Institute, which is attacking the board's commendable new policy affirming transgender students.

The board says it will meet again at 5:30 p.m. Friday to reconsider its policy.

"Let's be clear where the pressure for this meeting is originating. The Illinois Family Institute, designated a 'hate group' for its Nazi and racist hate speech, is generating the hate and the heat," said Bernard Cherkasov, CEO of Equality Illinois.

"We are wearing purple today, Friday, and even our red-and-blue logo is purple, because it is Spirit Day in honor of the victims of bullying. It would be extremely sad on today of all days to buckle under to the bullying of a 'hate group' and not provide needed protections to all of our students in safe school environments," Cherkasov said.

"The East Aurora school board took a responsible position, supported by numerous educational and psychological experts, and now it faces venomous lies from a hate group," Cherkasov said.

In its commentary against the new policy, the Illinois Family Institute said the transgender students have "disordered desires" and have a "mental and moral disorder."

"This is not how we talk about school children or the responsible school authorities who are looking out for the students' interests," Cherkasov said.

Equality Illinois believes the need to expose the Illinois Family Institute and its national affiliate the American Family Association is important enough to repeat our analysis of the groups released earlier this week. In that analysis, Equality Illinois condemned efforts by the two "hate groups" to pressure politicians and schools to weaken anti-bullying efforts locally and nationally.

One outrage is an effort by the American Family Association demanding that schools abandon a program called Mix It Up at Lunch Day dedicated to breaking down barriers and reducing bullying in schools. School districts in Illinois are among thousands of districts that have signed on to participate.

The Southern Poverty Law Center, a nationally recognized civil rights organization, designates the American Family Association and the Illinois Family Institute as "hate groups" because of their vicious rhetoric.



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The designation puts the AFA and IFI in the company of 1,016 other hate groups in the U.S. identified by the Center, including “the neo-Nazis, Klansmen, white nationalists, neo-Confederates, racist skinheads, black separatists (and) border vigilantes.” The category also includes certain organizations dedicated to the denial of the Holocaust.

In their campaigns, the American Family Association and the Illinois Family Institute evoke language and imagery of the Holocaust and one of America’s most racist and anti-Semitic groups when attacking individuals, groups and positions with which it disagrees.

“The comparisons used by the American Family Association and the Illinois Family Institute to invoke Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan in a desperate attempt to make their points is demeaning and marginalizing to the victims targeted by two of the most extreme institutions of the modern era,” Cherkasov said.

Examples of the IFI’s and the AFA’s extreme positions that earned them the hate group label include:

-The IFI compares the failure of religious institutions in Germany to speak out against the rise of Nazism in the 1930s to the lack of churches today speaking out against homosexuality. One IFI statement said, “What is alarming about the account of the German Evangelical Church’s reprehensible failure is its similarity to the ongoing disheartening story of the contemporary American church’s failure to respond appropriately to the spread of radical, heretical, destructive views of homosexuality.”

-One AFA statement said, "Homosexuality gave us Adolph Hitler, and homosexuals in the military gave us the Brown Shirts, the Nazi war machine and six million dead Jews."

-The IFI asserts “the virulent hatred many homosexual activists have for Catholic (and Protestant) orthodoxy is fully comparable to the virulent hatred that members of the KKK had.”

-When railing against legislators or civic leaders with which it disagrees, it regularly identifies them by their sexual orientation if they are gay or lesbian. For example, it calls out “openly homosexual, anti-life activist Terry Cosgrove,” who is President and CEO of Personal PAC, which supports reproductive rights. And it regularly labels Illinois State Rep. Kelly Cassidy of Chicago as a “lesbian activist.”

This is as dangerous a direction for debate in the political arena as if a person’s race, ethnicity, sex or religion were raised.

Sadly, the influence of the American Family Association and the Illinois Family Institute is more than just rhetorical. The American Family Association wants Mix It Up at Lunch Day to end, according to stories in Monday’s New York Times and other publications, because the association thinks there’s an LGBT-rights agenda behind it.

Already more than 200 school districts have canceled their participation in Mix It Up at Lunch Day, the Times reported, though they don't explain why. Mix It Up at Lunch Day was created 11 years ago by the Southern Poverty Law Center. Though many schools build elaborate programs around it, at its core it simply asks students to connect with someone new over lunch.

Here in Illinois, the Illinois Family Institute was active this year in helping to defeat an amendment offered in the General Assembly to strengthen anti-bullying programs in schools.

The Associated Press said about the proposed amendment to the Illinois Safe Schools Act, "A closer look reveals little in the legislation itself to justify the institute's fears. It would not tell local schools what to say about bullying, let alone anything specific about homosexuality."

Yet the AP reported that the IFI asserted, "The measure's real goal is 'to use public education to promote unproven, non-factual beliefs about the nature and morality of homosexuality and transgenderism.' It sees the bills as a beachhead for 'homosexual activist organizations' that want to indoctrinate students and teachers."

Refuting the positions of the American Family Association and the Illinois Family Institute, Cherkasov said, "We call on all Illinois school districts to participate in the meaningful program built by the Southern Poverty Law Center or similar efforts. We challenge the American Family Association and the Illinois Family Institute to end their demonizing of anti-bullying strategies."

A recent report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office, requested by a bipartisan group of U.S. Senators, including Sen. Mark Kirk of Illinois, found that about one child in four is subject to bullying in school.

"Rather than fighting programs designed to encourage dialog and breaking down of barriers, we all should be embracing efforts to build bridges and end the isolation of youth perceived as being different," Cherkasov said.

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