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Illinois and U.S. Groups That Employ Nazi and Racist Hate Speech Now Fight Anti-Bullying Programs

CHICAGO – Equality Illinois today condemned efforts by recognized “hate groups” the American Family Association and its state affiliate, the Illinois Family Institute, to pressure politicians and schools to weaken anti-bullying efforts locally and nationally.

The latest 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 American Family Association wants Mix It Up at Lunch Day to end, according to stories in yesterday’s New York Times and other publications, because the association thinks there’s an LGBT-rights agenda behind it.

The Southern Poverty Law Center is the nationally recognized civil rights organization that started Mix It Up day and also lists the American Family Association and the Illinois Family Institute, as “hate groups.” 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.

Refuting the positions of the American Family Association and the Illinois Family Institute, Bernard Cherkasov, CEO of Equality Illinois, the state’s oldest, largest and most effective LGBT advocacy organization, 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.

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



Mailing Address
3318 N. Halsted Street
Chicago, IL 60657

Phone
773-477-7173

Fax
773-477-6912

E-mail
info@eqil.org

Web
www.equalityillinois.org

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. Already more than 200 school districts have canceled their participation in Mix It Up at Lunch Day, according to the New York Times, 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.”

Cherkasov countered, “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.”

Equality Illinois is the state's oldest, largest and most effective advocacy organization working to secure and protect the civil rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. Learn more about our mission at www.equalityillinois.org.

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