



FOUNDATION  
AGAINST  
INTOLERANCE  
& RACISM

**Western Wisconsin Chapter**

REPORT ON FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUEST TO LACROSSE SCHOOL DISTRICT  
RE: HIRING ICS EQUITY FOR STAFF TRAINING

By Kevin M. Connelly, Donald Sims and DeeDee Sims

When hired on March 23, 2020, as Superintendent for the La Crosse School District, Dr. Aaron Engel made the following statement:

*“One of the best parts of my job as a superintendent is the opportunity to work with diverse groups of individuals to accomplish change that positively benefits our students, teachers, and our community...**Equity** is foundational to a successful educational system that supports democracy and I am committed to making this a reality in public education.” [emphasis added]*  
(Posted on school district website 3/23/2020).

The concept of equity today has a highly charged racial justice connotation (derived from critical race theory). It is usually revealed by what is called an “equity audit” that identifies some superficial statistical racial disparity that needs to be addressed. For example, the audit may determine that, when data is disaggregated (a word you will hear a lot) by race, students’ grades differ too much. Or, white students may more likely be placed in AP classes. Or, standard test results vary significantly by race. Proponents of the equity ideology then accuse the school of being systemically racist, and demand to “dismantle” any program or system, or seek other disruptive changes.

Assuming that such an audit has validly identified some particular issue, simple logic says that the point where something is measured tells us nothing whatsoever about what the cause might be for that which is being measured. Possible causes for such disparities most likely start well before any student has entered a school system. Or other societal factors may be at play. It takes work to study causes of complex social problems, and requires more than the much easier, superficial solution of simply attributing the problem to racism in the school.

What does dismantling mean? What is the replacement? Some advocates of this social justice ideology may want to radically disrupt and significantly change existing educational practices. Others may want to adopt the expedient and crude remedy of just eliminating objective measurements and programs that reveal a disparity in the first place -- no letter grades, no standardized tests, no AP and honors courses, no special education, etc. Just pretend that no disparity exists.

It was reported that at least one Madison school has gotten rid of letter grades in favor of descriptors like “exceeding” “meeting” “developing” “emerging.” How does that help a truly disadvantaged student?

## What is happening in the La Crosse School District?

The La Crosse School District has adopted an eight-page Strategic Plan for Educational Equity. The plan specifically states that,

*“...educational equity will result in a school system that is fair for all students and yields equal results through equitable practices. Educational equity is the differential application of resources and support to ensure that each student gets what they need to succeed. We will know equal results are achieved when outcomes by any measure are proportional to the makeup of the student body by the same measure. The result is social justice for all students.” [emphasis added].*

Toward this goal, the district has contracted with a Madison firm, Integrated Comprehensive Systems for Equity (ICS Equity). The firm is committed to interjecting a racial justice ideology into schools through their training programs for teachers and administrative staff. As noted on their website, they work from a framework they term as Four Cornerstones: (1) Focus on equity. (2) Align staff and students guided by the Equity Non-Negotiable of proportional representation. (3) Transform teaching and learning through a Co-Plan, Co-Serve, Co-Learn (C3)<sup>TM</sup> team teaching approach, and (4) Leverage procedures, and funding in alignment with the Equity Non-Negotiables and federal and state legislation to eliminate inequities.

Kevin Connelly, of the Western Wisconsin chapter of the Foundation Against Intolerance and Racism (FAIR), and author of this report, met with Dr. Engel at his office in May of 2022. In a seeming contrast to ICS Equity’s ideological framework, Engel assured Connelly that the district is keeping letter grades. He also has no plans to get rid of AP or honors courses, lowering classroom standards, or otherwise taking anything away from deserving students. That was good to hear.

Engel indicates that his version of ‘equity’ will remain focused on individual student needs, not group outcomes. Again, that’s good to hear. However, he went on to say that he uses ICS Equity to train staff for collaborative teaching with the goal of keeping students in a ‘heterogenous classroom’ (discussed below). His strategy is to allocate some resources to raise the performance of underachieving students.

In an email reply to La Crosse school board member Robert Abraham, who subsequently forwarded additional questions from Connelly, Engel also added the following:

1. “We have contracted with ICS Equity in the past. They provide training on the co-plan to co-teach to co-serve model. This model helps us integrate students into classrooms by proactively planning as teams on how to meet the full range of students needs in general education. It helps us meet the needs of students in special education as well as our gifted students in an inclusive way.
2. We are addressing our grading practices in our schools but will keep letter grades. Because of how we all grew up, letter grades are helpful for effectively communicating with parents. We are working on how we get to those grades so students and parents have more clear communication of what grades mean and how they can demonstrate proficiency and mastery.
3. We absolutely will not get rid of AP or honors opportunities. Our hope is to expand those opportunities to more students. We do want to move from tracking students which inappropriately predetermines their future outcomes. We want to make honors and AP as accessible to all students as possible which will increase rigor for students.
4. Standardized testing will be here to stay for the foreseeable future. The Federal and State government have an interest in tracking the progress of schools and students within schools. We also have routine screening, benchmarking, and diagnostic tests that provide crucial information how we are progressing and how teachers can adjust their curriculum and teaching to ensure that all students are getting what they need to learn.”

So why, if ICS Equity promotes an apparently antithetical ideology to Engel’s goals, did his administration hire the firm? ICS Equity did some staff training in 2016 for the La Crosse school district, before Engel arrived, and his administration brought them back in. As of July of 2022 Engel said they are not hiring ICS Equity for services this next school year.

## **Who is ICS Equity?**

The founders of ICS Equity are Elise Frattura and Colleen Capper. They wrote a book setting out their educational philosophy called *Leading for Social Justice* which Connelly has read.

Connelly notes, “That title alone trumpets that their approach to education is highly political. Their central theme is all about marginalized students v. white culture. Schools must

**disaggregate** all sorts of school data for identity groups so that disparities can be uncovered wherever they might be lurking because justice demands proportional identity-group representation in all school programs.” Does such an ideological framework truly exist anywhere? Is that the way the real world works? Is that even desirable?

To summarize – using their jargon – ICS Equity believes it is a form of “segregation” and a “cycle of oppression” to pull selected students from the main classroom to go to special programs such as gifted and talented, special needs, at-risk, because that is bad “homogenous” learning: students sharing a particular trait (homogenous) are taught by specialized staff. They believe this results in students of color, ESL, low income, and disabled students being unfavorably under-represented or over-represented, as the case may be, in these various groups. That, over the long term, results in those students being “tracked” and “marginalized” with “reinforced low expectations” by their teachers in a “caste system” where “...the white, middle/upper-class curriculum and culture of the school works against them.”

They believe the **heterogenous classroom** is the solution. The proper learning environment, in their opinion, is for all students to remain in one classroom all day, perhaps with some minimal weaving in and out as needed, and “building teacher capacity” to provide for the varying needs of all the students in their classroom, no specialized teachers, and no blaming of any factors beyond the school. The end result will be that all students “feel a sense of belonging.” What metric measures that? Connelly distills this all down to mean ICS Equity wants a school to either:

1. Get rid of, or substantially reduce, all special programs and letter grades and standardized tests because such labels stick to the student and are a form of “segregation.”
2. Or, if such programs will remain, then constantly disaggregate student data for each grade to make sure no “marginalized” group of students is over-represented in, say, special education or at-risk programs, or under-represented in, say, the school musical or biology honors class, etc. If there is a disproportionality, then some kind of action must be taken. What?

The MacIver Institute obtained the training materials from an anonymous source and reports on this at: <https://www.maciverinstitute.com/2021/09/questionable-curriculum-why-you-should-be-concerned-about-ics-promoting-crt-in-your-schools/> In the post by Abbi Debelack she states that, “The driving goal behind the implementation of the ICS Equity program is equity – not equality – for all students. Equity is the opposite of equality.” Marc Renault, a Wisconsin parent, did a deep dive into the ICS equity handbook. He says that, “This firm pushes for the radical restructuring of school districts for equity (forced equality of outcomes

not fairness) in all areas – academics, sports, clubs, staff, administration, etc. – in the name of Social Justice.”

## **Taxpayer dollars paid to ICS Equity**

La Crosse School District taxpayer dollars have been paid to ICS Equity in the past, and additionally have been paid more recently for their consulting services.

Don and DeeDee Sims, members of the FAIR Western Wisconsin Chapter, sent a Freedom of Information Request for information for money spent by the La Crosse School District on ICS Equity. The district responded by email April 28, 2022, with invoices for money spent for the years 2016 and in 2021. Apparently, ICS was not hired during the intervening years.

According to the documents more than \$32,000 were expended to provide ICS Equity training services to teachers and administrative staff at all grade levels throughout the school district. Detailed expenditures are provided in Appendix A.

## **Concluding comments**

What is really happening in La Crosse schools? The dichotomy between Dr. Engel’s expressed representations versus the districts Strategic Plan for Educational Equity, and the ICS Equity training programs for administrative staff and faculty, raise questions:

1. Principals, special education, literacy specialists among other teacher and school administrators have attended the ICS Equity training sessions. Consistent with what Engel said, it would appear he wants special education students and apparently children with reading problems to benefit from the ICS training. However, is the concept of the heterogeneous classroom benefiting students with other proficiency levels? Is racial data disaggregation being applied to the detriment of some students?
2. What exactly is ICS Equity asking the La Crosse School District staff to do? And what have they already done in the classroom that affects students? Will ICS be hired again the future?
3. What metrics show whether ICS Equity is a failure or success? For example, if a school fudges the data by reducing the number of students every year in special education or at-risk, then they will claim success. But that is just manipulating data. Schools control that data whereas they cannot control standardized testing and proficiency scores.

One may reasonably conclude from the FOIA data obtained, the responses from the La Crosse school district superintendent, and the information obtained from other knowledgeable sources in Wisconsin regarding ICS Equity, that serious concerns remain about what is truly going on within La Crosse schools.

In an educational environment where documented cases of indoctrination, as opposed to appropriate educational policies and practices, are arising throughout the United States, as well as around Wisconsin, one cannot assume that La Crosse is immune.

More questions need to be answered to resolve areas of concern. In order to have a meaningful dialogue the school district must provide clear and complete definitions of the terminology used so that parents and community members understand exactly what the district's goals are and how they will be implemented. Words should not be permitted to be used to obfuscate and conceal the true intentions of the school board, administrators and teachers.

At this point, parents are strongly encouraged to remain involved and vigilant in the education of their children, and ask themselves, "Are they receiving what they expect and are willing to pay their taxes for?" Be alert to what your children are telling you, and do not be afraid to ask questions of teachers and school administrators.

As parents you have the right to know how your child is being educated. There are numerous resources and organizations, including FAIR, that parents can turn to for support should they encounter resistance when seeking information about their children's education, or dealing with a defiant and uncooperative school district.

*The Foundation Against Intolerance & Racism (FAIR) is a nonpartisan organization, with more than 100 chapters throughout the USA and Canada, dedicated to advancing a pro-human approach to civil rights and liberties for all. We promote a common culture of fairness and respect for the individual. No dehumanization. No division based on immutable characteristics. Western Wisconsin chapter meetings are typically held monthly in La Crosse, WI. For more information contact Kevin Connelly, Chapter Leader. Email: [western-wisconsin@fairforall.org](mailto:western-wisconsin@fairforall.org). Phone: 608-343-4114. Or join us via the FAIR website at [www.fairforall.org](http://www.fairforall.org).*

## Freedom of Information Request Data Provided by the School District of La Crosse

### Appendix A

#### 2016

\$3150 invoice 2/2/2016 for 21 “log-ins.” Central HS, 7 Rivers Charter HS, Logan HS, La Crosse Roads Charter HS, Logan Middle School, Lincoln Middle School, STOA II Charter Middle School, Coulee Montessori Adolescent Charter School, Longfellow Middle School, La Crosse Design Institute Charter Middle School, Emerson Elementary, Hamilton Elementary, SOTA I Charter Elementary School, Hintgen Elementary, North Woods Elementary, Northside Elementary, Coulee Montessori Elementary, Southern Bluffs Elementary, Spence Elementary, State Road Elementary, Summit Elementary.

Details: Building Leadership Modules 1, 2, 3. Equity Audit.

\$15,000 invoice August 21, 2016 for 3 day conference on “equity.” National Leadership for Social Justice Institute, honorarium for Dr. Capper and Dr. Frattura (co-founders of ICS) includes all preparation time, travel, meals, lodging.

**Total \$18,150.**

2017 – nothing paid.

2018 - nothing paid.

2019 – nothing paid

2020 – nothing paid

(March 23, 2020 Dr. Aaron Engel is appointed superintendent)

#### 2021

\$11,385 for 23 staff members (23 x \$495 registration fee) to attend **June 22-23** Virtual Institute Part II, Co-plan, Co-serve, Co-learn, for returning teams (When did they attend Part I? Was that in 2016), Details: review implementation and next steps for Cornerstones 1 and 2, presented by Dr. Elise Frattura and Dr. Colleen Capper. Attendees: Rosemary Bodnar (Lincoln OSPED), Mandi Hundt (Lincoln 8<sup>th</sup> grade), Melissa Murray (LSM principal), Matt Kitzerow (Longfellow Principal), Kellie Schmitz (Supervisor of Educator Readiness), Melissa Ender (Hogan Lit Specialist), Ruth Baardseth (Lincoln Literacy Specialist), Kristy Holinka (Logan Middle School Literacy Specialist), Kate Keeney (Logan High Literacy Specialist), Sarah Bradel (Emerson

Summit IC), Jenny Banse (IC Spence), Sara DePaolo (North Woods Title I/IB), Lisa Gunnarson (Hintgen State Road), Stacey Everson (Hogan), Shelley Shirel (Dir. Of Elem Ed), Sara Krueger (Logan High Teacher), Tony DePaolo (Logan HS Assoc. Principal), Krissy Congdon (Logan HS Sped Teacher), Kristin Nedvidek (Logan High Teacher), Tricia Gibbons (Special Ed), Jill Emerich (Longfellow Literacy Specialist), Paula Johnson (Lincoln ELA--), Chelsey Willms (Lincoln Special Ed),

\$530 (late registration fee) preapproval paid for Greg Fenton, Supervisor of Special Education to attend **July 19-20** virtual conference, ICS Part II.

\$495 eventbrite order to attend virtual institute Part II **August 2-3**. Co-plan, Co-serve, Co-learn, implementation of Cornerstones 1 and 2 in their schools.

\$530 (late registration fee) preapproval paid for Resa Hawes, Program Support Coordinator, Hogan to attend **July 19-20** virtual conference, ICS Part II.

\$495 eventbrite order to attend virtual institute Part II **August 2-3**. Co-plan,Co-serve,-Co-learn, implementation of Cornerstones 1 and 2 in their schools.

\$530 preapproval paid for Angela K. Orson, Program Support Coordinator, Hogan to attend **July 19-20** virtual conference, ICS Part II.

\$495 eventbrite order to attend virtual institute Part II **August 2-3**. Co-plan,Co-serve,-Co-learn, implementation of Cornerstones 1 and 2 in their schools.

**Total \$14,460**

**Grand total: \$32,610.00**