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For Immediate Release

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Administration to Transition Students Out of Northern Illinois Academy Following Findings of State-Commissioned Equip for Equality Report

ISBE to Assign Facility ‘Non-Approved’ Status as DCFS, IDHS, and HFS Coordinate to Safely Transition all State Students to New Placements

AURORA – The State of Illinois is transitioning all students in its care from Northern Illinois Academy to alternate placements, following an Equip for Equality report commissioned by the state in January 2021 to review the facility’s practices. The Illinois State Board of Education conducted its review of the facility. Based on that review, it announced today that effective August 6, 2021, it will assign a status of “non-approved” to NIA for education services. NIA is an 87-bed private youth residential treatment facility and therapeutic day school located in Aurora and operated by Sequel Youth and Family Services.

Following troubling reports of improper treatment of youth at the facility, the state hired Equip for Equality to conduct an independent review of NIA. Equip for Equality is the State-appointed protection and advocacy organization for people with disabilities in Illinois. During this period, the state also sent monitors to NIA to take stock of the facility’s operations and ensure the safety of students at NIA. Equip for Equality has now completed its review and found serious concerns at the facility, including staffing, incident reporting, elopements, treatment planning, the use of seclusion and isolated time-outs, and improper restraints. Based on these findings and ISBE’s non-approved determination, the state agencies with responsibility for students at NIA, the Department of Human Services, the Illinois State Board of Education, the Department of Children and Family Services, and the Department of Healthcare and Family Services, will immediately begin the process to transition all students to alternate placements on a phased and orderly basis.

“The problems documented by Equip for Equality are deeply troubling. As a consequence and as a result of ISBE’s regulatory review, we are revoking approval of the facility and helping school districts to transition their students to better learning environments ahead of the next school year,” **said State Superintendent of Education Dr. Carmen I. Ayala**. “All children deserve to be educated by qualified, trained, and compassionate adults with the individualized supports they require. Removing approval from this facility holds NIA accountable and ensures a better future for the children who have been in their care.”



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The state previously provided NIA with ample opportunity to improve its services. ISBE changed NIA's status to Pending Further Review in December 2020, halting any additional placements to the facility. ISBE developed a corrective action plan for NIA and conducted extensive on-site monitoring. The state engaged Equip for Equality to conduct the comprehensive review after continuing to receive complaints, despite the ongoing corrective action. Changing a facility's status to non-approved means that school districts cannot receive state reimbursement for student placements there. Districts currently have 17 students placed at NIA and must find alternative placements for those students by the effective date of the change in order to continuing receiving state reimbursement for those placements.

“The top priority of the Department of Children and Family Services is protecting vulnerable children by ensuring they receive the best available support and services. It is unacceptable when any facility is not meeting the strict standards established by DCFS, and our team is taking steps to thoughtfully and carefully transition our youth in care to other facilities that can provide the nurturing, supportive environment our kids deserve,” **said Marc Smith, Acting Director, Department of Children and Family Services.**

DCFS currently has 15 youth in care residing at NIA, and the department has started the process to transition them to other facilities. This process includes identifying appropriate facilities, providing background and medical information to these new facilities, and scheduling interviews between facility staff and youth in care. DCFS is working to have all youth in care in safe and appropriate settings within 120 days.

“Above all else, the well-being of these children is the top priority. HFS has engaged every family with a child at Northern Illinois Academy under the Family Support Program to reduce the number of children placed there and is actively seeking solutions for those whose families haven't yet found alternative placements,” **said Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services Director Theresa Eagleson.** “HFS has been working to relocate children for more than a year and will continue to work with its sister agencies to ensure the best possible transition for these children.”

“We are committed to ensuring the safety and well-being of every child served by organizations that IDHS funds. We continue to work closely with families, advocates, and our provider system to ensure NIA youth can transition in an orderly and caring way to places where they can learn, grow, and thrive,” **said IDHS Secretary Grace B. Hou.**

DCFS licenses NIA's residential facility and DCFS, DHFS, and IDHS fund services for youth residing there. ISBE has oversight of NIA's educational programming.



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Equip for Equality's review found significant problems with NIA's programming, training, and protocols that created a negative environment for the children placed there. Findings include:

- Inadequate and overextended staffing
- Insufficient incident reporting, including elopements
- Lack of meaningful programming and treatment planning
- Undocumented and improper restraint and seclusions
- Insufficient adherence to COVID-19 health and safety requirements

Equip for Equality's January 2021 [full report can be viewed here](#).

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