

Feds investigate Ithaca schools' students of color summit events

Cornell law prof alleges events segregate students

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Ithaca city schools are being investigated by the Trump administration's Department of Education, based on a complaint filed in August by a group founded by Cornell University law professor William A. Jacobson.

The investigation began on Jan 27 — one week into President Donald Trump's second term — according to a DOE letter to the nonprofit Equal Protection Project, founded by Jacobson.



Jacobson

The organization alleged the Ithaca City School District's yearly Students of Color United (SOCU) Summits — held since 2021 — segregated students in a way that violates the Supreme Court's 1964 rejection of racial segregation in public schools.

The department of Education's Office for Civil Rights will investigate whether the district subjected students to different treatment on the bases of race and color by sponsoring the summits which allegedly excluded white students, and the regulations that implemented the summits.

The department's confirmation of the investigation does not confirm that the district violated the Civil Rights Act or the Fourteenth Amendment.

Sean Eversley Bradwell, president of ICSD's Board of Education, wrote in a statement to the Ithaca Times that the district welcomes the investigation.

"I don't know what interested (the Department of Education) but I will say we let laid out a very detailed evidence-based case in our civil rights complaint with screenshots links and quotes setting forth that this was a district-wide policy," he said in a recent interview with The Ithaca Journal.

Jacobson claimed the alleged segregation was not abnormal and that dozens of teachers and administrators were involved in it, all the way up to the superintendent's office and board of education.

"This was not as the district has tried to portray it as — a miscommunication or a mere one-off student event," he said. "This was Ithaca City School District policy at every level to discriminate against white students for this event, to the extent that students of color were released from class and white students had to stay behind."

Who is Jacobson and what is the Equal Protection Project?

Jacobson is a clinical professor of law and director of the Securities Law Clinic at Cornell Law School. Before joining the Cornell law faculty in 2007, he had a law firm in Providence, Rhode Island, concentrating in investment, employment, and business disputes in the securities industry.

Jacobson launched the Equal Protection Project in 2023, according to the Cornell Review, and it's been devoted to about a dozen cases involving alleged segregation or equal rights infringements with school districts since.

He also founded the website legalinsurrection.com, a conservative-leaning blog where he published an article on the Equal Protection Project's concerns regarding Superintendent Brown's com-

ments on the alleged segregation, among other content supporting former president Donald Trump in his bid for reelection this year and denouncing "Anti-Israel" campus protesters.

The professor is no stranger to speaking on American politics in the media: he's been featured on Fox news several times in recent years.

Events leading up to the investigation

Jacobson sent the district school board a letter demanding changes to the event days before the 2024 summit in May. The district issued a statement in response to the demands, claiming SOCU summits are open to all secondary students, labeling any prior use of exclusionary language as miscommunication.

"What's shocking to us as the Equal Protection Project is not just that the conduct took place, but that the district is completely unapologetic about it," Jacobson said. "They have never apologized for this; they have tried to write it off as a miscommunication."

The SOCU Summit, traditionally an event for students of color in grades 6-12 within the school district, has faced criticism for its alleged exclusivity in the past.

The Equal Protection Project delivered a letter to ICSD Superintendent Dr. Luvelle Brown and Board of Education President Bradwell, claiming the summits from 2021 to 2023 were racially exclusionary.

Brown and district communications did not respond to a request for comment on this story.

Brown defended what he referred to as "affinity groups" in May.