

## JOCELYN P. ANTONIO, MPH

**Testimony on H-5841, Prohibition of Discrimination Based on Hair Texture and Hairstyles**  
**House Education Committee**  
**April 8, 2025**

Good afternoon, Chairperson McNamara and members of the House Education Committee. My name is **Jocelyn Antonio**, and I serve as the **Director of Program Implementation and Policy** at the Hassenfeld Child Health Innovation Institute at the Brown University School of Public Health. I am providing this testimony in my personal capacity.

I strongly urge your **support** for **H-5841 – An Act Relating to Education – Offenses Pertaining to Schools**, sponsored by Representative Stewart and co-sponsored by Representatives Cruz, Lombardi, Alzate, Shallcross Smith, Kislak, Potter, Felix, Kazarian, and Casimiro.

This legislation **seeks to prohibit discrimination on the basis of race by expanding the definition to include traits historically associated with race, such as hair texture and protective hairstyles**. This amendment is important to ensure that students are not subjected to bias or disciplinary actions based on their natural hair or culturally significant hairstyles.

### **Public Health Implications of Hair Discrimination**

**Public health recognizes that students of color face systemic barriers and inequities in education.**<sup>1</sup> Discrimination - particularly when it targets cultural expression such as hairstyles - is rooted in structural racism and reinforces Eurocentric norms as the default standard.<sup>2</sup>

**Hair, appearance, self-perception, and identity are deeply interconnected.** For many individuals – especially Black youth- hairstyles are a source of cultural pride, identity, and self-expression.<sup>3</sup> Discrimination based on these traits are not only unjust but harmful to students’ mental and physical well-being.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> American Public Health Association and Dang, “Towards a More Inclusive Future: Creating Equitable School Environments to Improve Health for K-12 Students of Color.”

<sup>2</sup> Legal Defense Fund, “Black Hair Belongs Everywhere.”

<sup>3</sup> Nkimbeng et al., “The Person Beneath the Hair.”

<sup>4</sup> Association of Black Psychologists, “The Association of Black Psychologists’ Statement on the Need for Hair AntiDiscrimination Laws”; Nkimbeng et al., “The Person Beneath the Hair”; Whitley and Barnas, “Racial Discrimination Based on Hair Texture/Style”; DOVE, “Dove CROWN Research Study for Girls”; Payne-Patterson, “The CROWN Act”; Edwards, “From the Editorial Board.”

According to a 2021 Dove study, **66% of Black girls in majority-white schools reported experiencing hair discrimination, with 87% stating they encountered it by the age of 12.**<sup>5</sup> These early and frequent experiences of exclusion can have **long-lasting psychological effects.**<sup>6</sup>

Black children have been disproportionately subjected to harsh discipline – including removal from classrooms, suspension, and expulsion- for dress-code or hair-related violations.<sup>7</sup> The Brookings Institution found **that Black students are disciplined at a rate 4x higher** than any other racial or ethnic group and **70% of all suspensions are discretionary.** Such enforcement perpetuates a discriminatory trajectory that increases the likelihood of academic disengagement, dropping out, involvement with the juvenile justice system, and long-term health disparities.<sup>8</sup>

Experiencing this type of discrimination contributes to **toxic stress, anxiety, depression, diminished self-worth, and identity trauma.**<sup>9</sup> The American Academy of Pediatrics affirms that discrimination correlates with increased stress responses, negatively affecting both mental and physical health outcomes.

In some cases, discriminatory school policies push students and families to conform to Eurocentric beauty standards through chemical hair treatments. These products are associated with increased risk of scalp damage, hair loss, and exposure to endocrine-disrupting chemicals—disproportionately affecting Black communities.<sup>10</sup>

## **Impact on Educational Environment**

**Hair-based discrimination sends a message to Black children and children of African descent that their identity is not welcome.** This marginalization creates a hostile learning environment that directly impacts academic performance, sense of belonging, and overall well-being learning.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> DOVE, “Dove CROWN Research Study for Girls.”

<sup>6</sup> Association of Black Psychologists, “The Association of Black Psychologists’ Statement on the Need for Hair AntiDiscrimination Laws”; Nkimbeng et al., “The Person Beneath the Hair”; Whitley and Barnas, “Racial Discrimination Based on Hair Texture/Style”; DOVE, “Dove CROWN Research Study for Girls”; Payne-Patterson, “The CROWN Act”; Edwards, “From the Editorial Board.”

<sup>7</sup> Losen and Whitaker, “11 Million Days Lost”; Legal Defense Fund, “Black Hair Belongs Everywhere”; Edwards, “From the Editorial Board”; Whitaker, “Federal Data Shows Public Schools Nationwide Are a Hotbed of Racial Injustice”; Whitley and Barnas, “Racial Discrimination Based on Hair Texture/Style.”

<sup>8</sup> Henderson and Wyatt Bourgeois, “Penalizing Black Hair in the Name of Academic Success Is Undeniably Racist, Unfounded, and against the Law.”

<sup>9</sup> Association of Black Psychologists, “The Association of Black Psychologists’ Statement on the Need for Hair AntiDiscrimination Laws.”

<sup>10</sup> Association of Black Psychologists; Whitley and Barnas, “Racial Discrimination Based on Hair Texture/Style”; Payne-Patterson, “The CROWN Act.”

<sup>11</sup> Legal Defense Fund, “Black Hair Belongs Everywhere.”

By explicitly prohibiting this form of discrimination, H5841 helps to build a more inclusive, respectful, and equitable educational environment—one in which all students feel valued and are empowered to thrive authentically and with dignity.<sup>12</sup>

### **Alignment with Broader Initiatives:**

This **bill aligns with national movements** advocating for the protection of individuals and strengthening against hair-based discrimination, such as the CROWN (Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair) Act. Beginning with California in 2019, 26 states have passed the CROWN act into law.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, major cities - including New Orleans, Columbus, Charleston, Miami Beach, and Raleigh- have passed similar legislation at the local level.<sup>14</sup>

By adopting H5841, Rhode Island demonstrates its commitment to civil rights, equity, and the dignity and well-being of its diverse population.

### **Conclusion:**

**Enacting H-5841 is not only a matter of civil rights but also a public health imperative.** It addresses the systemic issues that contribute to health disparities and ensures that all students, regardless of their racial or ethnic background, can participate fully and authentically in school without fear of discrimination.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

**Jocelyn P. Antonio, MPH**

[joantoni@bu.edu](mailto:joantoni@bu.edu)

---

<sup>12</sup> American Public Health Association and Dang, “Towards a More Inclusive Future: Creating Equitable School Environments to Improve Health for K-12 Students of Color.”

<sup>13</sup> Nkimbeng et al., “The Person Beneath the Hair.”

<sup>14</sup> Payne-Patterson, “The CROWN Act.”

### **Reference:**

- American Public Health Association, and Thomas Dang. "Towards a More Inclusive Future: Creating Equitable School Environments to Improve Health for K-12 Students of Color." American Public Health Association. Accessed April 7, 2025. [https://www.apha.org/-/media/files/pdf/topics/education/students\\_of\\_color\\_report\\_09-2024.pdf](https://www.apha.org/-/media/files/pdf/topics/education/students_of_color_report_09-2024.pdf).
- Association of Black Psychologists. "The Association of Black Psychologists' Statement on the Need for Hair AntiDiscrimination Laws." Association of Black Psychologists, 2019. [https://abpsi.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/ABPsiStatementonHairDiscrimination\\_Aug2019-1.pdf](https://abpsi.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/ABPsiStatementonHairDiscrimination_Aug2019-1.pdf).
- DOVE. "Dove CROWN Research Study for Girls," 2021. [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5edc69fd622c36173f56651f/t/623369f7477914438ee18c9b/1647536634602/2021\\_DOVE\\_CROWN\\_girls\\_study.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5edc69fd622c36173f56651f/t/623369f7477914438ee18c9b/1647536634602/2021_DOVE_CROWN_girls_study.pdf).
- Edwards, Torrie K. "From the Editorial Board: Tangled Discrimination in Schools: Binding Hair to Control Student Identity." *The High School Journal* 103, no. 2 (2020): 53–56.
- Henderson, Howard, and Jennifer Wyatt Bourgeois. "Penalizing Black Hair in the Name of Academic Success Is Undeniably Racist, Unfounded, and against the Law." The Brookings Institution, February 23, 2021. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/penalizing-black-hair-in-the-name-of-academic-success-is-undeniably-racist-unfounded-and-against-the-law/>.
- Legal Defense Fund. "Black Hair Belongs Everywhere: Hair Discrimination FAQ." *Legal Defense Fund* (blog), February 5, 2020. <https://www.naacpldf.org/natural-hair-discrimination/>.
- Losen, Daniel J., and Amir Whitaker. "11 Million Days Lost: Race, Discipline, And Safety at U.S. Public Schools (Part 1)." ACLU of Southern California, August 29, 2018. <https://www.aclu.org/publications/11-million-days-lost-race-discipline-and-safety-us-public-schools-part-1>.
- Nkimbeng, Manka, Bernice B. Malaika Rumala, Crystal M. Richardson, Shemekka Ebony Stewart-Isaacs, and Janiece L. Taylor. "The Person Beneath the Hair: Hair Discrimination, Health, and Well-Being." *Health Equity* 7, no. 1 (August 2, 2023): 406–10. <https://doi.org/10.1089/heq.2022.0118>.
- Payne-Patterson, Jasmine. "The CROWN Act: A Jewel for Combating Racial Discrimination in the Workplace and Classroom." Policy Memo. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, July 26, 2023. <https://www.epi.org/publication/crown-act/>.
- Whitaker, Amir. "Federal Data Shows Public Schools Nationwide Are a Hotbed of Racial Injustice." *American Civil Liberties Union* (blog), August 29, 2018. <https://www.aclu.org/news/racial-justice/federal-data-shows-public-schools-nationwide-are>.
- Whitley, Dr. Brittany, and Dr. Jill Barnas. "Racial Discrimination Based on Hair Texture/Style." Jefferson City, MO: MOST Policy Initiative, February 24, 2022. <https://mostpolicyinitiative.org/science-note/racial-discrimination-based-on-hair-texture-style/>.