



March 13, 2024

Chair Joseph M. McNamara
House Education Committee
Rhode Island State House
Providence, RI 02903

RE: Support for H-7724 – Offenses Pertaining to Schools - Crown Act

Dear Chair McNamara and Members of the House Education Committee:

The Rhode Island Chapter of the National Organization for Women (RI NOW) supports H-7724 to broaden the prohibition against discrimination based on race to include characteristics based on hairstyles and hair textures. RI NOW is committed to combating racism and discrimination and that includes ending the practice of unfairly targeting BIPOC students by criminalizing their natural hairstyles.

No student should be penalized for their self expression in the way they style their hair, particularly when their hairstyle has notable cultural meaning or reflects the way in which their hair naturally grows. Schools do not control how individual students engage with family practices or express themselves outside of school so they should not be policing how they are allowed to style their hair in relation to their hair type. That's an individual choice made by the student and their parents or guardians.

Strict dress code policies often lead to higher rates of punishment, which students of color are often subjected to at a disproportionate rate, for unnecessary infractions that have no real connection to patterns of misconduct or behavioral issues. Hairstyles are not as interchangeable as clothing. They can be expensive, detailed, and time-consuming to create, they may have a personal and symbolic meaning, or they may even just be the natural way a person's hair grows. No child should be punished, or forced to undo the work that went into their hair, or forced to comply with dress code standards that their specific hair texture does not meet. Likewise, they should not be limited in their choice of style based on unreasonable restrictions on personal appearance.

Punishing students of color and limiting their choice of hairstyle based on racial characteristics is discriminatory, racist, and suggests a negative message that treats them with disrespect because of their hair type. Rather than controlling how a child does their hair, we must instead focus more attention on providing a top quality education to our students and promoting inclusion and self-acceptance. RI NOW supports passage of H-7724 and we strongly urge you to pass it out of committee and bring it to the floor for a vote.

Thank you for your consideration.

Very truly yours,



Lesley Bunnell
President
RI NOW



Giona Picheco
Legislative Chair
RI NOW

Rhode Island National Organization for Women (RI NOW) is a membership-based advocacy organization with hundreds of members and supporters throughout the state of Rhode Island. Our mission is to take action to bring women into full participation in all aspects of public and private life without experiencing barriers based on gender. Our key issue areas include economic equity, ending violence against women, reproductive health and justice, 2SLGBTQIA+ civil rights, and ending racism.