

ACLU OF RI POSITION: SUPPORT

**TESTIMONY ON 24-H 7724,
AN ACT RELATING TO EDUCATION – OFFENSES PERTAINING TO SCHOOLS
March 13, 2024**

The ACLU of RI writes in strong support of this legislation which would expand the definition of race in three of our state’s anti-discrimination laws to include “traits historically associated with race,” importantly including hair texture and protective hairstyles. Discrimination on the basis of hair texture or hairstyles is nothing but racial discrimination, and the inclusion of specific statutory protection against this type of discrimination is critical to ensure that the rights of BIPOC individuals are clearly and legally safeguarded in workplaces and schools. For many people of color, this is far from a minor issue.

A quick online search will inform anyone that hair discrimination is a pervasive and insidious problem across the country. It prompted the U.S. House of Representatives to pass a bill two years ago classifying it as a violation of federal anti-discrimination laws. As of June 2023, 23 states have passed iterations of this critical statute.¹ Stories of individuals being told that their hair is not “professional” enough for the workplace constitute instances of racial discrimination that have led to this demand for distinct legal protection under the law. This bill would explicitly ensure that biases, however unconscious or unintentional they may be, posited around standards of appearance will not be tolerated.

In addition to amending the state’s Fair Employment Practices Act and Civil Rights Act, this legislation would, commendably, address this discrimination in the school setting as well. There have been many reported incidents across the country of young students being sent home for having “distracting” hair and, in at least one case, of a student athlete being forced to cut their locks or else forfeit a school sports match.

We therefore strongly encourage passage of this bill and the elimination of this unfair and discriminatory practice.

¹ <https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/news/inclusion-equity-diversity/crown-act-state-prohibit-hair-discrimination#:~:text=As%20of%20June%202023%2C%2023,inclusing%20the%20U.S.%20Virgin%20Islands.>