

ACLU OF RI POSITION: SUPPORT

**TESTIMONY ON 23-H 6235,
AN ACT RELATING TO EDUCATION – OFFENSES PERTAINING TO SCHOOLS
April 19, 2023**

The ACLU of RI writes in strong support of this legislation which would expand the definition of race in three of the state’s anti-discrimination laws to include “traits historically associated with race,” 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 at school. 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 issue across the country. There have been many reported incidents across the country of young students being sent home for having “distracting” hair or, in at least one case, of a student athlete being forced to cut their locks or else forfeit a match. Other stories of individuals being told that their hair is not “professional” enough for the workplace also 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. At least 20 states, including neighboring Massachusetts and Connecticut, have passed similar laws in recent years, and we believe the time has come for Rhode Island to join them.

We therefore strongly encourage passage of this bill.