

ACLU OF RI POSITION: SUPPORT

**TESTIMONY ON 21 – S 539,
AN ACT RELATING TO EDUCATION –
PREVENTING DISCRIMINATION ON THE BASIS OF RACE
May 17, 2021**

The ACLU of RI writes in strong support of this legislation which would expand the definition of race under our 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 a protection against discrimination under our state laws 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 issue across the country. Stories of young students being sent home for having “distracting” hair; student athletes being forced to cut their locks or forfeit a match; and incidents of individuals being told that their hair is not “professional” enough for the workplace all constitute instances of blatant racial discrimination which demand distinct protections within our laws.

This bill would explicitly specify that biases, however unconscious or unintentional they may be, posited around standards of appearance like this should not be allowed in our workplaces or schools in Rhode Island. We therefore strongly encourage passage of this bill.

Thank you for your consideration.

Submitted by: Hannah Stern, Policy Associate