

March 6, 2020

Dear Chair Pendergrass and Vice Chair Pena-Melnyk,

RE: HB. 1444

My name is Aaron Cook and I am here today representing my family; Colleen Cook, my wife, and my children Mya, Deanna, Tatiana, Mekhi, and Thomas. I grew up in Charles Village and graduated from the Baltimore Polytechnic Institute in 1986. I moved to New England in the early 1990's to follow a job and settled in Boston in the tech sector in early 1999.

Our family is a transracial family, my wife and I having adopted a sibling group of five black children starting in 2004. We have experienced issues related to natural hairstyle discrimination, most recently when our oldest twin girls were Sophomores in high school, in Malden, MA. They chose to wear box-braids upon returning from Spring Break, a protective hairstyle, which, at that time, was against school uniform and dress code policy. We supported our children's desire to keep their hairstyle braided as they were exploring something that my wife and I cannot provide them: their blackness. Our children were presented

with a choice from their school: conform to a discriminatory hair policy and don't make any waves about it or risk escalating punishments including hours of daily detentions, being kicked off the track team (Deanna is a sprinter), rescinded invitations to the Prom, in-school and out-of-school suspensions, and ultimately expulsion from the school.

Or they could choose to fight for what we as a family felt was right and just and ensure that the policy was changed. When my wife and I asked them what they wanted to do, their response was, and I paraphrase: "... if we don't fight for what is right and get this policy changed, who will do it when we graduate and move on?" And so, they persisted.

They received daily detentions and uniform infractions. My wife and I told them that we would talk to the school and get this resolved: they did not need to worry about it. Clearly there was a misunderstanding at the school about black hairstyles that could be resolved with a simple meeting with the administration. Unfortunately, we were completely stone-walled by the school. There was clearly no understanding of the complexities of black hairstyles. We were told that our daughters needed to "Fix their hair or continue to receive escalating punishments".

Deanna was kicked off the track team and Mya was uninvited to the Prom and disallowed from all after-school activities. In fact, they were told that after the dismissal bell rang, if they were caught on school grounds, the Police would be called.

At that point, we understood that this was an issue, far bigger than us. This was a means for the school to disproportionately target and discipline children of color as black children were punished at a higher frequency than their white schoolmates, for the same action and/or behavior.

After talking with other families, we discovered that the school was adept at keeping communications about this Hair issue extremely close to the vest. We had to reach out and find families to talk with us in order to learn of their similar interactions with the school. We also discovered that families of white children were allowed to circumvent the school's Hair policy with no repercussions. For example, the varsity swim team was allowed to dye their hair, which was explicitly called out as being against the school uniform and hair policy.

It took us requesting assistance from the Anti-Defamation League of Massachusetts, the National Association for the Advancement of

Colored People Legal Defense Fund, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Lawyers for Civil Rights (formerly the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights and Economic Justice), the Southern Poverty Law Center, and the Attorney General for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, in order to pressure the school to stop enforcement of and ultimately remove altogether the racially discriminatory uniform and hair policy that disproportionately targeted children of color for hair length, hair width, hair height, and extensions.

It is imperative that workplaces and schools are educated and informed about natural hairstyles and the adverse impact that discrimination has against people choosing to wear their hair natural and protected.

We need to break down this barrier for our community of people of color so that they do not need to fight this additional discriminatory view of the hair that naturally grows from their heads.

We strongly support HB. 1444 for passage.

Best,

Aaron and Colleen Cook and family