

Dear Chair Pinsky and Members of the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee,

For the record, I am Vita Shats - a senior at a Baltimore County high school, a member of the Black Lives Matter group in Northern Baltimore County and a member of Baltimore Hebrew Congregation. I am testifying in support of House Bill 418, to ban Hate Symbols in Maryland schools.

This bill prohibits the display of Hate Symbols from school property that includes but is not limited to Confederate flags, swastikas, and nooses. Although, they will be allowed for educational purposes only. Confederate flags are historically known as a symbol of racism, slavery, and segregation. Swastikas symbolize anti-Semitism and terror. Nooses symbolize brutality, fear, and hatred. Some students display these symbols with the intention of making their classmates feel uncomfortable and unsafe. Others may not realize the impact displaying these symbols have on their classmates.

My high school is 85% white and predominantly Christian. Numerous symbols of hate are displayed on campus with nothing being done about it. Sophomore and junior year, I met with my principal to talk about implementing a policy and he said it was above a school-level decision.

It is unacceptable that students who display Hate Symbols on their clothes, phone cases, and as a huge flag hanging off the back of their car, do not face consequences.

Last year we had a big problem with swastikas being carved into boys' bathroom stalls. Our administration had to close all of their bathrooms except one to keep an eye on them. Students thought this was funny and praised each other for getting away with it. As a Jewish student, I found it terrifying that this is normal where I go to school. This symbol represents millions dead. There needs to be an end to this.

There was also an incident where a student was wearing a Confederate flag on his belt and shoved it in a black student's face. That student faced no consequences even after the black student's parent complained to the school. How is this acceptable?

These are just two examples of how Hate Symbols disturb learning at school. Coming to school to see students comfortable with displaying swastikas, Confederate flags, and nooses is scary.

As a state, we cannot keep allowing this to be acceptable. Students should never have to fear going to school because of their race, religion, ethnicity, or culture. I believe in freedom of speech, but Hate Symbols do not have a place in schools.

In Baltimore County, there are already policies banning vulgar language, weapons, illegal or harmful products, and depictions of gang affiliations. But why aren't Hate Symbols included? It is necessary for students and staff to feel safe in their learning and working environment.

House Bill 418, banning Hate Symbols from school property, needs to be supported to protect all children and employees in the Maryland school system. Thank you for your time.

Vita Shats

vitashats22@gmail.com

District 42B, Hereford, Maryland