

Dear Members of the Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee,

My name is Jessica Klaitman and I am a Baltimore County resident. I am writing on behalf of Baltimore Women United in support of HB 418, the Symbols of Hate Ban.

Baltimore Women United (BWU) is a diverse group that educates women on important issues, engages them as voters, constituents, candidates and donors, and plans major actions to further women's equality in Baltimore and throughout Maryland. I am a member of the BWU Steering Committee, and I am also a social worker with over 20 years of experience.

Symbols of hate displayed in any way other than educationally are there for one reason: to intimidate. In a school setting, this can be particularly damaging, as the subjects of intimidation are primarily children. Hate symbols have a long history in our county. They are used as cryptic ways for like-minded people to identify each other, and to harass and intimidate specific racial and ethnic groups. These symbols allow people with white supremacist ideologies to hide in plain sight, while they make their hatred frighteningly clear. Why should we allow this in Maryland schools? Why should our schools be fertile ground for white supremacy to attempt to increase in power, while children who are ethnic, religious, or racial minorities suffer, with no recourse? And lest your concern is more for the white Christian heterosexual student than those of minority groups, hate symbols are damaging to them too; they frighten people of all races, ethnicities, religions, sexualities, genders, and ages, and they demean us all.

Some argue that it is important to show symbols such as the confederate flag and the swastika in schools for educational purposes, and HB 418 specifically allows this usage. When we teach our youth about confederate flags and swastikas, we are teaching them to understand painful and violent human history. We are teaching them so they understand the power of such symbols. We are teaching them so that they know not to repeat the human tragedies of the past. If we then display these symbols in our schools, allow them to be worn on clothing and backpacks, and to decorate notebooks and school supplies, we are teaching our children that we do not respect history, that we do not intend to refrain from the violence of our pasts, and mostly, that we do not prioritize their safety in the present. Allowing hate symbols to be displayed and worn freely in our schools – given that we and our students understand their hateful contexts – is an act of violence against our school children and our teachers and staff. This practice cannot be allowed to continue.

The hate symbol ban promotes the safety of all of our children, and our school communities. Baltimore Women United respectfully urges your favorable report on HB 418.

Thank you,

Jessica Klaitman

Baltimore Women United

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