

Thank you Ways and Means Committee for your time.

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 hate symbols that include but are not limited to Confederate flags, swastikas, and nooses. 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. Students display these symbols with the intention of making their classmates feel uncomfortable and/or unsafe. Although, hate symbols will be allowed for educational purposes only.

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 bathroom stalls (boys' bathrooms specifically). Our administration had to close all the boys' bathrooms except one to keep an eye on them. Students thought this was funny. As a Jewish student, I found it terrifying that this is "normal" where I go to school. This symbol represents millions dead and that is somehow funny? 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.

These are just two examples of how hate symbols disturb learning at school. Coming to school to see students comfortable with displaying hate symbols 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 public institutions.

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