

Vermont House overwhelmingly backs bill prohibiting race-based hair discrimination



Saudia LaMont speaks in July 2022. (VtDigger - Lia Chien) —

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Aaliyah Wilburn moved to Vermont two years ago and has faced more hair discrimination here than ever before.

A senior at North Country Union High School in Newport, Wilburn, 17, recalls being in line for the bathroom when the girl in front turned around and reached for her hair. Despite telling her not to touch it, Wilburn said the girl “grabbed” her hair.

“She then told me that I felt like a sheep and she imitated the noises of one,” said Wilburn, a leader with the Vermont Student Anti-Racism Network.

Once, when she was wearing a head covering because she was in the midst of braiding her hair, Wilburn said a student pulled it off and ran away in the school hall. When she wore a headwrap another time, students said she looked like Marge Simpson and that she looked too African for their comfort.

“Later in the day, someone took it off me,” she said.

Wilburn and the student anti-racism network support a bill, which the Vermont House passed in a landslide vote on Wednesday, that would prohibit racial discrimination by hair types, textures and styles.

H.363 would expand the state’s anti-discrimination statute, which forbids discrimination at public places such as schools, stores and restaurants, in housing, and its fair employment practices law, which covers discrimination in the workplace. The bill was approved 132-5 in the House and will now head to the Senate.

It’s important for Wilburn because it could help limit the experiences she has faced in school.

“I wouldn’t be scared of going out with a bonnet or a head wrap if this bill was in place at the time of these incidents,” she said in an email.

Addie Lentzner, executive director of the student anti-racism network, said she has seen hair discrimination in schools — not just in policies and norms but also in the form of microaggressions and racial bias.

“I think it’s a huge problem in our schools and this bill would help address it,” Lentzner said.

Modeled after language promoted as the CROWN Act and already enacted in 23 other states, including New York and Maine, the bill aims to prevent “an erasure and minimization of the experiences of marginalized people,” particularly Black and brown people, Rep. Saudia LaMont, D-Morristown, said during a preliminary vote on the bill Tuesday.

She cited a 2023 study that found 66% of Black girls in predominantly white schools and 44% of Black girls in all schools report experiencing hair discrimination, and that the experiences typically happen before they are 10.

For her daughter, she said, it first occurred in pre-school. While picking up her daughter one afternoon she said she was dismayed to find her wearing a stop sign on her chest that read, "Please ask to touch my hair."

A teacher explained that her daughter was reacting to several instances of students touching and petting her hair without her consent, LaMont continued. "So it was in fact my 4-year-old's idea to make a sign as a signal to her peers to stop violating her body and personal space," she said.

In another incident, her daughter's dance teacher asked to have her recently installed braids taken out so the child's hair could be put up in a bun to look like the majority of the other white kids in the class.

LaMont outlined to her House colleagues on Tuesday the ways in which caring for Black hair is a process. It can take a day to wash, dry and detangle and protective styling, such as box braids or twists, can involve 8 to 22 hours of work.

The bill is important, she said then, because "hair type, textures, styles, protective hairstyles" are "a symbol of one's identity and ability to show up authentically," which includes "the freedom to take pride in one's appearance in ways people choose that feels in alignment with the traits that are associated with their race (and) improves confidence, self esteem, dignity and respect."

Black women's hair is more likely to be perceived as unprofessional, she said, citing surveys. Many of them feel they must wear their hair straight in a job interview and report being sent home or denied a job because of their hair. The same kind of assumptions are used to prevent students with certain hairstyles from engaging in sports and other activities, she added.

"Hair and head coverings do not determine behavior, capacity or competency and people should not be penalized, discriminated against or treated as such," she said.

Hair discrimination is degrading, disrespectful and invades people's privacy in deep ways, said one of the bill's primary sponsors, Rep. Kevin "Coach" Christie, D-Hartford. He pointed to incidents of it nationwide that have challenged athletes, students and teachers.

These include students being punished for wearing braids in Massachusetts, a basketball player who referees initially barred from a game because of beads in her hair in New Jersey and a high school in Texas disciplining a student who refused to change his locs. Prominent during the Civil Rights movement, the fight for the right of Black people to wear their hair their way continues across the country.

“It seems like a small bill but in actuality, it’s another big block in the foundation of equity in the state,” Christie said, adding that it pains him when families choose to leave Vermont after facing racial bullying, hazing and harassment.

Representing Vermont’s most diverse community, Rep. Daisy Berbeco, D-Winooski, also a sponsor, told VT Digger the bill is an important step in advancing equity and “a step in the right direction towards people feeling safe and welcome in our state, no matter where they are in Vermont.”

Rep. Mike Mrowicki, D-Putney, another bill sponsor, said he has heard from constituents who have faced discrimination due to their hair.

With the population and demographic of Vermont fast changing, this bill is a common sense effort to make sure that residents are not ostracized or mistreated because of who they are, he said.

“The reality that people of color are often ostracized or mistreated because of their hair. It can be as seemingly innocent as people wanting to touch it — which is really an invasion of people’s space,” he said.