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Chairman Thompson and Members of the Committee,

The Kansas African American Affairs Commission strongly supports the passage of SB36, also known as the CROWN Act. As an acronym for Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair, the act seeks to address the discrimination that many feel for their hairstyles that are often associated with Black culture. This includes braids, twists, locs, or afros.

This bill is needed as it expands the definition of what is considered “normal”. The unfortunate truth is there have been many examples of hair discrimination across the country. You may have seen the case of the wrestler in California who had his locs cut to participate in a match but there are examples of students not being allowed to walk for graduation ceremonies or being cut from cheer squads, not because they failed to meet any academic or athletic benchmarks, but the negative outcomes were based solely on their hair.

Not surprisingly, there are examples right here in Kansas as well. A February 10, 2022, report on KCUR references a “lawsuit, filed in federal court in Kansas City, Kansas, last week, says that Highland Community College in northeast Kansas conducted a concerted campaign to discourage African Americans from attending the school, intimidated Black student-athletes into leaving and told its coaching staff to refrain from recruiting African Americans.” The original complaint filed referenced the school administration’s comments on the athletes’ hair, specifically locs.

This is the fourth year that advocates have proposed legislation to the Kansas Legislature. In that time, municipalities have taken up the charge of protecting people. The Lawrence City Commission became the first city in Kansas to pass a local CROWN Act in 2023, soon followed by Atchison and Wichita. All these cities understand the power of such legislation to send a clear message that they are places where people can feel safe to do something as simple as wear their hair in a natural state.

Dress codes or standards of appearance that appear normal to one group of people can be problematic to other populations. This became painfully clear last month in Girard, Kansas where an 8-year-old student and member of the Wyandotte Nation was asked to cut his hair to be compliant with the school district’s dress code. His mother asked for an exemption citing their cultural heritage where men cut their hair as a display of mourning. Her request was denied, and the child’s hair was cut to avoid disciplinary action and to comply with an arbitrary standard imposed by a culture not his own. The school district eventually changed its dress code policy after the ACLU brought attention to the situation, but the damage to that child had already been done. CROWN Act language includes protecting hairstyles related to “ancestry” and as such, would have protected this child as well.

A patchwork of municipalities or places where local ordinances come late or not at all is not an ideal way forward. Now is the time for the Kansas Legislature to pass the CROWN Act, SB36, to ensure that no dress code or standard of appearance can be used against another person in a discriminatory manner. Beyond that, passing SB36 will send a positive message that Kansas is taking a step in the right direction to be a more welcoming state – and that will benefit us well into the future.