

March 10th, 2022

SB 130

Proponent

Oral Virtual Testimony

Essence Dickinson | 316.730.180 | essdickinson@gmail.com

Self

Mr. Chairman and other esteemed members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to write to you in support of Senate Bill 130.

I would like to start off by stressing the importance of hair to one's sense of self. As history demonstrates to us, hair is symbolic of one's identity. The Vikings, the Romans, and the Native Americans are just a few examples of the many cultures throughout history that have placed great importance on hair because it served as a symbol within their culture and ultimately was central to their identity. The symbolism of hair is further exemplified in the Bible with the story of Samson. Today, hair still remains an important cultural symbol to many, and many see the manner in which they choose to wear their hair as representative of their identity.

The Kansas Anti-Discrimination Act should be amended to protect Kansans who choose to wear their natural hair in the workplace. Under current Kansas law, Kansans of color can be discriminated against because of the style of their natural hair. Discrimination on the basis of one's hair as it naturally grows and occurs is unjust. It is wrongful to deny citizens the right to employment or the right to participate in school activities simply because of the way that their hair naturally grows from their heads.

The term "natural hair" refers to the varying natural curl patterns that are found within the African-American community. Protective hairstyles refer to wearing the hair in a manner that protects the hair from outside elements such as, but not limited to, cold air, or humidity, and these styles allow the hair to maintain moisture—something that is essential for healthy curly hair. These protective styles can be braids, twists, or dreadlocks among many other styles.

I personally connect to Senate Bill 130, because I am Hispanic and African-American, and I, too, understand the discrimination that is associated with natural hair. Before a job interview, I often become anxious about my hair. Many times, I feel pressured to straighten my hair because I feel as though employers or organizations will be more likely to hire me if my hair is straight due to the discrimination against natural hair that is currently legal under Kansas law. This is a real concern that other women and girls outside of myself also experience. Some turn to wigs, weaves, or chemical relaxers in order to alter their hair—with the latter being extremely damaging to the hair—because many know all too well the discrimination that is attached to natural hair. Men and boys are also subjected to this same kind of discrimination based on their natural hair or protective styles, such as dreadlocks. But, no one should have to alter a natural part of their appearance in order to obtain an education, participate in school activities, be hired at a place of employment, or be subjected to suspension or termination because of their hair, especially when they are deserving and qualified.

Those with physical disabilities cannot be denied employment simply because of such disabilities since these are things that they cannot help. Hair is no different. We cannot help the way that our hair naturally grows. No job should ever require that one has to change something that naturally occurs on their body whether that be a physical disability, a blemish, or their natural hair. The same argument can be made for protective hairstyles, because these styles are helpful for maintaining healthy hair and often carry cultural significance. The molecular

structure of curly hair is different than that of straight hair; therefore, the styling and practices associated with straight and curly hair are very different. We live in a society where our differences should be respected and celebrated, not discriminated against.

There have been several instances across the country where hair discrimination has occurred. One of the most notable occurrences of hair discrimination occurred in New Jersey where a high school wrestler, Andrew Johnson, was forced to cut his dreadlocks in order to participate in his match (Gold and Mays). More recently, a student at a Texas high school, Deandre Arnold, will not be allowed to walk for graduation unless he cuts his dreadlocks (O’Kane). A 2019 NBC News article highlights how African-American children are disproportionately singled out in school because of their hair (Griffith). Instances of hair discrimination have also occurred in Kansas as is noted in a 2020 Wichita Eagle article (Sherman and Lefler). Hate speech is protected by law, yet the right for one to wear their hair as it naturally grows to school or work without being discriminated against is not yet protected. This should not be. No one should be discriminated against because they choose to wear their hair as it naturally grows, or because they choose to wear a style that helps maintain the health of their hair.

Mr. Chairman and other esteemed members of the Committee, after reading the above written testimony, it is my hope that you all can clearly see the necessity for Senate Bill 130 as it will protect Kansans who choose to wear their natural hair from being discriminated against in schools and in places of employment solely on the basis of their hair. Kansas should join Nebraska, California, New Jersey, and other states by protecting the right to wear one’s natural hair.

If we are to truly embody the essence of the preamble to the Declaration of Independence, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness,” then Senate Bill 130 should be passed because we cannot continue denying citizens their natural rights simply because of their natural appearance.

In closing, I would like to leave you with this to think about: What if you were told that you could not be a Kansas State Legislator simply because of the way that your hair naturally grows?

Thank you again for your time and consideration of this significant matter.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Essence M. Dickinson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, prominent "E" at the beginning.

Essence M. Dickinson

References

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