

CROWN ACT PROHIBITS RACIAL HAIR DISCRIMINATION

August 2026

On Nov. 25, 2025, Gov. Josh Shapiro signed the Pennsylvania [CROWN Act](#) into law. Passed by an overwhelming bipartisan vote (44-3), this new law provides important statutory protections against racial hair discrimination and brings the Commonwealth into alignment with the growing majority of states that have outlawed such discrimination.

WHAT IS RACIAL DISCRIMINATION?

Racial discrimination is any conduct that treats a student differently and unfavorably because of the student's race, color, ancestry, national origin, personal characteristics associated with race (including hair texture or wearing hair in a natural or protective style), or association with a person of a certain race or color. Racial discrimination includes any denial of equal educational opportunities based on race.¹ Disparate treatment based on race is illegal under federal and state laws as well as the U.S. Constitution and the Pennsylvania Constitution.² Racism has no place in our schools. To learn more, see ELC-PA's fact sheet, [The Right to Be Free From Racism at School](#).

WHAT IS THE CROWN ACT?

The CROWN Act (Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair) explicitly extends statutory protections against racial discrimination to hair textures and certain hairstyles to prohibit race-based discrimination.³ The Pennsylvania CROWN Act amends the Pennsylvania Human Relations Act (PHRA), which is the Commonwealth's primary anti-discrimination law.⁴ The amendment clarifies that "race" includes traits historically associated with race, explicitly including hair texture and protective hairstyles.⁵ The law also defines "protective hairstyle" as including, but "not limited to such hairstyles as locs, braids, twists, coils, Bantu knots, afros and extensions."⁶ The law also defines "religious creed" to include head coverings and hairstyles historically associated with religious practice.⁷

The Pennsylvania CROWN Act became effective on January 24, 2026.

WHAT ARE EXAMPLES OF PROTECTIVE HAIRSTYLES?

Black people may choose to wear protective hairstyles to protect and maintain the health of their hair, and for many people, wearing these styles is a deeply held and important expression of their identity, culture, and self-love.⁸ Protective hairstyles are among the many styles that showcase the beauty of Black hair.⁹

DOES THE CROWN ACT APPLY IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

Yes. Public school students are protected under Pennsylvania’s CROWN Act and the PHRA generally. The PHRA prohibits discrimination in schools on the basis of race, sex (including gender identity and sexual orientation), disability, national origin, ancestry, family status, and religion.¹⁰ The PHRA applies to students in all public schools, including charter schools and cyber charter schools. For more information, visit [C.R.O.W.N. Protections](#) issued by the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission.

The CROWN Act also applies to and protects teachers as employees. Accordingly, teachers have the right to wear protective hairstyles in schools. Employers may limit this right only if they can demonstrate that a rule restricting protective hairstyles is (1) necessary for health or safety, (2) required by actual occupational conditions, (3) nondiscriminatory and specifically tailored to the employee’s position and job activities, and (4) applied equally. If a rule does not meet *all* these requirements, it violates the CROWN Act’s prohibition on racial discrimination in the workplace.¹¹

WHY IS ELIMINATING RACIAL HAIR DISCRIMINATION IMPORTANT?

Racial hair discrimination has its roots in American slavery.¹² Originating in white supremacy and anti-Black racism, hair discrimination enforces white, Eurocentric standards of beauty and exclusionary notions of professionalism as the universal standard and enforced expectation. Hair discrimination informs and reinforces other portrayals of dehumanizing stereotypes about Black people.¹³

Hair discrimination is one example of how Black people’s bodies and expressions are devalued, vilified, surveilled, and policed in all areas of life, including in education spaces. For example, Black people’s hair may be wrongly described as being “messy,” “dirty,” or “undesirable” within these racist paradigms. Black girls and Black women are disproportionately targeted for this form of illegal discrimination.¹⁴ Schools are not exempt from perpetuating these harms; in fact, they often reinforce this racism. As detailed in a report by the United States Government Accountability Office, rules policing students’ hair, hairstyles, and hair coverings were “enforced more often against Black girls”¹⁵ and were identified as one type of rule that fuels school pushout.¹⁶

No child can learn in an environment that enforces discrimination against them. Moreover, the consequences of experiencing racial hair discrimination are dire and mirror the impacts of other forms of trauma that undermine peoples’ health and wellbeing.¹⁷ As a result, “hair discrimination may have significant effects on self-image, health, and wellbeing,” in the short term and throughout a person’s life.¹⁸ Nationally¹⁹ and in Pennsylvania,²⁰ Black students are not only disproportionately subjected to school discipline and exclusion from school, but also directly experience or are forced to witness illegal racial harassment by peers and school staff — experiences that can have devastating and long-lasting impacts on their self-image and self-esteem.²¹

The Pennsylvania CROWN Act is a critical reform that Black girls in Pennsylvania’s public schools have demanded for years. Students’ right to wear protective styles – such as braids, locs, and twists – and the right to learn without fear of stigmatization, reprisals, school exclusions, or other disciplinary measures are now codified as legal entitlements. This important legal protection safeguards students’ right to expression, honors the dignity of Black students, and ensures they can come to school as their full authentic selves.

UNDER THE CROWN ACT, CAN MY CHILD BE DISCIPLINED FOR THEIR HAIR TEXTURE, WEARING A PROTECTIVE STYLE SUCH AS LOCS, OR A HEAD COVERING?

No. A school may not punish or discipline a student for expressing their racial and cultural identity by wearing a protective hairstyle or for the way their hair grows from their head. Schools are prohibited from disciplining students in any manner for hair texture or for wearing a protective hairstyle or head covering, including during athletic events. This protection includes, but is not limited to, hijabs, niqabs, kippahs, yarmulkes, and headscarves. Disciplinary actions by schools are considered illegal racial discrimination and violate the Pennsylvania CROWN Act. Notably, PHRC’s explainer detailing how the Act will be enforced, entitled [C.R.O.W.N. Protections](#), expressly identifies “creating school policies restricting how students can wear or treat their hair,” as an example of prohibited hair discrimination.²²

This legal change is an important step toward ending the criminalization of Black hairstyles²³ and eliminating pervasive, race-based hair discrimination²⁴ – harms that disproportionately impact Black children and fall most heavily on Black girls.²⁵

DOES THE NEW LAW REQUIRE MY SCHOOL TO REVIEW AND REVISE ITS CURRENT POLICIES?

Yes. Many school codes of conduct, student handbooks, or other policies will need to be revised to comply with the Pennsylvania CROWN Act, and these changes should have been made by January 24, 2026. The law may also require revisions to school employment policies.

Over the past several years, ELC-PA has challenged numerous racially discriminatory school rules, including policies that ban hairstyles such as locs or prohibit “hairstyles with excessive parts,” “curly high-top fades,” or the use of combs, headscarves, wave caps, or “do-rags.” These prohibitions must be eliminated to comply with the CROWN Act. In addition, some school rules ban hairstyles that aren’t “neat” or “well-groomed,” and the use of these vague and subjective terms has resulted in disparate impact discrimination, disproportionately harming Black students even though the language is neutral. This may also be prohibited racial discrimination.²⁶

WHAT CAN I DO IF MY CHILD IS DISCIPLINED OR HARASSED BASED ON ILLEGAL HAIR POLICIES?

To challenge exclusionary, race-based disciplinary actions – such as in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, or expulsion – resulting from the enforcement of illegal hair policies, families or students may file a [complaint](#) with the PHRC by using [this resource](#). Families and students may also request that discipline be removed (expunged) from a student’s education record by using [this tool](#). To learn more about students’ rights in the school discipline context, visit [this resource page](#).

To support a student experiencing unlawful racial harassment, including harassment based on protective hairstyle or hair texture, visit our [Bullying and Harassment resource page](#), which includes publications such as [The Right to Be Free From Bullying and Harassment](#), [Bullying and Harassment Self-Advocacy Tool](#), and [How to File a Complaint to the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission](#). For more information about how the PHRC evaluates “Harassment in Educational Settings,” review the PHRC’s [2025 guidance](#).

WHAT MUST SCHOOLS DO TO ENSURE THEIR POLICIES COMPLY WITH THE NEW LAW?

School boards must review all applicable policies — including grooming and dress code policies, athletics policies, etc. — in light of Pennsylvania’s recent adoption of the CROWN Act to ensure that all policies comply with the new law. In addition, any necessary revisions should have been completed by January 24, 2026. To learn more about legal requirements that public schools must follow in their codes of conduct, as well as promising practices for protecting students’ rights, visit [How to Create Equitable, Affirming Codes of Conduct](#).

ARE THERE ANY EXAMPLES OF MODEL DRESS AND GROOMING POLICIES THAT COMPLY WITH THE CROWN ACT?

Yes. In recent years, a growing number of school districts have adopted affirming dress and grooming rules that specifically protect students’ ability to wear protective hairstyles, as this is best practice.²⁷ One such example is the dress code provision regarding protective hairstyles and hair textures in the [2026-2027 Code of Conduct](#) adopted by the School District of Philadelphia.²⁸ Other school districts have also adopted affirming dress code rules related to students’ hair.²⁹

ARE THERE ANY OTHER CROWN ACT LAWS IN PENNSYLVANIA THAT PROTECT AGAINST RACIAL HAIR DISCRIMINATION?

Yes. Both the [City of Philadelphia \(2020\)](#) and the [City of Pittsburgh \(2021\)](#) enacted local Acts that apply in addition to the Pennsylvania CROWN Act.³⁰ These local laws provide explicit, additional protections to students in those cities:

Philadelphia’s CROWN Act

- Protects protective and cultural hairstyles.
- Includes but is NOT limited to “braids, cornrows, locs, Bantu knots, Afros, and twists.”
- Includes protections for styles that are created using hair extensions and protects styles “adorned by hair ornaments, such as ribbon, headwraps, beads, or barrettes.”

Pittsburgh’s CROWN Act

- Protects protective and cultural hairstyles.
- Includes but is NOT limited to “braids, cornrows, locs, Bantu knots, Afros, and twists.”
- Includes protections for styles that are created or maintained using “hair extensions or treatments” or “adorned by hair ornaments, beads, or headwraps.”

WHERE CAN I GO TO LEARN MORE ABOUT RACIAL HAIR DISCRIMINATION IN PENNSYLVANIA SCHOOLS?

As detailed in ELC-PA's first-of-its-kind report, [We Need Supportive Spaces that Celebrate Us: Black Girls Speak Out About Public Schools](#), racially discriminatory school rules that punish children for their hair textures and protective hairstyles have been an ever-present part of many children's educational experiences. This discrimination is illegal. ELC-PA invites community members to learn directly from Black girls by reading our [report](#), [four-page companion guide](#), and [one-pager](#). Join us in the fight for equitable school rules by reviewing public school policies in your community and [advocating for positive change](#).

School District of Philadelphia's 2026-2027 Code of Conduct Expressly References Hair-Related Protections Against Racial Discrimination

Excerpts from the Code of Conduct:

Dress Codes Should Respect our Diverse Communities

Students may dress in a manner that is consistent with their racial, cultural, religious, and gender identity or expression. Students have the right to:

- Wear protective hairstyles such as braids, locs, puffs, afros, twists, wigs, and styles with elements such as headbands, head wraps, bonnets, barrettes or beads.
- Not be discriminated against on the basis of their hair texture.

Enforcing the Dress Code

- [S]tudents may not be excluded from class, suspended and/or sent home for dress code violations.*

* See [page 10 of the Code of Conduct](#) to review the dress code in full.

The Education Law Center-PA (ELC-PA) is a nonprofit, legal advocacy organization with offices in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, dedicated to ensuring that all children in Pennsylvania have access to a quality public education. Through legal representation, impact litigation, community engagement, and policy advocacy, ELC-PA advances the rights of underserved children, including children living in poverty, children of color, children in the foster care and juvenile justice systems, children with disabilities, multilingual learners, LGBTQ+ youth, children experiencing homelessness, and children at the intersection of multiple underserved identities.

ELC-PA's publications provide a general statement of the law. However, each situation is different. If questions remain about how the law applies to a particular situation, contact ELC-PA's Helpline for information and advice – visit www.elc-pa.org/contact or call 215-238-6970 (Eastern and Central PA) or 412-258-2120 (Western PA) – or contact another attorney of your choice.

¹ *Types of Educational Opportunities Discrimination*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE CIVIL RIGHTS DIVISION, <https://www.justice.gov/crt/types-educational-opportunities-discrimination> (last visited Jan. 22, 2026); see also 20 U.S.C. § 1703.

² 42 U.S.C. 2000d et seq.; 43 PA. STAT. ANN. §§ 951-963; Pennsylvania Fair Educational Opportunities Act (applicable to “educational institutions” defined in § 5003(1) as “any institution of post-secondary grade and any secretarial, business, vocational or trade school of secondary or post-secondary grade, which is subject to the visitation, examination or inspection of, or is, or may be licensed by the Department of Public Instruction, including any post-secondary school, college or university incorporated or chartered under any general law or special act of the General Assembly, except any religious or denominational educational institution as defined in [§ 5003(2)].”), 24 PA. STAT. ANN. §§ 5001-5010; U.S. CONST. amend. XIV; PA. CONST. art. I, § 29.

³ 43 PA. STAT. AND CONS. STAT. § 954(bb)-(dd) (West 2026).

⁴ 43 PA. STAT. AND CONS. STAT. § 954(bb)-(dd) (West 2026) (amending § 954 to include protections for traits historically associated with race and religious creed, such as hair texture, protective hairstyle, and religious head coverings and hairstyles).

⁵ 43 PA. STAT. AND CONS. STAT. § 954(bb)-(cc) (West 2026).

⁶ 43 PA. STAT. AND CONS. STAT. § 954(cc) (West 2026).

⁷ 43 PA. STAT. AND CONS. STAT. § 954(dd) (West 2026).

⁸ *Natural Hair Discrimination: Frequently Asked Questions*, NAACP LEGAL DEF. & EDUC. FUND, <https://www.naacpldf.org/natural-hair-discrimination> <https://www.naacpldf.org/wp-content/uploads/2023-07-12-Black-Hair-Belongs-larger-5-1.pdf> (last visited Jan. 20, 2026).

⁹ Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission, *LOVE YOUR CROWN MOS 60 sec*, YOUTUBE (Oct. 17, 2023), https://youtu.be/MB6uLLTphjU?si=CE5GF1BM2hpa98_u (highlighting what the CROWN Act means to and how it affects Pennsylvanians).

¹⁰ 43 PA. STAT. AND CONS. STAT. § 954.

¹¹ 43 PA. STAT. AND CONS. STAT. § 955.

¹² Manka Nkimbeng et al., *The Person Beneath the Hair: Hair Discrimination, Health, and Well-Being*, 7 HEALTH EQUITY 406, 406 (2023).

¹³ Tracey O. Patton, *Hey Girl, Am I More than My Hair?: African American Women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image, and Hair*, 18 Nat’l Women’s Stud. Ass’n J. 24, at 26, 38-9, 46 (2006).

¹⁴ See Leticia Smith-Evans et al., *Unlocking Opportunity for African American Girls: A Call to Action for Educational Equity*, THURGOOD MARSHALL INSTITUTE, at 5-6 (2014) https://www.naacpldf.org/wp-content/uploads/Unlocking-Opportunity-for-African-American-Girls_0_Education.pdf; see also Shannon Cumberbatch, *When Your Identity is Inherently “Unprofessional”: Navigating Rules of Professional Appearance Rooted in Cisheteronormative Rules of Professional Appearance as Black Women and Gender Non-Conforming Professionals*, 34 J. CIV. RTS. & ECON. DEV. 81, 102-03 (2021).

¹⁵ U.S. GOV’T ACCOUNTABILITY OFF., GAO-23-105348, DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION SHOULD PROVIDE INFORMATION ON EQUITY AND SAFETY IN SCHOOL DRESS CODES at 27 (2022), <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-105348>.

¹⁶ U.S. GOV’T ACCOUNTABILITY OFF., GAO-23-105348, DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION SHOULD PROVIDE INFORMATION ON EQUITY AND SAFETY IN SCHOOL DRESS CODES at 24, 27 (2022), <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-105348>.

¹⁷ Manka Nkimbeng et al., *The Person Beneath the Hair: Hair Discrimination, Health, and Well-Being*, 7 HEALTH EQUITY 406, 408 (2023) (citing The Association of Black Psychologists’ Statement on the Need for Hair Anti-Discrimination Laws, ASS’N BLACK PSYCHOLOGISTS (2019), https://abpsi.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/ABPsiStatementonHairDiscrimination_Aug2019.pdf).

¹⁸ Manka Nkimbeng et al., *The Person Beneath the Hair: Hair Discrimination, Health, and Well-Being*, 7 HEALTH EQUITY 406, 407 (2023); see generally Gregory A. Panza et al., *Links Between Discrimination and Cardiovascular Health Among Socially Stigmatized Groups: A Systematic Review*, 14 PUB. LIBR. SCI. 1 (2019); Felesia Bowen & Patricia O’Brien-Richardson, *Cultural Hair Practices, Physical Activity, and Obesity Among Urban African-American Girls*, 29 J. AM. ASS’N NURSE PRAC. 754 (2017); David R. Williams & Ruth Williams-Morris, *Racism and Mental Health: The African American Experience*, 5 ETHNICITY & HEALTH 243 (2000).

¹⁹ *CROWN Act Research Studies*, THE CROWN ACT, <https://www.thecrownact.com/research-studies#:~:text=53%25%20of%20Black%20mothers%20say,by%20the%20age%20of%2010> (last visited Jan. 20, 2026). See also Izraelle I. McKinnon et al., *Experiences of Racism in School and Associations with Mental Health, Suicide Risk, and Substance Use Among High School Students—Youth Risk Behavior Survey, United States 2023*, 73 CDC: MORBIDITY & MORTALITY WKLY. REP. 31, 33 (2024) (“Among students overall, poor mental health, suicide risk, and substance use were consistently higher among students who reported having ever experienced racism in school compared with students who reported having never experienced racism.”); Nia J. Heard-Garris et al., *Transmitting Trauma: A Systematic Review of Vicarious Racism and Child Health*, 199 SOC. SCI. & MED. 231, 235-36 (synthesizing literature on secondhand racism, finding that “[d]espite the small number of studies, almost half of the findings yielded statistically significant

associations between vicarious racism exposure and child health, reinforcing literature describing associations between perceived racism and poor health outcomes.”).

²⁰ EDUC. L. CTR., *We Need Supportive Spaces that Celebrate Us: Black Girls Speak Out About Public Schools* (2023), <https://www.elc-pa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/FINAL-Supportive-Spaces-for-web.pdf>.

²¹ EDUC. L. CTR., *We Need Supportive Spaces that Celebrate Us: Black Girls Speak Out About Public Schools*, at 11, 17 (2023), <https://www.elc-pa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/FINAL-Supportive-Spaces-for-web.pdf>; see also Leticia Smith-Evans et al., *Unlocking Opportunity for African American Girls: A Call to Action for Educational Equity*, THURGOOD MARSHALL INSTITUTE, at 6, 19-22, (2014), https://www.naacpldf.org/wp-content/uploads/Unlocking-Opportunity-for-African-American-Girls_0_Education.pdf.

²² PA. HUM. REL. COMM’N, C.R.O.W.N. Protections (n.d.), <https://www.pa.gov/content/dam/copapwp-pagov/en/phrc/phrc-outreach/english/hair%20discrimination.pdf> (last accessed on June 26, 2026).

²³ Angela Tapnio et al., *Black Beauty in Education: Media Implications and Future Actions*, 1, 14, 16, UNIV. OF TORONTO LANGUAGE STUDIES UNDERGRADUATE JOURNAL (Winter, 2022), <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/utmlsas/article/view/39220>.

²⁴ See *Natural Hair Discrimination: Frequently Asked Questions*, NAACP LEGAL DEF. & EDUC. FUND, <https://www.naacpldf.org/natural-hair-discrimination/> (last visited June 14, 2023) (detailing the many ways that hair discrimination uniquely targets and criminalizes Black hair).

²⁵ See Rebecca Epstein et al., *Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls’ Childhood*, GEO. L. CTR. POVERTY & INEQ. (2017), at 1, 10-11, 13 <https://genderjusticeandopportunity.georgetown.edu/wpcontent/uploads/2020/06/girlhood-interrupted.pdf> (explaining that dress codes are one example of the ways that policing of Black girls’ bodies harkens back to “paradigms of Black femininity that originated in the South during the period of slavery [and] have persisted into present-day culture”).

²⁶ Under *Village of Arlington Heights v. Metro. Hous. Dev. Corp.* 429 U.S. 252, (1977), where a rule is neutral on its face and disproportionately impacts one race, it may violate the 14th Amendment based on evidence that a discriminatory reason more likely than not motivated the defendant. See e.g., *Mi Familia Vota v. Fontes*, 129 F.4th 691, 724 (9th Cir. 2025). “A plaintiff does not have to prove that the discriminatory purpose was the sole purpose of the challenged action, but only that it was a ‘motivating factor.’” *Arce v. Douglas*, 793 F.3d 968, 977 (9th Cir. 2015) (quoting *Arlington Heights*, 429 U.S. at 266).

²⁷ See PITTSBURGH PUB. SCH., *Student Support & Positive School Culture Guide 2025-2026*, at 21 (2025), https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1765299498/pghschoolsorg/ic8ab40gzk57hj8do22r/PPS-2025-Code_of_Conduct.pdf; see also COATESVILLE AREA SCH. DIST., *Student Code of Conduct 2025-2026* (2025), <https://5il.co/3nuns>.

²⁸ SCH. DIST. PHILA., *Code of Conduct 2026-2027*, at 10 (2026), <https://drive.google.com/file/d/10GzaP-wER9OZ6DUapQ5xWuGWRGmyYQcn/view>. While this particular provision of the dress code is protective of children’s rights, other rules in the same Code of Conduct are problematic. For example, the Code repeatedly uses vague and subjective language, such as prohibiting “clothing that is otherwise likely to cause a disruption,” *id.* at 10, or imposing rules against “disruptive behaviors,” *id.* at 30. Due to individual racial bias, such subjective language is likely to result more Black and Brown students being subject to school discipline.

²⁹ See PITTSBURGH PUB. SCH., *Student Support & Positive School Culture Guide 2025-2026*, at 21 (2025), https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1765299498/pghschoolsorg/ic8ab40gzk57hj8do22r/PPS-2025-Code_of_Conduct.pdf; see also COATESVILLE AREA SCH. DIST., *Student Code of Conduct 2025-2026* (2025), <https://5il.co/3nuns>.

³⁰ PHILA., PA., FAIR PRAC. ORDINANCE: PROT. AGAINST UNLAWFUL DISCRIMINATION § 9-1102(e) (2020) (prohibiting discrimination based on traits commonly associated with race, including hairstyles); see PHILA., PA., FAIR PRAC. ORDINANCE: PROT. AGAINST UNLAWFUL DISCRIMINATION § 9-1102(m.1) (2020) (defining hairstyles to include any hair texture, hair styles [protective or cultural], and other forms of hair presentation); see also PHILA., PA., FAIR PRAC. ORDINANCE: PROT. AGAINST UNLAWFUL DISCRIMINATION § 9-1102(v.1) (2020) (explaining that protective or cultural hairstyles include, but are not limited to, “braids, cornrows, locs, Bantu knots, Afros, and twists”). See generally PITTSBURGH, PA., PITTSBURGH CODE tit. 6, art. V, ch. 651, § 651.04 (uu), (vv) (2021) (amending § 651.04 to include definitions for hairstyle (uu) and protective and cultural hair textures and hairstyles (vv)); PITTSBURGH, PA., PITTSBURGH CODE tit. 6, art. V, ch. 659, § 659.02(a-h) (2021) (amending § 659.02 to establish that employment discrimination extends to discrimination based on “hairstyles and protective and cultural hair textures and hairstyles.”).