

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection.

A Black Student Was Suspended for His Hairstyle. The School Says It Wasn't Discrimination

Source: Cheyanne Mumphrey and Juan Lazono, *Associated Press*, September 18, 2023

MONT BELVIEU, Texas (AP) — A Black high school student in Texas has served more than two weeks of in-school suspensions for wearing twisted dreadlocks to school. When he arrived Monday with the same hairstyle, he was suspended again, his mother said.

Darryl George, a junior at Barbers Hill High School in Mont Belvieu, was initially suspended the same week his state outlawed racial discrimination based on hairstyles. School officials said his dreadlocks fell below his eyebrows and ear lobes and violated the district's dress code.

George, 17, has been suspended since Aug. 31 at the Houston-area school. He was in tears when he was suspended Monday despite his family's arguments that his hair does not violate the dress code, his mother Darresha George said.

"He has to sit on a stool for eight hours in a cubicle," she said. "That's very uncomfortable. Every day he'd come home, he'd say his back hurts because he has to sit on a stool."

The incident recalls debates over hair discrimination in schools and the workplace and is already testing the state's newly enacted CROWN Act, which took effect Sept. 1.

The law, an acronym for "Create a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair," is intended to prohibit race-based hair discrimination and bars employers and schools from penalizing people because of hair texture or protective hairstyles including Afros, braids, dreadlocks, twists or Bantu knots. Texas is one of 24 states that have enacted a version of the CROWN Act.

A federal version of the CROWN Act passed in the House of Representatives last year, but was not successful in the Senate.

For Black people, hairstyles are more than just a fashion statement. Hair has always played an important role across the Black diaspora, said Candice Matthews, national minister of politics for the New Black Panther Nation. (Her group is not affiliated with another New Black Panther organization widely considered antisemitic.)

"Dreadlocks are perceived as a connection to wisdom," Matthews said. "This is not a fad, and this is not about getting attention. Hair is our connection to our soul, our heritage and our connection to God."

In George's family, all the men have dreadlocks, going back generations. To them, the hairstyle has cultural and religious importance, his mother said.

"Our hair is where our strength is, that's our roots," Darresha George said. "He has his ancestors locked into his hair, and he knows that."

Historians say braids and other hairstyles served as methods of communication across African societies, including to identify tribal affiliation or marriage status, and as clues to safety and freedom for those who were captured and enslaved.

After slavery was abolished, Black American hair became political. Although the Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex and national origin, Black people continued to face professional and social stigma for not adopting grooming habits that fit white, European beauty standards and norms.

Government officials are pushing to relax hair codes at schools in Trinidad and Tobago after a public outcry over nearly two dozen students who did not receive their high school diploma because they wore Afros and other hairstyles at graduation.

The issue of race-based hair discrimination in the workplace has long existed alongside concerns in public and private schools. In 2018, a white referee in New Jersey told a Black high school wrestler to cut his dreadlocks or forfeit a match. Viral video of the wrestler having his hair cut with scissors as the crowd watched prompted the referee's suspension and spurred passage of the state's CROWN Act.

Darresha George said her son has been growing his dreadlocks for nearly 10 years and the family never received pushback or complaints until now. When let down, his dreadlocks hang above his shoulders but she said he has not worn his hair down since school started in mid-August. George said she couldn't understand how he violated the dress code when his hair was tied on top of his head.

“I even had a discussion about the CROWN Act with the principal and vice principal,” she said. “They said the act does not cover the length of his hair.” Barbers Hill Independent School District prohibits male students from having hair extending below the eyebrows, ear lobes or top of a t-shirt collar, according to the student handbook.

Additionally, hair on all students must be clean, well-groomed, geometrical and not an unnatural color or variation. The school does not require uniforms.

The school previously clashed with another Black male student over the dress code. Barbers Hill officials told a student he had to cut his dreadlocks to return to school or participate in graduation in 2020, which garnered national attention.

Greg Poole, who has been district superintendent since 2006, said the policy is legal and teaches students to conform as a sacrifice benefitting everyone.

“When you are asked to conform ... and give up something for the betterment of the whole, there is a psychological benefit,” Poole said. “We need more teaching (of) sacrifice.”

Nearby districts have less stringent policies in place. For example, Poole noted others allow students to wear jeans with holes in them, while Barbers Hill does not. He said parents come to the district because of its strict standards and high expectations, which he credits for the district’s academic success.

Attorney Allie Booker, who represents the family, said the school’s argument doesn’t hold up because length is considered part of a hairstyle, which is protected under the law.

“We are going to continue to fight, because you can’t tell someone that hairstyles are protected and then be restrictive. If style is protected, then style is protected,” she said.

Darresha George said she and her son refuse to conform to a standard set by someone who is uncomfortable or ignorant.

“My son is well-groomed, and his hair is not distracting from anyone’s education,” Darresha George said. “This has everything to do with the administration being prejudiced toward Black hairstyles, toward Black culture.”

The district defends its dress code, which says its policies are meant to “teach grooming and hygiene, instill discipline, prevent disruption, avoid safety hazards and teach respect for authority.”

George’s situation has drawn solidarity from young Black people around the nation, who say they have long dealt with discriminatory dress codes and comments from adults about their hair.

“When I was in fifth grade, I had a teacher tell me that my blue hair, my pink hair, was unnatural and too distracting for the other students in the class,” said Victoria Bradley, 19, who lives in Detroit. Michigan passed the CROWN Act into law this year.

Rights Act of 1964 banned discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, and national origin, Black people continue to face professional and social stigma for not adopting grooming habits that fit white European beauty standards and norms. (AP Photo/Jose Juarez)

Bradley, whose hair is braided and currently dyed multiple colors, said she attributes a lot of her hair confidence to her mother, Bernita Bradley, a longtime hair stylist and director of parent voice for the National Parents Union.

Bernita Bradley said her first introduction to the CROWN Act was in 2021, when a biracial, 7-year-old girl in Michigan had her hair cut by a school worker without her parents’ permission. The girl’s father, Jimmy Hoffmeyer, filed a \$1 million lawsuit against the school district, alleging racial discrimination and ethnic intimidation. The lawsuit was settled earlier this year.

“That was modern-day scalping of this Black child,” Bradley said.

This is Darryl George’s first year at Barbers Hill High School. Last year, he went to a school in nearby Baytown, Texas, where he had no problems wearing the same hairstyle, his mother said. Darresha George said they recently moved to the Mont Belvieu area for personal reasons.

After the suspension, “his grades are suffering, which also means he is not able to play football or participate in any extracurriculars,” Darresha George said. “He was on track to graduate early, and now he is falling behind and will have to work double time just so he can still graduate.”

Possible Response Questions

- What are your thoughts about the district’s dress code? Explain.
- Did something in the article surprise you? Discuss.
- Pick a word/line/passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a “move” made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.