



Gov. Pritzker Signs Landmark Legislation To Prevent Hair Discrimination In Schools

August 13 2021 4:42 PM



CHICAGO- Governor JB Pritzker signed Senate Bill 817 into law, prohibiting schools from issuing policies on hairstyles historically associated with race or ethnicity. The legislation addresses injustices in dress code policies and protects Black youth in Illinois facing hair bias in schools.

“Nobody should be made to feel ‘less than’ for how they express themselves – so in Illinois, we’re making it so school uniform and dress code policies in Illinois cannot prohibit or restrict hairstyles historically associated with race, ethnicity, or hair texture,” said Governor JB Pritzker. “Today, we are adding to the progress we’ve already made by allowing students of color to embrace the power of their heritage rather than

compromise their identity. This is yet another way Illinois is making powerful strides in transforming the culture of our schools.”

The bill prohibits school uniform and dress code policies from restricting hairstyles that have been historically associated with race, ethnicity, or hair texture. This may include, but is not limited to, braids, locks, and twists. The bill requires the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) to provide schools with educational resource materials to teach about protective hairstyles. The materials will be developed in consultation with stakeholders and will be made available on ISBE’s website.

“Whether beads, locs, twists or braids, no child should be pushed out of school for wearing natural or textured hairstyles,” said Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton. “As the mother of four daughters who rock their natural hair, I believe all of our children deserve to be safe, supported and free to express their individuality and cultural pride in school. Now in Illinois, this is the case.”

SB 817, also known as the Jett Hawkins Law, is in response to a four-year-old boy in Chicago, Gus “Jett” Hawkins, who was told his braids were in violation of the school dress code. His mother, Ida Nelson, began raising awareness on the negative impacts of stigmatizing children’s hair and the impact it can have on their educational development.

“This is so monumental. I would like to express gratitude for the senator and governor in helping me do the work to move our country from intolerant and repressive systems that directly impacted people of color and have prevented us from being accepted in our true, natural states,” said Ida Nelson, mother of Jett Hawkins. “For us, this is bigger than just hair. Our hair is an extension of who we are as a race and is deeply connected to our cultural identity. This is one huge step towards improving the mental health outcomes for our children, as it ensures that they will be in healthier learning environments. But the work must continue to proactively create safe spaces in schools where children of color are accepted completely. Our hair, our blackness, our existence, deserves to be celebrated vs tolerated.”

“Young people should be free to express who they are and celebrate their heritage through their hairstyles, especially in an educational setting,” said Majority Leader Greg Harris (D-Chicago). “The Jett Hawkins law will remove historical barriers that have disproportionately burdened students of color in Illinois and I am proud to have played a part in this important step forward.”

“We’ve all seen the awful headlines around the country of Black youth being targeted and humiliated because of their hair, and today we are turning the page on that history here in Illinois. Learning at a young age that you have agency over your own life is

empowering for Black youth, and I'm proud of Jett and his mother Ida Nelson for taking a stand on the issue and for becoming activists for Black people to be able to wear their hair naturally and as they see fit in all spaces," said State Senator Mike Simmons (D-Chicago). "Black youth in school settings shouldn't have to be restricted by outdated and often racist dress codes that only serve to humiliate students of color who want to wear their hair in a style that honors their heritage, ancestry, and culture. I want to thank the governor and my colleagues in the General Assembly for standing with me, Jett, and Ida and being on the right side of history today."

This legislation builds on the administration's commitment to ensuring that Illinois' education policies reflect the diversity of the state. Earlier this year, Governor Pritzker enacted the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus' historic reform agenda to dismantle systemic racism in four key pillars: criminal justice reform, education, economic opportunity, and healthcare. Last month, the Governor signed an Executive Order establishing the Office of Equity to help promote diversity, equity, and inclusion across state government.

SB 817 is effective January 1, 2022.