

When School Policies Interfere with our Children's Education

By Shawnta S. Barnes – May 25, 2017



Without fail, every month, there is a report of a child unjustly punished at school because of a school handbook rule or policy that is antiquated or discriminatory. These policies interfere with students' education, make students feel targeted and less part of their school community.

This month, in Massachusetts and Florida, black girls were singled out because of their hair. Twin girls, Deanna and Mya, who attend Mystic Valley Regional Charter School in Malden, Massachusetts have been assigned detention repeatedly, kicked off the track team and banned from prom for wearing box braids. School policy

does not allow hair extensions. Many black women wear extensions as a protective hairstyle or a hairstyle to decrease the amount of time it takes to get ready in the morning. Although both black and white women can wear hair extensions, the majority of women wearing hair extensions are black.

School is a place to obtain an academic foundation. How do hair extensions interfere with this? How did this become a policy in the first place, when it is clear it will mostly affect black girls? Even after the media reported the story and there was an outcry against the policy, the best the school could do is indefinitely suspend the policy, not eliminate it.

Straight-A Florida student Nicole Orr wears her hair natural. Her parents were informed that her natural hairstyle violated school policy and she needed to change the style. To back up their stance, the school referred her parents to a line in the school's handbook that prohibits dread-like hair. When asked by the media why Nicole's hair was considered a problem in the first place, Montverde Academy Headmaster, Dr. Kasey Kesserling stated, "My understanding in talking with the Dean of Students, I think it was more in line with that neat and organized look that we're going for not so much the issue with dreadlocks." Although after meeting with her parents, the headmaster agreed to remove the dread-like line from the handbook, I still find his explanation troubling. He essentially said it wasn't about her hair being in dreads, but about her hair looking messy and unorganized.

After being wronged by a discriminatory policy, to be told your hair in its natural glory is not neat and caused a problem is offensive. I also wonder why at the end of the school year, this is now a problem when it is clear this is how she has worn her hair during year.

Another issue schools face is enforcing the clothing portion of the dress code. At Tri-North Middle School in Bloomington, Indiana, both male and female students peacefully protested language used in their school's dress code policy which says, "No apparel should draw undue attention from other students or faculty members." Female students felt this policy was mostly directed at them. The peaceful protest included female students wearing shirts stating, "Not a distraction" and male students wearing shirts stating, "Not distracted."

This subjective language is problematic. What may garner, “undue attention” or seem distracting to one staff member may not be the case for another staff member. I remember one morning a few years ago when two friends, a black female student and a white female student, came to my room during arrival. They had decided to wear the same pants to school. The black student was told by a teacher her pants were inappropriate and violated the dress code and that she needed to go to the nurse’s office to get another pair of pants to wear. The black student said to me, “That teacher is so petty. She just doesn’t like me. We are wearing the same pair of pants and she said nothing to her even after I pointed it out.” Although Tri-North Middle School students had an opportunity to speak with the administration about the policy, it is not clear if any changes will be made.

School should be a safe haven where students of all walks of life feel accepted, not a place where students are anticipating or blindsided by a punishment that not only interrupts their learning but also makes them feel less connected and part of their school community.

The article, “Racial Disparities in Discipline Greater for Girls Than for Boys” highlights research conducted by Dr. Brea L. Perry, associate professor of sociology in the College of Arts and Sciences at IU Bloomington and Dr. Edward Morris, a sociologist at the University of Kentucky. “Morris and Perry examine referrals to the school office, the gateway to formal school discipline. They find the biggest disparities are for low-level offenses that could lend themselves to subjective responses by teachers and staff: things like disobedience, disruptive behavior, and inappropriate dress. We found black girls are disproportionately vulnerable to getting office referrals for these relatively minor offenses,” Perry said. “This is an area where there’s a lot of discretion on the part of teachers or other staff. They may just give a warning or they may give a referral.”

Policies with subjective language allow teachers and school staff to target students. Yes, I agree that school handbooks are not the most exciting read, but we should read handbooks before an out-of-line policy affects a child’s worth, self-esteem, connection to the school community and interrupts his or her education. Teachers have enough to worry about without wasting time and energy time enforcing or interpreting unnecessary and discriminatory school policies.