



Expert Witness Testimony Regarding Discriminatory Practices Within Tatum School District

Qualifications of the Expert

Dr. Bernice B. Rumala has more than fifteen years of experience in equity, social justice, and public health. She earned a PhD and three masters degrees from Columbia University and served as a Harvard and Fogarty Fulbright Research Fellow. She is Co-Founder of the CROWN Campaign.

Compensation

Dr. Bernice B. Rumala is providing this expert testimony pro bono as part of the CROWN campaign, a campaign founded to end discrimination and injustice including hair discrimination.

Testimony

The early experiences that children have in the educational setting are foundational to how they think about themselves as learners, students, and members of the larger communities around them. Any experiences of discrimination at this vulnerable age can negatively affect personal development and academic trajectories, and limit the emotional benefits of early childhood education. Within the school setting, children start to develop a sense of belonging and how to interact with society by watching and observing how they are treated. The school setting can have a profound impact on the lifelong well-being of children. Therefore, a positive and supportive learning environment is paramount.

Discrimination based on appearance, cultural values, can have harmful and negative ramifications for children's sense of self, social identity and well-being. This can also cause children to internalize these negative views.

The discriminatory practices within the Tatum Independent School District constitutes two forms of discrimination: 1) Personal Discrimination by Individuals (see enclosed crown campaign letter) and 2) Structural Discrimination through institutional practices of hair discrimination (see enclosed crown campaign letter)

Hair Racism

Hair Discrimination is a human rights and civil rights issue: According to the New York City Commission on Human Rights, Anti-Black racism is an invidious and persistent form of discrimination across the nation and in New York City. Anti-Black racism can be explicit and implicit, individual and structural, and it can manifest through entrenched stereotypes and biases, conscious and unconscious. Anti-Black bias also includes discrimination based on characteristics and cultural practices associated with being Black, including prohibitions on natural hair or hairstyles most closely associated with Black people. Bans or restrictions on natural hair or hairstyles associated with Black people are often rooted in white standards of appearance and perpetuate racist stereotypes that Black hairstyles are unprofessional. Such policies exacerbate anti-Black bias in employment, at school, while playing sports, and in other areas of daily living.

Impacts of Racism and Discrimination

Racism impacts the individual as well as the social fabric of society. Specifically, discrimination and racism have profound impacts on physical health, mental health and health behavior. At the physical level, discrimination has been associated with cardiovascular disease, pelvic inflammatory disease, diabetes, yeast infections, respiratory conditions, fibroids and endocrine disorders. In terms of mental health impact discrimination is associated with changes in self-esteem, feelings of depression and anxiety, impacts on self-identity and confidence changes in feelings of well-being and life satisfaction, For health behavior impacts, discrimination is associated with alcohol use and abuse, smoking behavior, negative impact on medication adherence, eating behaviors and attitudes, changes in health habits (e.g. sleep and exercise), missing doctor's appointments (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009) and negative impacts healthcare utilization (Ben J, Cormack D, Harris R, et al, 2017).

Conclusion

The institutional practices regarding the children's natural hair constitutes a discriminatory practice within the Tatum Independent School District that will have additional short and long term negative impacts on the well being of the children, their families, and the community if not urgently addressed.

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