

Should Schools or Employers Be Allowed to Tell People How They Should Wear Their Hair?

Do employers or school administrators have the right to make rules about hairstyles, hair color and facial hair?



A UPS driver making a delivery in Brooklyn. The company has eliminated rules against facial hair. Credit...Benjamin Norman for The New York Times

By Shannon Doyne

Nov. 16, 2020

Students in U.S. high schools can get [free digital access to The New York Times](#) until Sept. 1, 2021.

Does your school have rules about hair? What, if anything, can't you do with the way you wear your hair or color it? What about facial hair, tattoos or piercings? Have you observed anyone break the rules? If so, what happened?

Why do you think school administrators — and employers, too — make rules about grooming? Do you think these rules are helpful? Can they ever be unfair, or even discriminatory?

In “[UPS to Allow Natural Black Hairstyles and Facial Hair](#),” Michael Levenson writes about UPS’s recent change in policy that allows workers to have facial hair and to wear natural Black hairstyles, like Afros and braids:

UPS will allow workers to have facial hair and natural Black hairstyles like Afros and braids as it becomes the latest company to shed policies widely criticized as discriminatory amid nationwide demands for racial justice.

The delivery company, which has more than 525,000 employees worldwide, said it was also eliminating gender-specific rules as part of a broader overhaul of its extensive appearance guidelines, which cover hair, piercings, tattoos and uniform length.

UPS said that Carol Tomé, who in March was [named](#) the first female chief executive in the company’s 113-year history, had “listened to feedback from employees and heard that changes in this area would make them more likely to recommend UPS as an employer.”

“These changes reflect our values and desire to have all UPS employees feel comfortable, genuine and authentic while providing service to our customers and interacting with the general public,” the company said in a statement.

The policy change, previously reported by [The Wall Street Journal](#), comes amid a growing national movement to ban racial discrimination against people based on their natural hairstyle. Many companies, responding to months of protests against systemic racism, have also sought to address discrimination by [overhauling brand names and marketing images](#) and by [diversifying their ranks](#).

California last year became [the first state to ban](#) discrimination based on hairstyle and hair texture by passing the Crown Act — an acronym for Create a Respectful and Open Workplace for Natural Hair. [New York](#) and [New Jersey](#) soon followed with their own versions of the law, and a federal version [passed the U.S. House](#) in September.

In February, the Oscars [highlighted the issue](#) when it named “[Hair Love](#),” a film about an African-American father learning to style his daughter’s natural hair in his wife’s absence, best animated short.

The article also addresses issues Black students have encountered in schools:

The actress Gabrielle Union and the former N.B.A. star Dwyane Wade, the married producers of “Hair Love,” [invited to the ceremony](#) a Black high school student in Texas who had been suspended because of the way he wore his dreadlocks.

The student, DeAndre Arnold, was one of a number of Black people who said they had been singled out in the workplace or in school because of their hair.

In 2018, an 11-year-old Black student at a Roman Catholic school near New Orleans was [asked to leave class](#) because administrators said her braided hair extensions violated school rules, according to a lawyer for her family.

In 2017, Black students at a charter school in Massachusetts complained that they had been subjected to detentions and suspensions because they wore hair extensions, prompting the state’s attorney general to order the school to [stop punishing students](#) for wearing hairstyles that violated the school’s dress code.

The article concludes:

Some legal specialists called UPS's policy change long overdue.

"Though UPS has defended its grooming policy in past civil rights litigation, it appears that UPS may now better appreciate that its natural hair ban maintains centuries old race-based exclusion of Black workers from employment opportunities simply because they wear their hair as it naturally grows," said D. Wendy Greene, a professor at Drexel University's Thomas R. Kline School of Law and an architect of the Crown Act.

"In doing so, UPS's grooming policy sent a clear message to Black workers that they were required to either change or extinguish a fundamental part of their racial, cultural, and sometimes religious identity to be a member of the organization," Professor Greene said.

Angela Onwuachi-Willig, a professor of law and dean of the Boston University School of Law, who has researched hair codes, said the change at UPS "recognizes that allowing people to be their authentic selves is good for business."

Policies that ban natural Black hairstyles are clearly discriminatory, she said, because they deem Black hair to be "inherently unprofessional."

Dominique Apollon, vice president for research at Race Forward, a racial justice advocacy organization, said companies that forbid natural Black hair send the message that "white standards of beauty and white comfort are ultimately the default."

"I'd like to see these sorts of policy changes accompanied by a deeper reckoning with the past, and with a humility that unfortunately doesn't come often in our litigious society," he said. "Companies like UPS need to acknowledge that these sorts of policies have had long-term effects, and will continue to have ramifications or racial outcomes unless more is done."

Students, read the entire article, then tell us:

- Why do you think school administrators and employers make rules about grooming? Do you think these rules are helpful? Can they ever be unfair, or even discriminatory? Why?
- Have you ever been reprimanded at school or work because of your appearance? What rule or rules did you break? What happened?
- Were you surprised that UPS previously had a policy that prohibited employees from wearing natural hairstyles and facial hair? If you worked for UPS, how do you think you would feel about the company's decision to change that policy?
- Dominique Apollon, a vice president for research at a racial justice advocacy organization, said companies that forbid natural Black hair send the message that "white standards of beauty and white comfort are ultimately the default." Do you agree? Why or why not?
- In July 2019, California [banned discrimination based on natural hairstyles](#). Should more states follow suit? The bill says: "In a society in which hair has historically been one of many determining factors of a person's race, and whether they were a second-class citizen, hair today remains a proxy for race. Therefore, hair discrimination targeting hairstyles associated with race is racial discrimination." Do you agree? Explain your answer.

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