



HAIR, IDENTITY AND BIAS

In May 2017, it was reported that a charter school in Massachusetts was disciplining several Black girls, including sisters Deanna and Mya Cook, for wearing their hair in braids with extensions. The students had been given detentions and were prohibited from participating in after-school activities, including sports, for violating the school's Hair/Make-Up policy, a policy that many, including the Massachusetts Attorney General, says discriminates against students of color, especially young Black women. School officials at Mystic Valley Regional Charter School stated that the ban on hair braid extensions is designed to minimize distractions and to keep students' focus on education. Parents, students, advocates and state officials have said that the policy is racially discriminatory and singles out black students for punishment. The school's policy and the two girls' situation drew widespread attention as well as protest, leading a coalition of civil rights organizations to write a [letter](#) of concern and organize a rally outside the school before the school board's emergency meeting about the issue. On May 21, the school's Board of Trustees voted to suspend the hair section of the policy for the remainder of the school year. The Massachusetts Attorney General has an ongoing investigation into the substance and application of the "Hair/Make-up" policy.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to reflect upon the important aspects of their own identity, learn more about the policy and situation at Mystic Valley Regional Charter School and consider their points of view about the school policy.

See these additional ADL resources: *Current Events Classroom* "[Student Dress Codes: What's Fair?](#)," "[Who Am I? Identity Poems](#)" and "[When Perception and Reality Collide: Implicit Bias and Race](#)," [Race Talk: Engaging Young People in Conversations about Race and Racism](#), [Tell Mystic Valley's School Board: "Hair Policy is Discriminatory"](#) and [Letter of Concern to Mystic Valley Charter School](#).

Grade Level: grades 6–8

Time: 45–60 minutes

Common Core Anchor Standards: Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening

Learning Objectives:

- Students will explore what identity is and the aspects of identity that are important to them, especially ones that connect identity with appearance.
- Students will learn about and reflect upon the recent situation where two twin teenage girls were suspended for violating a school policy about hair extensions at Mystic Valley Regional Charter School.
- Students will consider their points of view about the policy at Mystic Valley Regional Charter School and write a speech that reflects their perspective.

Material:

- Drawing supplies (paper, markers, colored pencils or crayons)—be sure to include crayons/markers that reflect a range of skin complexions.

- Signs (created in advance) with the following statements, one statement on each sign: (1) I have been in a similar situation, (2) I disagree with the school's policy, (3) I agree with parts of the school's overall policy, (4) I need more information, (5) I still am not sure what I think.
- [Letter of Concern: Discriminatory Policies at Mystic Valley Regional Charter School](#) (one copy to read aloud)
- [Malden Charter School Criticized For Punishing 2 Black Students Wearing Hair Extensions](#) (one copy for each student)
- [Speech Graphic Organizer](#) (one copy for each student)

Compelling Question: Can schools have policies about appearance that lead to discrimination?

Vocabulary:

Review the following vocabulary words and make sure students know their meanings. (See ADL's "[Glossary of Education Terms](#).")

- ban
- bias
- civil rights
- culture
- detention
- discrimination
- disrespect
- equitably
- hair extensions
- henna
- insensitive
- materialism
- policy
- protest
- socioeconomic

WHAT IS IDENTITY?

1. Ask students: *What is identity?* Define **identity** as the qualities and beliefs that make a particular person or group different from others. Brainstorm different aspects of identity, which may include the following:
 - race
 - ethnicity
 - hobbies, interests, skills
 - heritage
 - community or neighborhood
 - physical appearance
 - personality
 - religion
 - gender
 - gender identity
 - gender expression
 - ability/disability
 - family composition
 - nationality
 - education
 - sexual orientation
 - socioeconomic status
 - clothing style
 - age
 - language(s) spoken
2. Explain to students that for this lesson, we are going to focus on the physical appearance aspect of identity and how that intersects with other aspects of identity. For example, a person's skin color or complexion and hair texture can reflect something about one's race.
3. Have students draw self-portraits that highlight aspects of their physical appearance that are important to them and/or aspects that reflect a core part of their identity. If needed, brainstorm aspects of physical appearance prior to students' drawing such as: hair color, texture, style and length; skin color and complexion; height and body shape; eye color and shape; eyebrows and eyelashes; nose shape, and

other distinguishing characteristics (birthmark, freckles). They can also include other important aspects of physical appearance such as clothes, jewelry, piercings, etc.

NOTE: As an alternative for students who would rather not draw, you can instruct students to describe in writing the aspects of their physical appearance that are important to them. Or, if you think most/all students would rather write than draw, you can instruct the whole class to write.

4. Have students turn and talk with a person sitting near them, sharing their drawings (or writing) with a partner, pointing out the most important aspects of their appearance.
5. Engage students in a whole class discussion using the following questions:
 - What did you notice about what was important about your physical appearance? What did you notice was important to others?
 - What, if anything, do physical characteristics have to do with other aspects of our identity (e.g. race, religion, gender, gender expression, ability, etc.)?
 - What aspects of our appearance are we born with and what aspects do we choose? Does that have an impact on how we feel about that physical characteristic?
 - Have you or anyone you know ever experienced bullying, bias or discrimination based on an aspect of your appearance?
 - If someone told you that you couldn't have or display some aspect of your physical appearance that was important to you, how would you feel?

INFORMATION SHARING

1. Ask students: *Have you heard about a recent case at a Massachusetts school where young Black women were punished for wearing their hair in braids with extensions?*
2. Share the following information with students:
 - In May 2017, it was reported that a charter school in Massachusetts was disciplining several Black girls, including sisters Deanna and Mya Cook, for wearing their hair in braids with extensions in violation of the school's Hair/Make-Up policy, a policy that many say discriminates against students of color, especially Black women. The School officials at Mystic Valley Regional Charter School stated that the ban on hair braid extensions is designed to minimize evidence of economic inequality amongst its students. They said that the hair extension ban is in keeping with the school's desire to create an environment "that celebrates all that our students have in common and minimizes material differences and distractions."
 - Parents, students, advocates and state officials have said that the policy is racially discriminatory, singles out black students for punishment, and demonstrates a lack of cultural sensitivity in the school. The Hair/Make-Up Policy also prohibits "hair more than two inches in thickness or height," which Massachusetts Attorney General Maura Healey's office said is a reference to "Afros" and "fades" most likely to be worn by black students. In addition, a Muslim student was forced to remove henna from her hands during Eid as a result of the school's discriminatory hair and makeup policy.
 - The school's policy and the two girls' situation drew widespread attention as well as protest, leading a coalition of civil rights organizations including the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), NAACP, ACLU, the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Economic Justice, NAACP Legal Defense Fund, National Women's Law Center, and other groups to write a letter of concern and organize a rally

outside the school before an emergency school board meeting about the issue. In addition, Attorney General Healey sent a [letter](#) to the principal demanding they immediately end the policy.

- If time permits, read aloud the [Letter of Concern: Discriminatory Policies at Mystic Valley Regional Charter School](#).
 - On May 21 after meeting privately for more than two hours, the Mystic Valley Regional Charter School Board of Trustees voted to suspend the hair section of the policy. They suspended this part of the policy for only the remainder of the school year in response to the Attorney General's demand [letter](#). After the meeting, they issued a [letter](#) continuing to defend the policy. The Attorney General's investigation is ongoing.
3. Engage students in a brief discussion by asking:
- What is happening here?
 - What did you learn about this situation that you didn't know before?
 - What are your thoughts and feelings?
 - What more do you want to know?
 - Why did the civil rights organizations state that the policy "discriminates against students of color?"
 - How did the media and civil rights organizations have an impact on the outcome?

READING ACTIVITY

1. Distribute a copy of the article [Malden Charter School Criticized For Punishing 2 Black Students Wearing Hair Extensions](#) to each student and give students ten minutes to silently read the article. You may also choose to read the article aloud.
2. After reading, engage students in a class discussion by asking:
 - What did you learn that you didn't know before?
 - What surprised you?
 - What was the school's position on hair braid extensions and why do they have this policy?
 - What is the position of Colleen Cook, the students' mom and why does she have this point of view?
 - What does this controversy have to do with identity? To what extent do you think it unfairly targets Black girls?
 - Why is the school being accused of discriminating against these students?

STAND UNDER...

1. Explain to students that there are signs around the room with the following statements:
 - (1) I have been in a similar situation.
 - (2) I disagree with the school's policy.
 - (3) I agree with parts of the school's overall policy.
 - (4) I need more information.

(5) I still am not sure what I think.

Read the five statements aloud and instruct students to consider how they feel about the issue you are discussing and find the statement that best matches their thoughts and feelings about it right now. Allow students to take a few minutes to consider where to stand and then have them stand under/next to the sign.

2. When students are situated in their spots, have them talk with each other in their small groups for 5–10 minutes, sharing their thoughts and feelings about the controversy and why they decided to stand where they are standing. If only one student is standing under one of the signs, they can choose to go somewhere else for the discussion or reflect upon the questions by themselves. You can give students the following questions to discuss, if needed:
 - Why did you decide to stand here?
 - What are your thoughts and feelings on the topic?
 - What more do you want to know?
3. Have students come back to the large group and ask one representative of each group to summarize their small group's discussion. Then ask the whole class: *Upon reflection, would you still stand in the same place as you did or would you move? Why or why not?*

WRITING ACTIVITY: SPEECHES

1. Explain to students that they are going to do a writing activity that brings together what they have learned so far about the school's policy on hair braid extensions. Explain that they are going to write speeches about the controversy.
2. In order to get students thinking about speech writing, ask them: *When you listen to a good speech, what makes it great? What makes it inspirational?* Record on the board/smart board the things they say and include these if they are not stated:
 - Engaging facial expression
 - Warm and expressive tone of voice
 - Emphasis on some words and phrases (slowing down and/or speeding up, raising or lowering voice volume)
 - Expressive hand and body motions
 - Being relaxed
 - Using humor and/or storytelling
 - Visual aids
 - Being authentic
 - Using eye contact and movement in different parts of the room
3. Give students fifteen minutes or more (time permitting) to begin working on their speech, using the [Speech Graphic Organizer](#) as a first step. Have students complete the first draft of their speech for homework. If time permits, have students conference with each other to improve their speeches and practice delivering their speeches with a partner. Assign students the completion of the speech for homework over the next day or days.

4. When the speeches are completed, have students deliver them as a class presentation. Consider recording them and making them available on your school or class website.

CLOSING

Have students share something new they learned today.

ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

- [“Black girls at Mass. school win freedom to wear hair braid extensions”](#) (*The Washington Post*, May 22, 2017)
- [“Black Women Speak About Natural Hair Bias in the Workplace”](#) (*Teen Vogue*, February 24, 2017)
- [“Braids Go Against This Charter School’s Dress Code”](#) (*Ebony*, May 17, 2017)
- [“Judge Rules Banning Dreadlocks In The Workplace Is Not Discrimination”](#) (*Essence*, September 20, 2016)
- [Let Her Learn: Join the Fight to Stop School Pushout](#) (National Women’s Law Center)
- [“Mass. school punishes twins for hair braid extensions. Their parents say it’s racial discrimination”](#) (*The Washington Post*, May 15, 2017)
- [“The Punishment of Deanna and Mya Cook is Much Bigger Than Braids”](#) (NBC News, May 22, 2017)
- [“War on Black Hair: Rules Banning Girls with Braids are Biased, Massachusetts AG Tells Malden Charter School”](#) (*Newsweek*, May 20, 2017)

COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS

Content Area/Standard
Reading
Standard 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
Writing
Standard 1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
Standard 4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.
Speaking and Listening
Standard 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on each others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
Standard 4: Present information, findings and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.



May 22, 2017

Mr. Alex Dan
Interim School Director
Mystic Valley Charter School
4 Laurel Street
Malden, MA 02148

Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education
75 Pleasant Street
Malden, MA 02148-4906

RE: Discriminatory Policies at Mystic Valley Regional Charter School

Dear Mr. Dan and Members of the Massachusetts Board of Education:

Below please find our letter prepared for the Mystic Valley Regional Charter School Board in advance of yesterday's emergency meeting. While we understand that the Board has suspended its hair policy for the remainder of the school year, the concerns we have remain, as do the remedies we seek for the Cook children and all Black students attending the school.

Sincerely,

American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts
Anti-Defamation League
Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Economic Justice
Mystic Valley Branch of the NAACP
NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.
National Women's Law Center
(The letter's authoring organizations)

Contact: Matt Cregor, Education Project Director
Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Economic Justice
617-988-0609, mcregor@lawyerscom.org



Updated May 22, 2017

Mr. Alex Dan
Interim School Director
Mystic Valley Charter School
4 Laurel Street
Malden, MA 02148

Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education
75 Pleasant Street
Malden, MA 02148-4906

RE: Discriminatory Policies at Mystic Valley Regional Charter School

We, the undersigned civil rights and education organizations, write to express our strong concern about Mystic Valley Regional Charter School's Hair/Make-Up policy and the school's recent and historical enforcement of it. We were deeply disturbed to learn that the school is disciplining several Black girls, including sisters Deanna and Mya Cook, for wearing their hair in braids with extensions.¹ We were equally disturbed to learn that the school forced a Muslim student to remove henna from her hands during Eid, despite the fact that it was applied in adherence with religious tradition. Mystic Valley's actions in each of these instances suggest that its Hair/Make-Up policy and its enforcement of it are unlawful and discriminatory. Apparently, to Mystic Valley, braids with extensions are "drastic," "unnatural" and/or "distracting" and the religiously motivated practice of applying henna to one's hands runs afoul of the rule prohibiting students from "writ[ing] or draw[ing] on themselves." Mystic Valley's policy, both as written and as applied, discriminates against students of color and burdens religious expression. It must be changed.

Mystic Valley's student handbook includes a number of unjustifiable restrictions on student dress and grooming. Among these is a general ban on hair extensions, pursuant to which Deanna and Mya were disciplined, despite the widespread and well-known use of hair extensions in braids worn by Black women and girls and a lack of pedagogical basis for the policy. As a result of this discriminatory policy, the Cook girls have been given numerous detentions and are currently not allowed to participate in after-school activities, including sports – which may affect their eligibility

for both college and scholarships – and the Prom. Moreover, some of their Black peers have been suspended for failing to adhere to this policy.

Mystic Valley’s justifications for its application of this policy to the Cook sisters, and others, are deeply flawed. The school claimed that such policies are necessary to reduce evidence of economic inequality amongst its students, citing the costs of extensions. However, the assumption that wearing braids with extensions constitutes a marker of wealth is erroneous for two reasons: (1) braids with extensions cost less than other hair styles that are permitted under the policy – including relaxed hair – and (2) the cost of the extensions and braids themselves can range in price from hundreds of dollars to next to nothing. Meanwhile, the school imposes significant costs for participation in athletic activities, which may limit participation in school-related activities to those who can pay to play. In addition, it is clear that the policy itself has been inconsistently enforced, raising more questions as to the discriminatory nature of Mystic Valley’s actions.

Most disturbingly, Mystic Valley claims hairstyles like Deanna and Mya’s are “distracting.” Let us be clear: braids and hair extensions are not distractions; rather, they are basic forms of grooming and expression adorned primarily by Black women and have deep historical and cultural roots. In addition, as Mystic Valley employs at most one Black educator on its staff of 160,ⁱⁱ the fact that Mystic Valley considers braids with extensions distracting further demonstrates a severe lack of cultural sensitivity in the school.

We know that Deanna and Mya are not the only Black students targeted by Mystic Valley’s discriminatory practices. Data collected by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education reveal that Black students at Mystic Valley are nearly three times more likely to be suspended than white students, and for longer periods of time.ⁱⁱⁱ The disparities are even more dramatic for Black girls at Mystic Valley: according to the most recent data from the U.S. Department of Education, every girl suspended by the school in the 2013-14 school year was Black.^{iv}

Mystic Valley’s policies and practices clearly violate the civil rights laws that prohibit discrimination against students based on race and sex, including Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments.^v The policies under which Deanna and Mya were punished discriminate against Black girls by directly targeting a culturally traditional hairstyle and grooming choice. On top of its prohibition on hair extensions, the Mystic Valley code also states that “hair more than 2 inch [sic] in thickness or height is not allowed.”^{vi} Under such a policy, most white students who wear their hair naturally would face no penalty, while most Black students and students of other ethnicities in which tightly curled hair is common could face daily discipline for doing the same. The policy deploys harmful stereotypes about what a “good student” looks like and sends the message to children of color that only students who adhere to a narrow, Eurocentric aesthetic are acceptable. Further, a quick review of the school’s yearbooks shows that white girls in the school wear extensions and/or dye their hair in violation of the Hair/Make-Up policy, suggesting the school’s grooming policy is disproportionately applied to Black girls.

We call upon Mystic Valley to amend their school policies to be inclusive of all students and prioritize student learning over student appearance. To remedy the harm its policies have already caused, and to prevent future discrimination, Mystic Valley must retract the current disciplinary infractions imposed because of violations of the “Hair/Make-Up” policy, remove all mention of relevant disciplinary action in students’ records, and issue an apology to all affected students, including the Cook sisters. Mystic Valley must also agree to stop punishing students for wearing extensions in their braids, change its hair policies to permit all appearances that do not pose a threat to health, safety, or cleanliness, and institute mandatory cultural competence and anti-discrimination training for all staff. To the extent that Mystic Valley is unwilling to make these necessary reforms, we call upon the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, which authorized Mystic Valley’s charter, to use the full extent of its oversight authority to remedy this matter and ensure that similar policies and practices are not employed by other schools under its purview.

Creating safe, inclusive schools requires educators, students, and the communities to understand what happens when bias goes unchecked. If Mystic Valley is truly interested in providing an opportunity for a world class education, they should focus on the development of an inclusive culture and respectful school climate, and not spend any more of their students’ time splitting hairs.

Sincerely,

Advancement Project
African American Juvenile Justice Project
Alliance for Educational Justice
American Association of University Women of Massachusetts (AAUW-MA)
American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts
Anti-Defamation League
Center for Collaborative Education
Center for Law and Education
Children’s Law Center of Massachusetts
Children’s Rights Clinic at Southwestern Law
Citizens for Juvenile Justice
Civil Rights Project at UCLA
Clearinghouse on Women's Issues
Education Law Center
The Evoluer House
FECT
Futures Without Violence
Girls, Inc.
Institute for Compassion in Justice
Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Economic Justice
Maryland Multicultural Coalition

Massachusetts Advocates for Children
Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law & Justice
Massachusetts Jobs with Justice
Massachusetts Women of Color Coalition
Mental Health Legal Advisors Committee
Mystic Valley Branch of the NAACP
NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.
National Alliance for Partnership in Equity (NAPE)
National Organization for Women
National Women's Law Center
National Women's Political Caucus
New England Regional Conference of the NAACP (NEAC)
Power of Self Education (POSE) Inc.
Public Counsel
Public Justice
Schott Foundation for Public Education
Texas Appleseed
Victim Rights Law Center
Youth On Board
(Updated to reflect additional signatures since the Mystic
Valley Regional Charter School Board's meeting on
Sunday, May 21, 2017)

ⁱ Kay Lazar, *Black Malden Charter Students Punished for Braided Hair Extensions*, Boston Globe (May 12, 2017) at <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2017/05/11/black-students-malden-school-who-wear-braids-face-punishment-parents-say/stWDIBSCJhw1zocUWR1QMP/story.html>

ⁱⁱ While Mystic Valley Charter School reported employing only one Black educator to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education this school year, the families are unaware of any Black educators at Mystic Valley Charter School. See, Mass. Dep't of Elementary and Secondary Education, Staffing Data by Race, Ethnicity, Gender by Full-time Equivalents (2016-17), at:

<http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/teacher.aspx?orgcode=04700105&orgtypecode=6&leftNavId=817&>

ⁱⁱⁱ See, Mass. Dep't. of Elem. and Second. Educ., *2015-16 Student Discipline Data Report* (2016), at <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/ssdr/default.aspx?orgcode=04700000&orgtypecode=5&leftNavId=12565&TYPE=DISRICT&fycode=2016>; Mass. Dep't. of Elem. and Second. Educ., *2015-16 Student Discipline Days Missed Report* (2016), at

http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/ssdr/ssdr_days_missed_detail.aspx?orgcode=04700000&orgtypecode=5&=04700000&

^{iv} U.S. Dep't. of Educ., *2013-14 Civil Rights Data Collection* (2016) at <http://ocrdata.ed.gov/>.

^v These laws apply to all schools that receive federal funding, including charter schools. Acknowledging that students may face discrimination on the basis of the intersection of their sex and race, federal courts and the U.S. Department of Education have also recognized joint claims under Title IX and Title VI. Prohibited forms of discrimination include disciplinary policies that target students based on their sex and/or race as well as facially neutral policies that are disproportionately applied to students on the same bases. Research shows that discrimination is often rooted in impermissible sex- and race-based stereotypes that have no place in classrooms.

^{vi} Mystic Valley Regional Charter School, *Parent/Student Handbook 17* (2017), at: <http://www.mvracs.com/pdf/2016-2017%20Student%20Parent%20Handbook.pdf>.

SPEECH GRAPHIC ORGANIZER

INTRODUCTION

Opening line to grab your audience

State your main point or thesis

What is your goal?

MAIN POINTS

What is the issue?

What is your stance on the issue and why?

What problem are you trying to solve?

What facts, quotes, statistics or other information can you provide to convince your audience?

CONCLUSION

Summarize your main points

Review central ideas of your position

Call to Action: What do you want people to do and what do they need to do it?