

March 3, 2026

Attorney General Andrea Joy Campbell  
Commonwealth of Massachusetts  
Office of the Attorney General  
One Ashburton Place  
Boston, MA 02108

**RE: Addressing the Rise in Bullying/Harassment in School Hockey and Other Athletics**

Dear Attorney General Campbell,

Lawyers for Civil Rights (“LCR”) is grateful for your continued attention and willingness to communicate about severe and ongoing identity-based bullying and harassment of schoolchildren throughout the Commonwealth. Unfortunately, these heinous incidents persist, and we respectfully urge your office to take more direct and systemic action. With the roll-back of civil rights enforcement at the federal level, your office—and organizations like LCR—are all that remain to protect and safeguard children across the Commonwealth.

Identity-based bullying is particularly prevalent in school athletics, where team hierarchies, locker room culture, and competitive dynamics intensify harm and suppress reporting. We are currently seeing a surge of LGBTQ-related harassment in high school sports teams, with school districts and the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association (“MIAA”) increasingly unwilling to adequately intervene when discriminatory incidents arise.

In recent weeks, we have observed a noticeable spike, particularly in reports of bullying and harassment within school-affiliated hockey programs, especially conduct that targets students who are gay or perceived to be gay. These incidents frequently involve homophobic slurs, locker room intimidation, team-based hazing, and harassment connected to hockey teams. We are concerned that this rise is a backlash to the growing visibility and popularity of the television series *Heated Rivalry*—and the resulting attention, commentary, and social media discourse it has generated around gay hockey players.

**Scope of the Problem**

Identity-based bullying in schools is prevalent and, by many measures, on the rise in the Commonwealth and nationwide. Just within the past year, LCR has represented students experiencing identity-based harassment ranging from verbal abuse to physical violence. And in all cases, the school districts failed to protect the students’ rights. As the *Boston Globe* has correctly noted, this trend is “nothing short of horrifying.”

Of the education-related complaints LCR receives, identity-based incidents at sporting events are particularly disturbing and problematic. LCR has supported families whose student-athlete

children were subject to extreme racial bullying, including a high school athletics association’s discriminatory hair policies; a Black male track athlete called a racial slur during a track meet; and a Black male athlete spat on during a state tournament basketball game. These incidents demonstrate a troubling pattern: bias is expressed openly and addressed inadequately at athletic events.

As *Heated Rivalry* grows in popularity—and as it fuels conversation about hockey culture and what happens on and off the ice—we are increasingly concerned about the backlash we are now seeing in school-affiliated hockey environments across the Commonwealth.

In recent weeks, LCR has received an alarming number of complaints from student-athletes at public high schools reporting severe homophobic comments and conduct by hockey coaches and peers. These reports include direct statements from coaches to players that explicitly police gender expression and use graphic, sexualized language, including:

- admonitions not to “play like they are gay”; and
- references to “dick in their ass” in the context of playing defense.

LCR is also receiving reports that students who are gay—or perceived as gay—are being intentionally benched during games, denied meaningful playing time without legitimate athletic justification, and otherwise isolated from team events and bonding activities. The concrete harm includes stigma, exclusion, and a hostile environment within a school-sponsored program—often with students fearing retaliation if they report what is happening, given the power coaches and team leadership hold over playing time, team standing, and future opportunities.

LCR urges the Attorney General’s Office to take immediate steps to combat identity-based bullying, harassment, and exclusion in school sports—particularly within hockey programs where locker room culture can intensify harm. Intervention is urgent now to ensure that school athletics remain spaces where young people can build self-esteem, learn fair play, and participate fully and safely, without being targeted for who they are or who others perceive them to be.

### **Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association**

LCR also urges the Attorney General’s Office to ensure that MIAA does not abdicate its responsibility to investigate, remedy, and prevent identity-based harassment in school sports.

MIAA provides the overarching management of the interscholastic sports scene in Massachusetts, “wield[ing] enormous power over the lives of student-athletes.” Pursuant to G.L. c. 71, § 47, local school committees delegate to MIAA the authority to govern and regulate school sports. In turn, “MIAA’s executive body, called the Board of Control . . . is responsible for enforcement (including interpretation) of the rules, with power to impose a variety of sanctions upon offending member schools, ranging from warning or censure to a year’s suspension from interscholastic play.” *Attorney Gen. v. Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Ass’n, Inc.*, 378 Mass. 342, 346 (1979). Among its duties, MIAA routinely adjudicates whether

schools, programs, coaches, and students have committed violations of its Rules regarding sportsmanship and eligibility to participate. *See, e.g.*, MIAA Rules 87, 89.

Nevertheless, MIAA maintains that it lacks the authority to investigate and remedy identity-based incidents that occur during MIAA events. This is discriminatory. Given that MIAA routinely enforces rules such as the length and type of penalties for fighting during a hockey game, racist or homophobic actions and comments must also justify penalties when they occur. MIAA undoubtedly has the authority and institutional structures to adjudicate and punish discriminatory conduct by coaches, team members, and fans, but chooses not to exercise them. This position undermines civil rights protections in Massachusetts. LCR is in active litigation against MIAA to help address identity-based incidents at sports events, and we urge the Attorney General's Office to also make clear that MIAA's policy of turning a blind eye to discriminatory treatment is unacceptable.

## **Conclusion**

For all of these reasons, LCR urges the Attorney General's Office to take immediate steps to:

- Investigate patterns of anti-LGBTQ harassment in school hockey programs;
- Clarify schools' obligations under state civil rights laws to investigate, remedy, and prevent identity-based harassment;
- Ensure meaningful enforcement mechanisms within the MIAA and other athletic governing structures; and
- Hold institutions accountable when discriminatory conduct occurs.

We are available to provide additional information and would welcome the opportunity to meet with your office at your earliest convenience to discuss these matters.

Sincerely,

Sophia Hall, Esq.

Oren Sellstrom, Esq.

Jillian Lenson, Esq.

Iván Espinoza-Madrugal, Esq.

cc: Department of Elementary and Secondary Education