

Do Uniforms Make Schools Better?

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For the past decade, schools, parents, and students have clashed over the issue of regulating student attire. In 2007, cases involving an anti-Bush T-shirt in Vermont, an anti-gay T-shirt in San Diego and Tigger socks in Napa, California, made their way through the courts, causing many to wonder whether this debate will ever be resolved.

Meanwhile, researchers are divided over how much of an impact - if any - dress policies have upon student learning. A 2004 book makes the case that uniforms do not improve school safety or academic discipline. A 2005 study, on the other hand, indicates that in some Ohio high schools uniforms may have improved graduation and attendance rates, although no improvements were observed in academic performance.

Why do some public schools have uniforms?

In the 1980s, public schools were often compared unfavorably to Catholic schools. Noting the perceived benefit that uniforms conferred upon Catholic schools, some public schools decided to adopt a school uniform policy.

President Clinton provided momentum to the school uniform movement when he said in his 1996 State of the Union speech, "If it means teenagers will stop killing each other over designer jackets, then our public schools should be able to require their students to wear school uniforms."

The pros and cons of school uniforms

According to proponents, school uniforms:

- Help prevent gangs from forming on campus
- Encourage discipline
- Help students resist peer pressure to buy trendy clothes
- Help identify intruders in the school
- Diminish economic and social barriers between students
- Increase a sense of belonging and school pride
- Improve attendance

Opponents contend that school uniforms:

- Violate a student's right to freedom of expression

- Are simply a Band-Aid on the issue of school violence
- Make students a target for bullies from other schools
- Are a financial burden for poor families
- Are an unfair additional expense for parents who pay taxes for a free public education
- Are difficult to enforce in public schools

Uniforms vs. dress codes

Schools and districts vary widely in how closely they adhere to the concept of uniformity.

What's a dress code?

Generally, dress codes are much less restrictive than uniform policies. Sometimes, however, dress codes are nearly as strict, as in the case of a middle school in Napa, California. This particular school's dress code required students to wear solid colors and banned images or logos on clothes. When a student was sent to detention for wearing socks adorned with the image of Winnie-the-Pooh's friend Tigger, the girl's family sued the school district for violating her freedom of speech. In August of 2007, the district announced it would relax its dress code - for the time being - to allow images and fabrics other than solid colors. The district superintendent, while admitting that banning images on clothes raises concerns about the restriction of political and religious speech, announced his intention to move soon toward implementing uniforms in the district.

Uniforms are certainly easier for administrators to enforce than dress codes. Consider two recent examples of students challenging dress codes through the courts.

In June of 2007, the United States Supreme Court upheld a lower court's decision affirming a Vermont student's right to wear a T-shirt depicting President Bush surrounded by drug and alcohol images. The school had suspended the student, not for the anti-Bush political statement, but for violating a dress code that prohibits drug and alcohol images. The courts, however, disagreed with the school and found that, because the images referred to Bush's alleged past use of cocaine and alcohol, they were protected as free political expression.

In March of 2007, the Supreme Court "vacated" or set aside the decision of a lower court upholding a San Diego high school's suspension of a student for wearing an anti-gay T-shirt. The school argued that the T-shirt was hateful and inflammatory. The Supreme Court's action essentially struck down the school's argument and upheld the student's right to free speech.

In both of these cases, the schools' attempts to protect students from drug and alcohol images or hateful speech were reversed in favor of free speech. To clarify the matter somewhat, the Supreme Court ruled in June of 2007 in favor of a school in Alaska that had suspended a student for displaying a banner

reading "Bong Hits 4 Jesus." The court ruled that the reference to drugs in this case had no political message and could indeed be seen as advocating drug use.

What's a uniform?

One school might require white button-down shirts and ties for boys, pleated skirts for girls and blazers adorned with the school logo for all. Another school may simply require that all shirts have collars.

In Toledo, Ohio, elementary school students have a limited palette of colors that they can wear: white, light blue, dark blue or yellow on the top half and dark blue, navy, khaki or tan on the bottom half.

Toledo girls are allowed a fairly wide range of dress items, however: blouses, polo shirts with collars, turtlenecks, skirts, jumpers, slacks, and knee-length shorts and skirts. Boys have almost as many choices: dress shirts, turtlenecks, polo or button-down shirts, pants or knee-length shorts.

When Toledo students reach junior high, they are treated to one more color choice: maroon.

What research says about school uniforms

Virginia Draa, assistant professor at Youngstown State University, reviewed attendance, graduation and proficiency pass rates at 64 public high schools in Ohio. Her final analysis surprised her: "I really went into this thinking uniforms don't make a difference, but I came away seeing that they do. At least at these schools, they do. I was absolutely floored."

Draa's study concluded that those schools with uniform policies improved in attendance, graduation and suspension rates. She was unable to connect uniforms with academic improvement because of such complicating factors as changing instructional methods and curriculum.

University of Missouri assistant professor, David Brunsma reached a different conclusion. In his 2004 book, *The School Uniform Movement and What It Tells Us About American Education: A Symbolic Crusade*, Brunsma reviewed past studies on the effect of uniforms on academic performance. He also conducted his own analysis of two enormous databases, the 1988 National Educational Longitudinal Study and the 1998 Early Childhood Longitudinal Study. Brunsma concluded that there is no positive correlation between uniforms and school safety or academic achievement.

Meanwhile, the movement toward uniforms in public schools has spread to about a quarter of all elementary schools. Experts say that the number of middle and high schools with uniforms is about half the number of elementary schools. If uniforms are intended to curb school violence and improve academics, why are they not more prevalent in middle and high schools, where these goals are just as important as in elementary schools? Because, says Brunsma, "It's desperately much more difficult to implement uniforms in high schools, and even middle schools, for student resistance is much, much

higher. In fact, most of the litigation resulting from uniforms has been located at levels of K-12 that are higher than elementary schools. Of course, this uniform debate is also one regarding whether children have rights, too!"

It's a big issue

A new trend is the mounting pressure to establish dress codes for teachers. Apparently the same casual mind-set toward revealing outfits is cropping up in the ranks of our teachers.

The debate over uniforms in public schools encompasses many larger issues than simply what children should wear to school. It touches on issues of school improvement, freedom of expression, and the "culture wars." It's no wonder the debate rages on.