

School Uniforms: The Good, the Bad, and the Plaid

By Danielle Dreilinger

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Plaid or khaki, polos or button-downs, bow-ties or long ties: The look may vary, but the back-to-school clothes shopping experience in the New Orleans area is almost, shall we say, uniform.

Many private schools, especially Catholic campuses, have required students to wear identical clothing longer than anyone remembers. Most public schools caught on in the 1990s.

That makes them an anomaly. Nationally, less than 19 percent of public schools required uniforms in 2009-10, the most recent academic year for which statistics are available.

It also can make for some confusion. Families wonder how many special shirts their child really needs, and why a uniform size 6X bears so little resemblance to an ordinary 6X.

But even if the sizing varies, proponents agree on the value of requiring uniforms. Identical clothing unites the school community, reduces distractions and creates a professional environment free from competition and peer judgment. It promotes discipline, ends the fashion show, helps identify outsiders and saves parents money.

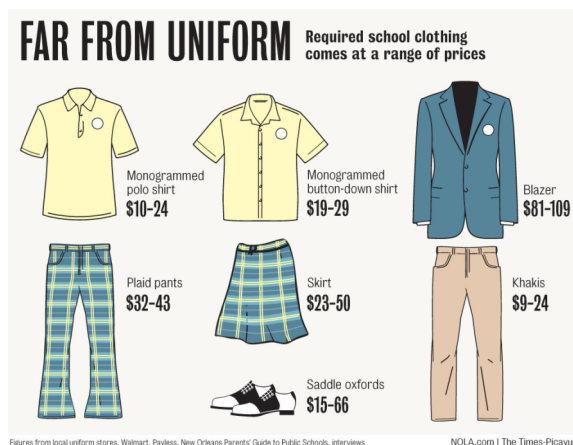
"I believe if you look good, you feel good. And first impressions are always lasting impressions," said Sivi Domingo, co-leader of Arthur Ashe Charter School in Gentilly.

Politics and Price

With private schools that require uniforms, parents are accustomed to paying tuition and know what they're getting into. It can be expensive. The smallest sizes of the mandatory blazer for St. Katharine Drexel Preparatory High in Uptown cost \$87 at Schumacher's in Metairie. Some schools also mandate school-monogrammed socks or specific shoes such as saddle Oxfords.

Is that pricey? "Oh, it is! Very much. Very, very much," said Debra LeBeau, who sends her daughter to St. Katharine, the new name of Xavier Prep. "I'm not OK with it. But what are you going to do?" At least the material is good and the clothes last, she said.

Low-income parents who send their kids to private schools through the state-funded voucher program are responsible for the cost of the uniform.



At public schools, plainness and affordability are more the norm. In St. Tammany and Jefferson parishes, parents at each school choose the look, and most go for school-color polo or Oxford shirts and khaki pants. Often there's no embroidered or screen-printed school crest adding expense to the shirt. Some New Orleans public schools are plain as well. Most schools that are part of the KIPP charter network require a logo-embroidered polo costing \$10 to \$15 per shirt, plus ordinary khakis available at any clothing store.

But some schools show a little more flair: In the late 1990s, Oretha C. Haley Elementary (now closed) was among the schools where the uniform incorporated kente cloth. Warren Easton High students went for a custom purple-and-yellow plaid in 1989.

Today, some schools stand out even more. Miller-McCoy Academy goes full-on prep school with blazers, vests and ties. Lycée Français puts prekindergarten girls in blue gingham smocks with red piping.

"A lot of other schools use khaki, but that's not the theme of the school," said Paige Saleun, founding board member of Lycée. She was overruled on one of her ideas: red berets for student field trips.

All this style comes at a cost, however, especially beyond children's sizes. According to the Schiro's website, the adorable Lycée Français smock costs \$45. In the New Orleans Parents' Guide, McDonogh 35, Carver and Warren Easton high schools and Alice Harte elementary school estimate the cost for a single uniform at more than \$70.

Oxford shirts might look dressier than polos, but they're also more expensive. A Landry-Walker High button-down runs \$27 at Step N Style in Algiers. Teen-sized plaid skirts for several schools cost \$40 at the same store.

Plaid is "not the most cost-effective" for uniform companies either, said Ricky Sadhwani, co-owner of Logo Express in Gentilly. They must order it six months in advance, and often for a single school because of the specific design.

Nicole Marshall knows the hit that plaid takes on the pocketbook. She used to send her kids to Samuel J. Green Charter. When the school community voted to "spruce up" from polo shirts and plain pants to button-down shirts, plaid bottoms and plaid ties, she could buy only one uniform per child. "I washed clothes every night," she said.

Kevin Buckel disapproves of moves like Green's. His Adopt-a-Family charity raises money for school uniforms, mostly for New Orleans public school students. With the \$50 he allots per recipient, he hopes to buy two shirts, one or two pairs of pants and a belt. But now, even at a wholesale rate, "Some schools you can only get one uniform because they're so expensive," Buckel said.

"I ask the counselors why do these schools choose such expensive uniforms." They tell him it starts with the charter board.

Sadhwani, in fact, agrees: "In my opinion a lot of schools go over the top."

Help for Parents

"We stress to schools, 'You have to think about the parents,'" Sadhwani said. If they want a blazer, he suggests a vest and tie instead. "We try to give them the prep school look at a regular price, I guess, a decent price."

There are efforts to make up for the cost. Adopt-a-Family's 2012 school uniform drive raised \$33,800 for 675 needy students. The counseling group Communities in Schools spent \$17,000 for uniforms last year in the 10 schools it serves, President Sara Massey said.

Some stores offer layaway. The Isidore Newman School, which requires uniforms for its lower school, and Lycée Français are among the many schools that have "recycling" drives, collecting old uniforms and re-selling them at a big discount. Thrift stores, too, sometimes stock school uniforms. And some schools offer options: khaki or plaid.

Many parents and school leaders consider uniforms cost-effective, saying it's cheaper and better to have one up-front bill rather than spending over the course of the year. Button-downs cost more, to be sure, but they hold up better, said Tarence Davis, operations manager at Landry-Walker High School in Algiers.

Parent Elizabeth Ehrensing buys uniforms for her older son at Stuart Hall then passes them down to the younger. "I wouldn't change uniforms for anything in the world," she said.

And while uniforms may be more expensive than bargain-bin T-shirts, they cost less than the fashionable items kids would want.

Contracts

The National Retail Foundation estimates that families will spend \$14.5 billion on back-to-school clothing and shoes this year. With so much of the money locally going to uniforms, it's not surprising that specialty stores want in on the action.

There's no centralized way to do that in Jefferson, Orleans or St. Tammany parishes, because uniform vendor decisions are made at the school level. School Board campaign contributions don't seem to be a factor; a search of public records for several popular school uniform stores and their owners turned up very little, and nothing since than 2010.

Instead, stores rely on shoe leather: personal contacts and visits to schools. Rarely are there exclusive contracts.

"Vendors come to you," said Davis of Landry-Walker, which uses multiple stores so students have options on where to shop.

Lycée chose Schiro's because "we needed to get the school open" quickly in 2011, Saleun said. School liaison Melanie Stephens was the first salesperson to call on them. They asked her to find cheaper options. She did. Voilà.

Sadhwani said he visits his schools at least twice a year, and he sweetens the pot with year-round contributions. If a school wants to run a raffle to increase attendance at PTA meetings, Logo Express donates gift cards.

"We started a business, but we're also here to help them," Sadhwani said. "The schools have been good to me, I'm good to the schools."

Discipline and Privileges

In turn, the schools - especially in New Orleans, where students overwhelmingly come from poor families - think that uniforms embody everything they are trying to accomplish. Wearing a uniform is "preparing them for the future," said Davis of Landry-Walker. "We use it as a model for teaching responsibility."

Many schools, public and private, use uniforms as incentives. There are dress-down or "duds" days, which are pitched as a reward or privilege that could be taken away at any time. Distinguished students may be allowed a distinguishing uniform, for achieving the honor roll or being elected to the Student Council, for example. Sci Academy upperclassmen may wear college sweatshirts, symbolizing the school's "college prep" mission.

But with the carrot comes the stick. Because uniforms are used to teach such serious character traits, the consequences for rule-breaking can be so intense that state lawmakers introduced a bill this spring to ban uniform-based suspensions. (It failed to pass.)

If a student arrives at school without the right belt or shirt, typically the staff will call the family to deliver the missing item.

There are assists, too. Schools keep a stockpile of spare uniform pieces for kids who occasionally screw up. At Arthur Ashe, if a student comes in with shoes that are part but not all black, staff will offer to put a piece of black electrical tape over the offending swoosh. (The student still must complete a reflection form for their "values violation.")

At George Washington Carver Prep, the student who hasn't remedied the problem by noon spends the afternoon "sidelined," doing schoolwork in their adviser's classroom. At Carver Collegiate Academy, the same violation suspends the student the next day.

When asked why the Collegiate Academies network, which comprises Sci and both Carver charters, considers uniforms so important, spokeswoman Allison Zimmer said being very specific about attire "allows us to be on the same page with families and scholars, to avoid differed interpretations of policy and to remain focused on more important matters."

However, parent Nicole Marshall, for one, was sick of that mindset. "I had tears in the morning because I couldn't find a black shoe," she said. When schools are so rigid, "That sends a mixed message about what's really important in education," she said. "It's that you're in class and you're learning, regardless of what you're wearing."