

Twenty Years After Long Beach Unified's Historic School Uniform Policy

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Gene Kinsey still remembers the evening his son announced that Long Beach students would have to wear uniforms to school. It was early 1994, and his son wasn't happy about the prospect of ditching his street clothes to attend class.

"At the time we were living in Bixby Knolls," recalled Kinsey, an attorney. "I came home one day, and he said, 'Dad, they're going to make me wear a school uniform next year. It's going to be mandatory, not voluntary.'"

Kinsey assumed his son was mistaken. "We have the United States Constitution and a First Amendment," he said at the time, and promised his son: "You will never have to wear a school uniform." Kinsey made good on his promise — but only after a legal battle resulting in an exemption for parents who object to the policy.

After a precedent-setting decision by the school board 20 years ago this fall, the Long Beach district became the first in the nation to require uniforms, consisting of navy bottoms and white tops. Gov. Pete Wilson signed a bill in August 1994 giving California school districts the authority to enforce this mandate, and LBUSD tailored its policy to the legislation.

While school districts in Oakland, Baltimore and New Orleans had implemented voluntary uniform policies for students, no district had ever made school uniforms mandatory. The decision thrust the district into the national spotlight. Time magazine and the New York Times wrote stories. Carl Cohn, then-LBUSD superintendent, and other school officials debated the policy on the "Today Show," "Good Morning America" and "CBS This Morning."

And 17 months after LBUSD implemented its policy, then-President Bill Clinton dropped by Long Beach to get a firsthand look at the uniform-clad students.

"We just thought we were doing the right thing," said Cohn, now a professor and director of Claremont Graduate University's Urban Leadership Program. "I did not expect to end up on 'The Today Show' or 'Good Morning America.' This was something we needed to do to send a powerful message about restoring standards in public schools."

Cohn said the policy made clear to students that LBUSD had high standards for student dress, behavior, and achievement.

A Difficult Period

Around the time of the board's decision in the early 1990s, LBUSD was losing students to rival districts and private schools, according to Karin Polacheck, president of the school board when members voted to implement the uniform policy. Gang violence spread in the neighborhoods surrounding some Long Beach schools, generating concerns about students showing up for class in gang attire.

"We wanted to create a safer environment for students, so they could focus on academics," said Polacheck, who now runs her own consulting firm.

All board members supported the policy, but the late Edward Eveland particularly championed uniforms, even penning the policy himself.

"Our issue was if private schools think it's important and parents like the idea, why isn't it good enough for our kids?" Polacheck said.

The mandate only applied to students in grades K-8. Later two high schools, Wilson and Millikan, voluntarily implemented uniform policies on their campuses — though it was not designed with high school students in mind. The idea, Cohn said, was to get students in elementary and middle school accustomed to wearing uniforms in hopes the shift would instill high behavioral and academic standards in them they would maintain as teens.

It seems to have worked. During the school year that Long Beach Unified implemented its uniform policy, crimes such as assault and battery, fighting, robbery, drug use and vandalism dropped markedly on school campuses. Time magazine reported in 1995 that the number of crimes in LBUSD related to weapons dropped by 52 percent. Drug use dropped by 69 percent and fighting by 51 percent.

"It's no coincidence that in the 20 years since uniforms were adopted, this school district has seen consistent gains in student achievement as measured by state tests, higher attendance rates now approaching 97 percent and numerous accolades at the national and international level," said Chris Eftychiou, spokesman for the district. "Uniforms are an important part of that success."

The success of the uniform program brought President Bill Clinton to LBUSD's Jackie Robinson Academy in February 1996. Then-mayor Beverly O'Neill met Clinton during the visit.

She recalled Clinton asking the school's student body president his thoughts on school uniforms.

"He said he thought they were wonderful," O'Neill remembered. "He said, 'I feel safe walking to school and walking home,' and [Clinton] was very impressed."

Clinton's visit and the intense media attention LBUSD's uniform policy received led to the district fielding phone calls from districts throughout the nation interested in implementing uniform policies of their own. Today, uniforms are standard in U.S. public schools, including a number in the Los Angeles Unified School District, which turned to Long Beach for help with its uniform policy, according to Cohn.

Robert Cuen, an LAUSD staff attorney, said uniforms help with discipline and that L.A. has likely seen the same results as Long Beach because of the uniform policy. In L.A., principals decide whether or not to require uniforms at their schools.

“I think the research ... bears true,” Cuen said. “If students are in a scenario where they have the same uniform, they are not looking at [gang] colors. They’re not looking at socioeconomics. They’re all wearing the same clothes.”

Starting Slow

The district started with eight pilot schools before requiring all K-8 schools to comply. District officials also met with community groups, community leaders and churches to drum up support. While Cohn said that surveys of the public at the time revealed that 80 percent of community members supported the switch to school uniforms, a vocal minority opposed the policy. Parents in neighborhoods unaffected by gang violence questioned why their children should wear uniforms, recalled Polacheck, who represented the middle class areas of East Long Beach and Lakewood on the school board.

“It was not an easy transition for a lot of communities,” she said. “I was surprised [by the opposition] because I believed in uniforms so strongly.”

Kinsey, the parent and attorney, believed uniforms would stifle students’ rights to self-expression. The state constitution, he reasoned, requires that the public provide a free education to all kids, so the school district can’t require a student to purchase anything as a requirement to attend school.

Nonprofits, however, stepped in to help those who couldn’t afford the clothing; it costs about \$70 to outfit a student with the appropriate attire.

The Assistance League of Long Beach had already been providing support since 1974 through its Operation Bell program. When LBUSD implemented its uniform policy, Cohn asked for help with providing uniforms to needy students.

The Assistance League agreed, and in recent years it outfits about 10,000 low-income students annually with clothing. Elementary school students receive two polo shirts and two pairs of pants or skorts, three pairs of socks and underwear and a jacket. Middle and high school students receive three shirts, two pairs of pants and a sweatshirt.

“We’re basically the safety net for the program,” said Annette Kashiwabara, director of development for the nonprofit.

Despite these efforts, the district in 1994 was still sued by a group of parents, including Kinsey. He and his cohorts dropped the suit when state lawmakers included a provision in the uniforms legislation to exempt parents who opposed the policy. To this day, the district must exempt parents who object to the policy on self-expression or religious grounds or other reasons deemed legitimate.

In 1996, LBUSD settled a lawsuit with the ACLU that alleged the uniform policy discriminated against low-income parents who could not afford the mandated school attire.

Kinsey said his legal battle with LBUSD wasn't easy: "It took a year of my life," he said. "I became the most hated man in Long Beach."

Eftychiou, the district spokesman and also a parent, said about 98 percent of parents comply with the uniform policy, saying it simplifies shopping and eliminates morning arguments about what to wear.

Students are mixed on the matter. Ruby Tlacatelpa, an eighth-grader at Hamilton Middle School in North Long Beach, agreed that uniforms make getting dressed for school easier. She also feels no pressure to come to school in revealing attire that makes her uncomfortable.

"Some people wear clothing that shows a lot," she said.

She was one of dozens of students on the Hamilton campus last week picking up their books in preparation for the start of school Wednesday. Daniel Ramirez, also in eighth grade at the school, said he doesn't mind uniforms, but looks forward to attending Jordan High School, which does not have a uniform policy.

"I'll finally have freedom of what to wear," he said.

Although the uniform policy made Long Beach Unified one of the most influential school districts of the 1990s, Kinsey's two children never wore them, he notes proudly. They wore their street clothes "as a badge of pride and honor they weren't going to be bludgeoned by the school district into giving up their constitutional rights," Kinsey said.

The lawyer is pleased that parents have the right to opt their children out of wearing uniforms, but he believes that too few parents know they have this option. Twenty years later, he continues to believe that students should be able to decide what they want to wear to school.

"If we had our way," he said, "there wouldn't be any kind of school uniforms."