

Findings



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Student Dress Policies

The Success of School Uniforms and Dress Codes

By Stephen Daniels



America's schools have been faced with increased challenges over the last several years. Aside from seeking out new ways to educate students and keeping up with

changes in technology, school leaders are facing a continued rise in social problems in their schools.

Among these problems are incidents of school violence, gang activity and bullying which create a tension on school grounds nationwide that prevents many schools from fulfilling their mandate to educate students. Sadly, some of the most tragic incidents that occur in schools stem from the type of clothing that is being worn by students. Often theft and violence can be linked to designer clothes and expensive shoes. Sometimes clothing bearing colors and insignias may be used to identify gang affiliation, thereby promoting fear and intimidation among students. Certain styles of clothing also lend themselves toward easily hiding weapons. Furthermore, the pressure to be fashionable and have the latest clothes can take its toll financially and emotionally on students and parents.

These issues are beginning to gain momentum, especially among parents, in school districts across the country. Parental support has become the force behind the increase in school districts adopting student dress policies. A recent survey in Hoke County, North Carolina showed an average of 64 percent of parents supported uniforms in the schools.¹ Student dress also drew the attention of the former President Clinton. In a memorandum on school uniforms to the Secretary of Education, he directed the Secretary to "develop information about how local school districts have made uniforms part of their school safety and discipline programs." He also requested that

information about school uniforms be made available to every school district in the country.²

There are no perfect solutions to the social problems that exist in today's schools. However, schools can and should consider practical steps to create an atmosphere of respect and attentiveness for their students. Implementing a student dress policy is one such option.

Although little formal research has been done on the effect these policies have on students, the feedback given by those who have implemented school dress policies

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indicate these policies are making a difference. This paper will explore the types of school dress policies—school uniforms and dress codes—and the effects they are having in today's schools.

Student Dress as Policy

The attention given to school dress codes and uniforms has become more and more focused over the last several years. As dialogue increases among parents, students and school officials about what remedies may exist to deal with the problems facing today's schools, student dress policies have moved to the forefront. The issue received nationwide recognition in 1998 when, in his State of the Union address, President Clinton recommended school uniforms as a method of reducing school violence.³ Since that time, there has been a notable increase in the number of schools that have considered and implemented a dress policy for their students.

More recently, in his State of the State address, North Carolina Governor Mike Easley recommended school dress codes as a means to address behavior in North Carolina's schools. In his speech Governor Easley asked every school board to "enforce a reasonable dress code policy... because students come to school to learn—not to party."⁴ It appears that leaders on many levels have begun to recognize the potential benefits that school dress policies can have on the school environment.

Uniforms: When implementing a school dress policy, some schools are more directive while others take a more passive approach. School uniforms are certainly the more directive method because they tell students what they must wear. A school uniform policy requires students to wear similar looking outfits to class each day. Some schools do offer an "opt-out" option if the parents agree to it. Others will also make exception for students whose religious beliefs may be hindered by the uniform.

The first known public school in the country to adopt a school policy on uniforms was Cherry Hill Elementary in Baltimore, Maryland in 1987.⁵ The first major school district to require school uniforms was California's Long Beach Unified School District in 1994.⁶ According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) of the U. S. Department of Education, only about three percent of public schools require uniforms to be worn by their students.⁷ Nationwide, at least 37 states, including North Carolina, give local school districts the authority to require uniforms if they choose to.⁸

The first county in North Carolina to require uniforms was Halifax County.⁹ As of the 2000-2001 school year, they are the only school district in the state to require uniforms in all their schools.¹⁰ The county school uniform regulations require elemen-

tary and middle school students to wear certain combinations of khaki bottoms with navy or white shirts (plaid jumpers are allowed for females). High school students must wear a variety of pants and shirts combinations depending on the school they attend. The Halifax uniform policy does ease penalties for financial hardship and exempts students from wearing a uniform if it imposes a substantial burden on a student's exercise of religious belief.¹¹

Though no other school districts require uniforms district-wide, some individual schools within school districts have chosen to require uniforms. For example, in North Carolina's largest school district—Charlotte/Mecklenburg—23 of the 144 schools have chosen to require uniforms even though they are not required to do so.¹²

Dress Codes: Another less stringent approach to student dress policy is the school dress code. A school dress code instructs students on what they cannot wear instead of telling them what to wear (i.e. no hats, no tight fitting clothes, no vulgar or obscene depictions on clothing, etc.). Dress codes are much more common in North Carolina's schools than uniform policies. Out of the 117 school districts in this state, at least 48 have some form of dress code in place.¹³

One of this state's most notable school dress code policies is in Johnston County. Their policy not only prohibits inappropriate clothing such as short shorts and sagging pants, but also prohibits abnormal hair colors and body piercing jewelry.¹⁴ Students who violate the policy may receive a short-term suspension from school for up to 10 days and students who repeatedly violate the policy may be suspended for the remainder of the year.¹⁵ Other counties, such as Cabarrus, have similar policies, but leave the responsibility of developing rules and regulation up to each school's principal.¹⁶

The Effect

There has been little scientific study done on the effects of student dress policies. However, there is empirical evidence that continues to mount, especially with the rising number of schools who are considering these options. One survey of schools nationwide conducted by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) revealed that one out of five (21 percent) public, private and parochial school principals had either instigated a uniform policy, were currently writing one, or had it on their agenda for consideration.¹⁷ With so many schools and school districts adopting school dress policies, it is impor-

tant to understand why so many have chosen to do so.

The purpose for most, if not all, schools that are adopting uniforms and dress codes is to address the issues of discipline and academic achievement. Classroom disruptions are commonplace in today's schools and having methods in place to promote a better learning environment have never been more important. Furthermore, little debate remains over the dangers and pressures that exist in schools today. With the increased displays of school violence, many school officials, parents and students have become more determined to find solutions.

In determining the effectiveness of school dress policies, there is no more compelling evidence that the feedback from the school principals themselves. Though the majority of public schools do not require uniforms, the feedback is very positive from those who do. According to one survey conducted by the NAESP, principals of schools that have uniform policies in place believe that students stay more disciplined and focused in their studies and feel less peer pressure.¹⁸

According to the study, principals identified the following effects of school uniforms: 79 percent believed uniforms positively affected classroom discipline; 67 percent saw an improvement in student concentration; 62 percent noticed a positive effect on school safety; 72 percent saw an increase in school spirit; 85 percent noted a better perception of the school by the community; and 75 percent indicated a positive effect on peer pressure among students.¹⁹

In North Carolina, the feedback from Halifax County is also positive. Dr. Viola Vaughan, principle at Southeast Halifax High School said that their school uniform policy has done a lot for the students both academically and behaviorally. "Discipline issues have decreased tremendously," she said, "when children look around at each other, they don't see the name brands and clothing that often divides them." Dr. Vaughan pointed out that even school assemblies are quieter because students act more respectfully.²⁰ Alan Sledge, assistant principle at Brawley Middle School in Halifax County, said that their uniform policy was "very effective and places a very valuable role on the academic setting because the kids are more focused on their books over their clothes."²¹

Feedback on school dress codes has also been positive. According to Don Woodard, a high school principal in Johnston County,

the student's "demeanor is better and there are fewer disruptions because of teasing, or students being uncomfortable because of the apparel that others are wearing." He also pointed out that the students have more "poise and are more well-behaved when they have the sense of being dressed for the occasion of learning."²² Commenting on his school's dress code, Shelly Marsh, a middle school principle also from Johnston County, said: "We have high expectations...by having a dress code, students know there are expectations and guidelines that they must adhere to. Students' attitudes are different according to their dress."²³

Along with school principals, the U.S. Department of Education has acknowledged the positive effect that school uniforms can have. In their publication "Manual on School Uniforms," which was ordered to be sent to every school district in the United States by President Clinton, the Department of Education cited the following potential benefits of school uniforms: (1) decreasing violence and theft; (2) preventing gang members from wearing gang clothing at school; (3) instilling student discipline; (4) helping to resist peer pressure; (5) helping students concentrate on academics; and (6) aiding in the recognition of intruders.²⁴

Safety and Other Benefits

Of all the potential benefits of school dress policies, none is more important than improving school safety. With student violence constantly making the headlines, the clamor for solutions continues to grow. Safety in schools today is essential, and creating an environment that reduces incidents of intimidation and violence is necessary for students to learn effectively. Unfortunately, the demand for high priced designer clothing often puts students at risk of theft and violence from other students. Clothing that indicates affiliation with gangs is also a problem and can cause intimidation and fear in schools.

The National School Safety and Security Services, an organization that consults nationwide on school safety and crisis preparedness issues, supports school uniforms and dress codes as a way to "contribute toward improving the school climate" because it "can play a significant role in reducing security threats and improving school safety." According to this safety organization, dress codes and uniforms can help reduce potential problems by: (1) reducing conflict stemming from socioeconomic status, such as comments and personal attacks about who has better clothing; (2) reducing ways in which gang members can identify them-

selves which, in essence, is a form of intimidation and creates fear; (3) reducing the risk of students being robbed of expensive clothing, jewelry, etc.; (4) in the case of uniforms, helping school administrators to more easily identify nonstudents, trespassers, and other visitors in the hallways who stand out in the crowd.²⁵

Notable evidence of the effects of a student dress policy can be seen from the aftermath of California's Long Beach school district implementing mandatory school uniforms. Since they began requiring uniforms, crime in the school district has dropped by 91 percent, suspensions have decreased by 90 percent, sex offenses have been reduced by 96 percent and vandalism is down 69 percent.²⁶ Interestingly, these improvements came about without any other security measures having been implemented at the time uniforms became mandatory.²⁷ In addition, a study released by the Harvard School of Education found that the Long Beach school district was among six districts in the nation's 34 largest cities that dramatically reduced their dropout rates. During the past five years, dropout rates have declined from 11.2 to 2.7 percent.²⁸

The Center for the Prevention of School Violence, though not endorsing any specific dress code policies, points out that each of the "three Ps of school safety" — "place" (physical security of the school), "people" (those in the school) and "purpose" (mission of the school)—can be impacted by school dress policies. This is because dress policies define what is appropriate for the school setting while impacting the way in which people relate and interact with one another. The Center acknowledges that though the research on student dress policies is limited, the anecdotal evidence supports the existence of some form of student dress policy.²⁹

It is important to remember that the solution to school violence does not lie in one single approach—certainly not in school dress policies alone. Yet, because of the likely benefit of curbing school violence, they should be considered along with other solutions.

Student dress policies can also benefit students far beyond keeping them safe. Schools with uniforms say that their students have better self-esteem because without the name brand clothing on display, the students are placed on an equal level. Poorer students do not feel and are not treated as inferior because they don't have nice clothes.³⁰ This equality also seems to create a sense of school unity. Dr. Viola

Vaughan and Allan Sledge, both principals from Halifax county have witnessed an increase in school unity since uniforms were required.³¹

Dr. Arnold Goldstein, head of the Center for Research on Aggression at Syracuse University agrees. He believes that uniforms encourage a "sense of belonging" because they promote a feeling of community among the students and help make a troubled student feel like part of a supportive whole.³² These effects contribute to a school's overall sense of order and discipline. As a result, the learning environment improves—making it easier for teachers to teach and for students to learn.

Student dress policies also reduce the cost of clothing for students. Parents whose children wear uniforms do not have to spend extra money on multiple outfits for their children. Instead, they need only invest in a few outfits that conform to the school's uniform policy. This is particularly helpful to the low-income parents who often feel the financial burden of providing suitable clothes for their children. USA Today reported that in 1998 parents of students in non-uniform schools spent an average of \$185 per child while parents of children in uniform schools spent an average of \$104 per child.³³ Uniforms also minimize the confusion about what to wear to school each day, relieving students of the chaos of choosing and outfit each day. Dress codes are also helpful for parents when shopping for their children because they provide guidelines for parents when purchasing clothes for their children—often ruling out excessive and expensive articles of clothing that conflict with the school's policies and keeping student dress within reasonable boundaries.

Student dress policies offer authority figures in the schools the opportunity to display their own dedication and discipline. Some schools with dress policies include (or extend the option to) teachers to participate as well. Certainly, if teachers and administrators exhibit the same discipline that is required of the students, it will reinforce the guidelines and make students more likely to comply.

Legal Issues

Though student dress policies have seen rapid success in schools nationwide, there is some opposition to their use. School uniforms are most often criticized because some contend that they infringe upon a student's First Amendment right to freedom of expression by mandating that students wear certain types of clothing. However,

recent court rulings indicate that student dress policies withstand legal challenges as long as they adhere to some basic principles.

In January 2001, school uniform policies won a huge victory when the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals rejected the plaintiff's argument that uniforms do not improve the academic environment, dampen student expression, and infringe on religious rights.³⁴ The court said that the policy was "viewpoint neutral" and justified because of its "substantial government interest" in improving education. The court added that because the school board's purpose for implementing the uniform policy was to raise test scores and improve student behavior, it in no way served to suppress student speech.³⁵

A federal district court upheld a restrictive dress code in Jefferson County, Kentucky and found that the dress code was created to "help reduce violent gang activity, ease tensions between students who fight over attire, aid school officials in identifying campus intruders, and promote student safety in general." Therefore, the court concluded that the student's interest in expressing themselves through their choice of clothes was outweighed by the school's attempt to create a "safe and peaceful environment."³⁶

Overall, most courts agree that student dress policies may be established as long as the intent for the policy is related to a legitimate government interest (i.e. to maintain discipline or encourage academics).³⁷ In an interview with the New York Times, ACLU president Nadine Strossen said that uniform policies would only be challenged if there were not an opt-out option for students with conflicting religious or cultural beliefs, or if there were no way for poorer students to be provided the proper uniforms.³⁸

Most, if not all student dress policies, make exceptions for the concerns mentioned above. In Halifax County the uniform regulations make it clear that student will not be penalized for not wearing uniforms "by reason of financial hardship," and will be allowed exemption if the uniform would "impose a substantial burden on the exercise of a sincerely held religious belief."³⁹ The Department of Education in their "Manual on School Uniforms" recommends that schools make provisions for families who cannot afford uniforms by either providing them to the students, having community or business leaders provide financial support, have parents and school officials work together to

provide them, or use uniforms formerly worn by school graduates.⁴⁰

Importance of Support

The positive feedback from school officials makes a strong case for the benefits of student dress policies. There is little doubt that some form of policy, whether uniforms or dress codes, will have a positive impact on the behavior and academic performance of students. Therefore, one might conclude it is in the best interest of each school district to adopt some form of policy.

When deciding which approach to take, the success of student dress policies depends on the support they receive from the school community. This is particularly important when it comes to the parents. Often the parents are the driving force behind starting a student dress policy. However, if parents are not involved from the beginning and their input is not considered, then a vital element in implementing and maintaining any program will be missed. Likewise, if teachers, parents and students do not perceive a particular approach to student dress as appropriate, the policy is likely to fail. Therefore, it is imperative that local school districts that are considering a policy get the community involved in the decision-making process.

Conclusion

With the myriad of challenges facing today's schools, there is no question that educators and parents must continue to seek ways to help students learn in a safe and temperate environment. All of the research and anecdotal evidence indicate that a school dress policy is an inexpensive way to improve school satisfaction. Although it is not the only solution to unruly behavior in schools, student dress policies like uniforms and dress codes are one more reasonable approach to creating a better learning environment for students. Furthermore, if schools combine a student dress policy with other forms of character building methods, such as character education, their students will be more likely to learn the responsibility and the respect necessary for safe and effective learning.

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