

Overview - School Uniforms

School Uniforms

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In his 1996 State of the Union Address, President Clinton said, "If it means that the school rooms will be more orderly and more disciplined, and that our young people will learn to evaluate themselves by what they are on the inside, instead of what they're wearing on the outside, then our public schools should be able to require their students to wear uniforms." Although originally only popular in private schools, school uniforms have been the topic of much debate in homes, schools, and courts since the first public schools began requiring that students wear uniforms in the 1980s. Since that time more and more schools, public and private, are opting for uniforms. In fact, 15.5 percent of public schools required uniforms in the 2007–2008 school year, according to the Department of Education, reflecting an increase of about 6 percent from a decade earlier.

Dress Codes Versus Uniforms

Dress codes generally differ from school uniforms in that they set rules about what cannot be worn but do not specify what must be worn. For example, a dress code may require that skirts and shorts be a certain length or may ban printed or potentially offensive T-shirts, certain types of jewelry, large or baggy clothes, clothes with holes, visible undergarments, strapless tops, or other types of clothing that the school administrators deem inappropriate or distracting. Uniform policies are generally more restrictive and require students wear a particular color and style of clothing—sometimes even dictating where the clothing must be purchased. In some schools, however, dress codes entail so many rules that they are nearly as restrictive as uniform policies and may require only solid colors or polo-style shirts. Both dress codes and uniform requirements have been contested in court. Some have even landed in the U.S. Supreme Court.

Court Cases

Generally, though not always, the courts rule in favor of a student's right to free speech in cases where students have violated dress codes. However, the courts have supported uniform requirements. This makes it easier for administrators to enforce uniform policies than more complicated dress code policies. For example, in a March 2007 case, a school argued that an anti-gay shirt was hateful and inflammatory, but the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the child citing the right to free speech. That following June the Supreme Court upheld a lower court's decision allowing a student to wear an anti-President Bush shirt with images of drugs and alcohol that violated the school's dress code prohibiting images of drugs or alcohol on clothing. In another June 2007 case, however, the Supreme Court clarified its position when it ruled against a student who wore a shirt with the words "Bong Hits 4 Jesus," which the court said advocated drug use.

The courts have not overturned school uniform policies despite numerous student protests. For example, the Clark County School District in Nevada gave individual schools in their district the option to require students to wear khaki pants and solid-color polo shirts. The American Civil Liberties Union challenged the requirement, and the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit in San Francisco ruled in favor of the schools, stating that uniforms do not violate the First Amendment rights of students.

Uniforms—Smarter and Safer?

Proponents of uniforms contend that school uniforms make having and enforcing a dress code easier for school administrators. They keep wealthy students from showing off, prevent gang colors from entering the school, contribute to school spirit, and help teachers more quickly identify students on field trips as well as spot outsiders who enter the building. In addition, research also shows that uniforms can improve test scores and reduce behavior problems.

A frequently cited case of academic improvement following a school uniform policy is that of the Long Beach California Unified School District, one of the first districts to require student uniforms in grades K–8 in 1994. Following the new requirement, crime in the K–8 schools dropped by 22 percent, while attendance increased. Further, the district reported higher student test scores in reading and math. Other schools implementing similar policies have had similar results, but critics wonder if the uniforms should really be taking all the credit.

School Uniforms Ineffective

A study done by David Brunnsma from the University of Missouri and Kerry A. Rockquemore from Notre Dame measured the effects of uniforms on attendance, behavior, substance abuse, and academic achievement and concluded that uniforms did not improve any of these. In their report published in the *The Journal of Education Research* in September/October 1998, the authors contend that uniforms may even have the opposite effect on academic achievement. They state, "Here, contrary to the expected, student uniform use actually decreases, on average, the standardized test score of these tenth graders who wear them due to mandatory school policy." Although these assertions were contested by Ann Bodine in the November/December 2003 issue of *The Journal of Educational Research*, where she argued that the research methods were flawed, their results are often cited by school uniform opponents, and no other formal studies support claims for either side of the debate. Perhaps more importantly, Brunnsma and Rockquemore consider other reasons schools may see a correlation between uniforms and improved test results and other benefits. They state, "What is omitted from the discourse on school uniforms is the possibility that, instead of directly impacting specific outcomes, uniforms work as a catalyst for change and provide a highly visible window of opportunity. It is this window which allows additional programs to be implemented ... Requiring students to wear uniforms is a change which not only effects students, but school faculty and parents. Instituting a mandatory uniform policy is a change which is immediate, highly visible, and shifts the environmental landscape of any particular school." Whether or not school uniforms directly improve attendance, behavior, and grades is still a matter of debate.

Uniform Costs

Although proponents say that uniforms should make clothing less expensive for parents, that is not always the case. Uniforms prevent parents from shopping at resale shops and sending their children to school in clothing handed down from friends and relatives. Some parents also argue that uniforms should not be mandated in public schools, which are supposed to be free. To address this issue, President Bush instituted tax breaks for school supply purchases. Meanwhile, some states offer additional deductions to cover the costs of school supplies, and a few districts give vouchers for uniforms to low-income families. However, these benefits rarely apply to private schools and are sometimes not sufficient to cover the costs of public school uniforms.

Further, some schools, particularly private schools, require children to wear pricy uniforms that can only be purchased through the school or at specialty shops. A writer at *The Economist* relayed a story on September 26, 2009, from one of his coworkers whose child's school required that students wear a wool suit only available through the school outfitters. The child's father argued with the school throughout the summer saying, "I don't object to his being nicer and more intelligent than I am ... But I draw the line at his being more expensively

dressed." The article continues to point out that expensive uniforms not only cost a lot upfront, but some schools change the uniform from year to year, preventing parents from handing clothing down to younger siblings or other students. Also, requiring that the uniforms come from specific suppliers means parents cannot use secondhand or discount stores. Many assume that parents who are paying the high price of tuition can also afford to pay for the expensive uniforms, but that is not always the case. Parents frequently make many financial sacrifices to pay the tuition at a school they feel will better serve their children than their local public schools. These parents cannot afford expensive uniforms in addition to the already high price of tuition.

Students Arguments Against Uniforms

Many students simply do not like wearing uniforms. They complain that uniforms take away their individuality, promote conformity, or are unflattering or uncomfortable. Some students have gone as far as staging protests against wearing uniforms. At the Watson Chapel School District in Arkansas, students wore black armbands to protest a uniform policy that began in 2006 for middle and high school students. When the students were disciplined for the armbands, the case went to court. The court ruled in favor of allowing the students to protest with armbands but did not require the school to change its stance on uniforms.

School Uniforms and Sweatshops

Requiring students to wear uniforms also does not allow parents to make clothing decisions that they view as more conscientious, such as resale, organic cotton, or locally produced clothing. Some school uniforms have been tied to sweatshop conditions at the factories where the uniforms are made. SweatFree Communities, an anti-sweatshop group in Maine, accused Wal-Mart of buying school uniforms made under sweatshop conditions from the JMS Garments Factory in Bangladesh, which were sold under the Faded Glory brand name.

Annalisa Barbieri complains in a *New Statesman* article, "Today, trying to find a school uniform that contains cotton and wool has got even harder. Whereas in the outside world we covet natural fibers, we can't be trusted with them where children's school dress is concerned. Synthetic school trousers, for example, outsell cottons by 20:1." She continues by saying that the fabrics are particularly bad for children with some skin conditions, such as eczema, and are so thin that they do not keep children warm in the winter.

Growing Popularity of Uniforms

While debates continue as to whether or not uniforms make schools safer and students smarter or if they are fair to require of parents and students, one thing remains clear—school uniforms will not likely be going away any time soon. The courts have supported their use, presidents have spoken out in support of school uniforms, and uniform policies are increasing in popularity in schools around the country.

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