

School Uniforms Stifle Freedom of Expression

 School Policies, 2008

"Our biggest problem with a school uniform policy is the anti-individuality message it sends."

The authors of this two-part viewpoint contend that school uniform policies erode students' rights of expression. In part I, an editorial in the *Northwest Florida Daily News* counters claims that uniforms ensure better behavior. Instead, it proposes, they suppress the individuality that administrators find distracting. In part II, Kent J. Fetzer of Salt Lake City, Utah, argues in the *Salt Lake Tribune* that abrogating students' rights of expression by mandating uniforms runs counter to the spirit and laws of our nation. Young people, he posits, should be allowed to choose clothing that is different from the norm as long as it meets standards of decency and poses no safety threat.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. How does the Northwest Florida Daily News editorial refute the argument that school uniforms ensure better behavior?
2. What advice does the editorial in the Northwest Florida Daily News offer to students who must wear uniforms?
3. According to Fetzer, what has long been a hallmark of our democracy?

The Borg, "Star Trek's" biomechanized bad guys, might as well have been talking about [Florida's] Okaloosa County's march toward school uniforms when they intoned: "Resistance is futile."

Indeed, as the *Daily News* reported last Monday [April 2002], more and more public schools are requiring or encouraging students to wear clothing of standardized colors and styles—uniforms, basically—and there's been nary a peep of protest. The goal: to mute some of the individuality that school administrators find so distracting.

Trekkers, however, will remind us that the Borg believed the individual was nothing and the collective was everything. That's one reason they were bad guys.

We don't think Okaloosa's uniform boosters are bad guys. But we do think they're emphasizing values that may not be, well, rewarding in the long run.

We know that many parents favor a uniform policy because it could make school clothes easier and cheaper to buy. And many administrators think uniforms will ensure kids behave better.

Anti-Individuality

Don't be too sure about that last one. If matching duds guaranteed better-behaved people, no soldier would ever go AWOL [absent without leave] and no prisoner would ever get into a fight.

But our biggest problem with a school uniform policy is the anti-individuality message it sends. If young people are to understand that a cornerstone of our freedom is the primacy of the individual—over government, over the collective, over any non-voluntary association—then sticking them all into look-alike clothes is a poor way to teach it.

In our view, a splendid way to teach the values of freedom and responsibility is to let youngsters experience freedom and, in the process, learn to act responsibly.

Instead, more uniforms are being ordered.

Here's our advice to area students:

Make your own friends, form your own opinions and shape your own beliefs, even if you're forced to look like everybody else.

Think your own thoughts.

And hope that they don't find a way to stop that, too.

Part II

While we were still basking in the warm glow of a successful Olympics, proud of our American heritage, a little bit of our freedom slipped away from us. A somewhat harried Utah Legislature has recently engaged in some well-intentioned railroading of our rights, and now our governor has signed their encroachment into law.

I refer to House Bill 5, sponsored by Rep. Karen W. Morgan, D-Cottonwood Heights, which disallows parents' ability to opt out of mandatory wearing of school uniforms by their children. Many parents are in favor of the uniforms, but not all. The stage has thus been set for the rights of the minority to be abrogated by the tyranny of the majority, and this with the sanction of our state government.

An Infringement on Students' Rights

It may seem a trivial matter to some, but then again, should any loss of our basic personal freedoms be considered trivial? I think not. Freedom of expression has long been a hallmark of our democracy, and any loss of its privilege is deserving of our careful attention and scrutiny. It is insufficient that some may be disturbed by others' choices to be different. If a choice meets with common standards of decency and poses no threat to the safety and weal of the community, then the bar has not been met. Whereas, to infringe upon the rights and independence of the individual by coercing uniformity is an affront to both the spirit and the letter of the law of this great nation.

I know lawmakers' concern was protecting our children against the deleterious influence of gangs; but as I would not want my children imposed upon by these pernicious elements, or even unduly influenced by the peer pressure of fashion and fad, so also I would guard them from the tyranny of bureaucracy.

Studies have been adduced demonstrating improved scholastic performance in conjunction with the wearing of school uniforms. I will not attempt to gainsay these results other than to state that even if true, it is still insufficient justification to warrant encroachment upon the rights of an individual. Should teachers also be forced to wear uniforms in an effort to improve their teaching? And why not the general citizenry of the state, to improve our overall efficiency? If possible, would some wish even to control hair, eye, and skin color? The thought may seem ludicrous, but then, Hitler's Third Reich was to boast the blond-haired, blue-eyed Aryan race.

A nation that does not guard against small encroachments on its liberties is not likely to retain them. To suffer small erosions of our personal freedoms is to demonstrate our not being deserving of them. Vigilance has ever been the price of liberty, and ever will be.

Further Readings

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