

# The School Uniform Controversy

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by

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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## **The School Uniform Controversy**

Children go to school every day to learn and grow, both as students and as people. To some, school uniforms promote this purpose: to others they are obstacles. Students, parents, school administrators, uniform manufacturers, and civil libertarians compete to influence school apparel policies in the United States. Students need a productive environment where they feel comfortable and safe. The clothing children wear affects their sense of belonging and their self-expression. According to the Pew Research Center, 29% of teens feel pressure to look good and 28% feel pressure to fit in socially (2019). Education Week Research Center found that 80% of educators strongly agree that to succeed, students need to believe they belong in the classroom community (Blad, 2017). Many students and civil libertarians oppose uniforms on grounds of freedom of expression. They argue that school is not merely a place for learning, but for personal discovery, expression, and growth, and that these qualities are impeded by uniforms. But most school administrators favor uniforms, sometimes with discrete support from manufacturers. They generally argue uniforms' academic, disciplinary, and economic benefits outweigh other considerations. Furthermore, school pride and unity, and the structure and order they encourage, seem weighed above individualism in their eyes. Parents are not united in their opinions on school uniforms, which vary across the board, but in their methods; they band together with likeminded parents to accomplish their goals.

## Review of Research

Researchers disagree about attire policy and its effects. Baumann and Krskova (2016) studied the academic performance of 15-year-olds in five regions. They found indicators that “for countries where students wear school uniforms ... students listen significantly better, there are lower noise levels, and lower teaching waiting times with classes starting on time.” However, Brunsmma and Rockquemore (1998) studied U.S. 10th-grade students, finding no evidence that school uniforms reduced absenteeism, behavior problems, or substance abuse. They even found “a significant, albeit weak, *negative* effect of uniforms on academic achievement” (emphasis theirs). This conclusion was disputed by Bodine (2003a), who performed her own analysis on their data and claimed that “the authors clouded thinking about school clothing by introducing an unfounded claim that student uniforms result in lower achievement.” Brunsmma and Rockquemore (2003) responded to her accusations and stand by their findings.

In a study of 100 Romanian students, Popa and Radu (2018) discovered that most students, when wearing uniforms, “tend to feel positive emotions ... accepted, well, comfortable, proud, normal.” But 40% of students, some of whom were from the prior group, reported negative emotions, including “constrained ... labeled ... imprisoned.”

In a Turkish case study, Cinoglu (2014) looked at the opinions of a small group of students, teachers, and parents. Across the board, in categories of achievement, discipline, safety, economic equality, and expression, most students disagreed that uniforms have a positive impact, but most parents and teachers found uniforms beneficial in all categories but expression. Sanchez et al. (2012) found that 87% of 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders at an urban Nevada middle school did not like wearing a school uniform, but 30-40 percent indicated at least some benefits. Latino students were more likely to favor uniforms.

## **The Students**

School is a huge component of a young American's life. It is the place where they go to learn, form social bonds, and to grow. For many students, a significant aspect of the school experience is the ability to express themselves. On these grounds, the majority of students oppose the implementation of school uniforms, petitioning those in charge of uniform policy to leave their freedom of expression in place.

One way to assess the student perception of school uniforms is through hard numerical data. As mentioned in the review of research, Sanchez et al. (2012) found that 87% of surveyed middle schoolers disliked uniforms. About 70% of students in Volusia County, Florida, voted against requiring them in 2015 (Chavez). In 2007, only 22.1% of Harford County Public School students agreed that "Harford County Public School students should be required to wear a school uniform" (Park). Brobeck's 2018 survey of a Minneapolis-area K-8 charter school found that 58% of students disagree or strongly disagree with the statement "I like wearing my uniform," with another 24% being neutral on the subject. Fairly unanimously across surveys of a similar nature, a majority of students express disapproval of school uniforms.

More qualitative evidence is needed to explain *why* students dislike school uniforms. DaCosta interviewed 22 urban public high school students about their new school uniform policy, and a couple common themes emerged (2006). One student, for example, complained "Why can't we just wear the colors ... ? Why does it have to be specifically [particular popular style or brand] shirts?" Other students expressed this same sentiment of constraint and lack of choices. "They ain't paying for our clothes, so how can they tell us what to wear? As long as you have [uniform colors], it's [uniform colors]." Others went even further, expressing dismay at

the homogeneity uniforms cause. “Everybody has on [uniform color]. I don’t like being like everybody else.”

In her 2013 dissertation, Gregory likewise interviewed 12 Arkansas high school students. Some of the most interesting insights came from the additional comments they chose to add, rather than directly responding to a prompt. One student explained “I don’t like wearing them because lots of kids get picked about it ... Sometimes they are real strict about it, some kids can’t get everything that we supposed to have like all-white shoes, khaki and burgundy so they just send us home and give us in-school over something that is uncalled for.” This economic inequality is a common point of contention, especially when uniforms are not affordably priced. Another student mused “I really don’t think we should have a school uniform policy because it is not really, really important to what we wear. It is what we come to learn. That should be what is important.”

McKenna interviewed a handful of Wareham Public Schools students for his 2014 local newspaper article, where they voiced their opinions about a potential upcoming uniform policy implementation. One common concern was “losing individuality” according to McKenna. “With school uniforms, everyone would look the same” lamented one middle school student. Another protested the monotony, saying “I wouldn’t really want uniforms because you wake up and you don’t want to wear the same thing over and over again.” Others were worried they would lose the ability to express themselves, with one student contemplating that “We should be able to wear what we want. I like wearing my sweatpants when I’m feeling tired. I like to dress pretty when I’m feeling pretty. I shouldn’t have to wear what someone tells me to wear.” Although students were assured that it was for their own good, one student dismissed these assurances, arguing “I don’t think it’s going to prevent bullying.”

Some students even publish public appeals against the use of uniforms. Emma Jacobs, a UK high school equivalent student, wrote an opinion piece for *The Guardian*, protesting her school's strict uniform policy (2014). Jacobs dismisses many claims proponents of uniforms make, including reducing bullying, improving academics, and decreasing disciplinary problems. Indeed, rather than helping to control students, Jacobs argues that a "uniform is a distraction. Teachers spend time and energy policing uniform when they could presumably be teaching us. They hand out detentions, quibble over hair dye and sometimes, creepily, ask girls to kneel on the floor to check the length of their skirts."

### **The Civil Libertarians**

As confirmed in *Jacobs v Clark County School District*, school uniform policies implemented "for the purpose[s] of increasing student achievement, promoting safety, and enhancing a positive school environment" are constitutional (2008). However, civil libertarians and civil rights advocacy groups, primarily the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and their subsidiaries, push back against uniform policies and dress codes that overstep their bounds, fighting to ensure that students' freedoms and rights to self-expression are preserved. They protect students from discrimination caused by uniform policies and dress codes, primarily on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, or religion. They do so through the courts, by working to inform students of their rights, and by advising policymakers of their responsibilities.

It is impossible to discuss the actions of civil rights groups regarding uniforms without mentioning *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District* (1969). In this landmark case, multiple students were suspended for wearing black armbands to school in protest of the Vietnam war. They were instructed to remove the bracelets and were suspended

when they disobeyed. They were approached by the ACLU, who helped them sue the school for violating their right of expression. The Supreme Court agreed, ruling that “It can hardly be argued that either students or teachers shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate.” Although not specifically addressing uniforms, this case set important precedent for student apparel.

In *Peltier, et al. v. Charter Day School, Inc., et al.* (2017), a student in Charter Day School in Leland, North Carolina petitioned to be allowed to wear pants to school as part of her uniform rather than the traditional skirt that the school enforced for women. When the school shut down her petition, she went to the ACLU and filed a lawsuit with their help. A federal court struck down the school’s policy, finding it to be unconstitutional discrimination. According to the ruling, “the skirts requirement causes the girls to suffer a burden the boys do not, simply because they are female.”

In *McMillen v. Itawamba County School District*, high school student Constance McMillen requested permission to bring her girlfriend to prom and to wear a tux (2010). The school initially refused her, and when pressured, cancelled the event entirely. The ACLU stepped in and pressed charges, and the court ruled in her favor, saying “this expression and communication of her viewpoint is the type of speech that falls squarely within the purview of the First Amendment.” The school reversed their policy and compensated McMillen.

When not fighting through the courts, the ACLU takes steps to educate students on their rights school, including those related to dress codes and uniforms. ACLU of California’s “My School, My Rights” campaign informs students of their rights to choose their attire (2019). The ACLU LGBT project published a document titled “Know Your Rights; School Dress Codes, Gender, and Self Expression,” which explains to students to students that “federal law says dress

codes can't treat boys and girls differently, force students to conform to sex stereotypes, or censor particular viewpoints" (2016). The ACLU of Rhode Island likewise has an educational pamphlet titled "Know Your Rights: School Dress Codes," where they directly address the constitutionality of school uniforms, arguing "there is no direct case on this issue in Rhode Island, but the ACLU believes that forcing students to wear uniforms infringes on their right to free speech and expression" (2017).

Rather than fighting school districts, some civil libertarians work directly with school districts to develop uniform and attire policy free from discrimination. The Oregon branch of the National Organization for Women (NOW) developed guidelines, initially adopted by Portland Public Schools, that removes sexist rules and terms from dress codes. NOW promotes this model as an alternative to traditional attire policy (2018). This model is now being used in school districts in at least 16 states (Hobbs, 2019).

### **The Parents**

The opinions parents have about uniforms vary widely, and resist easy categorization. However, their most common strategy for effectively conveying their opinions is as a collective, through organizations or simply by agreeing to attend school board meetings together.

The disagreements parents have on school uniforms can be seen in a 2010 parent survey of the Tuscaloosa City School System. 1839 responses were received, and of those 55% of parents favored implementing a mandatory school uniform policy, with 32% opposed and 13% undecided (Smith).

Disagreements also appear at an individual level. Facebook and similar platforms are a convenient way to express opinions, with a low barrier to entry. On February 25, 2017, the



*Beauregard Daily News* in Louisiana asked its readers: “What are your thoughts on school uniforms?” Responses were divided. “I hated them when my son was in school” confided one parent. “It was twice the money that I could have used so many other ways, like for food or bills.” Another parents, meanwhile, argues “if all of the kids wear the same clothes, then the alleged peer pressure isn't there for those who cannot afford expensive things. I've seen this in other states and it works.” One parent noticed that “Every year or two, someone decides they want to change things. They get everyone all riled up, but when the time comes to actually do something, most of those people can't be bothered to show up and make their voices heard.”

However, many parents *have* made their voices heard. Parents Across America (PAA) is a non-partisan grassroots organization for US parents advocating to improve public schools. While divided over uniforms' effects, they express concerns of discrimination. Kimberly Books, leader of PAA chapter PAA-Atlanta Public Schools, argues that any attire policy should be applied fairly and uniformly across schools and districts (2015).

In 1999, the school board of Wilson County, Tennessee implemented a uniform dress code for its students, consisting of black pants/skirts and a white shirt/blouse (ACLU, 2000). Many parents in the county were outraged by this, and formed the Wilson County Parents Coalition. They sought to protect the “rights of parents to decide not only what their children will wear but how their clothing dollars are spent” (2000). They urged their members to protest the policy, especially by attending school board meetings to make their voices heard.

In 2008, at Lawrence High School in Massachusetts, Gina Castillo and her 16-year-old son were arrested for resisting arrest and assault and battery against a police officer after they confronted school officials over his three-day suspension, which was a “uniform matter” of undisclosed nature. Dozens of parents accused the administration of overreacting and they

showed up in mass to a school board meeting, where they called for a change in dress code policy (Johnson). Likewise, in Gonzales, Texas, police had to restore order at a school board meeting, where parents were complaining about a policy that required students who violated the dress code to either go home or put on a prison jump suit (Johnson, 2008). A mother at the meeting said: “You’re punishing the children. You guys aren’t concerned about their education.”

### **The Teachers and Administrators**

School administrators draft and enforce dress codes. Uniform policies often appeal to them as an easy to enforce dress code option that improves academic performance, lowers disciplinary issues, reduces economic inequality, and promotes school unity.

As with students, hard numerical data is one way to assess the perception of educators on school uniforms. Brobeck’s previously mentioned survey found that 88% of the school’s staff agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I support the uniform requirements at this school” (2018). A 1998 survey of 41 teachers in a rural public elementary school in Georgia found that 66% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I favor a school uniform” (Padgett). And Bodine’s 2003 survey of Milpitas, California teachers found that 86% agreed with the statement “uniforms increase campus safety” (b). Fairly unanimously across surveys of a similar nature, a majority of educators express approval of school uniforms.

As with the students, more qualitative evidence is needed to explain *why* educators like school uniforms. Brobeck’s survey included in depth interviews with administrators and teachers concerning their feelings for school uniforms (2018). When asked “Do you believe that specific uniform requirements influence student behavior?” one teacher replied “Students are behaved better because they look the same – they aren’t checking out each other’s appearance and getting

distracted.” Another agreed, saying “Uniforms eliminate comparisons, which builds community and creates unity among students.” These teachers were also asked if “uniform requirements affect students’ academic performance.” Participants “generally agreed there was a positive correlation,” with one teacher remarking that “With uniforms there is a sense of coherency and cooperation. Nothing (wardrobe-related) interferes with learning.” Another clarified, specifying that it was not specifically that uniforms that improved focus, but rather “Anything different distracts students at school.”

In 2003, Alleyne, LaPoint, Lee, and Mitchell conducted focus groups with 16 teachers from a majority black northeastern city middle school, asking them questions about their views on dress, uniforms, and behavior. When asked about the changes they noted in students after a uniform policy was implemented, many had positive observations to share. “I don’t hear about the clothing or teasing in terms of clothing” one teacher noted. “Well, there is not as much time wasted on telling them to stop ‘jone-ing’ [competitive, back and forth verbal bantering] on individuals in class” remarked another. To directly quote the study, “Educators were asked if they liked the uniform policy and they all responded positively. Overall, they said that the policy had reduced teasing, absenteeism, and school violence and students were more focused on the teaching and learning process. Moreover, they said that they believed that school uniforms increased students’ confidence, pride, and self-esteem and improved behavior in class.”

### **The Manufacturers**

Uniform manufacturers have a vested interest in attire policy, as it directly affects their profits. They boast about the benefits uniforms can provide, and seek to convince policymakers to implement them (and ideally to choose them for their uniform needs).

Numerous uniform manufactures have a section of their website dedicated to praising uniforms. DENNIS Uniforms, a school uniform manufacturer based in Oregon, lauds the benefits of uniforms on their website, claiming that “with a uniform program, schools eliminate the socioeconomic tension driven by fashion trends and high-end brands only some families can afford, while increasing safety on campus and distinguishing students within their community” (2019). French Toast, a New Jersey based uniform producer, has an extensive page titled “Why School Uniforms?” (2020). Among the standard arguments about “climate for learning,” “school unity,” “cost-effective,” and “school safety,” they even have a subsection titled “School uniforms encourage individual self-expression,” where they argue “Instead of demonstrating their self-expression through the latest contemporary styles in the hallway, students focus on more appropriate ways to express themselves during their school day, most notably through personal or academic achievement.” And Clothes2Order, an online custom clothing manufacturer based in the UK, has a post on their blog praising uniforms. Titled “7 Really Great Reasons Why School Uniforms Are Beneficial,” they proudly claim that “as well as time-saving, a uniform also can help to improve grades, thanks to increased concentration. Similarly, it instills discipline and pride, again helping to **boost grades** by creating a more formal, academic atmosphere” (2013).

Beyond mere words on a webpage, uniform manufactures can influence policy through subtler means. In 2013, Lands’ End Uniforms, a Wisconsin based uniform manufacturer, partnered with the National Association of Elementary School Principles (NAESP) to conduct a survey of 517 schools. School officials were surveyed at each school, and the joint report, “School Uniforms Are on the Rise!” enthusiastically declares that “school uniforms are on the rise in public schools as nearly half (49 percent) have a policy in place or plans to implement one – more than double from 2000 (21 percent). The rise of school uniforms may be linked to their

positive effects in the classroom and the ease on a parent's pocketbook!" The report goes on to express all the positive benefits school officials believe might be granted by wearing uniforms, from raising achievement to decreasing bullying. According to the School Superintendents Association (AASA), an earlier study was also conducted by Lands' End, where they interviewed 1000 parents and found that 56% of parents whose children did not currently wear uniforms would support uniforms if their school implemented a policy (White, 2000). Furthermore, a study was sponsored by the Schoolwear Association in 2017, a UK based coalition of "retailers, direct to school suppliers, manufacturers, distributors, wholesalers, suppliers, decorators, agents and schools" involved in the supply of school specific uniforms, sponsored a study carried out by independent researchers (2020). According to the study, "75% [of teachers] reported they have seen an increase in the number of children with mental health problems in the last five years and two thirds felt that kids face increased pressure about fashion and appearance. While 83% said a good school uniform reduced this pressure in schools and could prevent bullying based on appearance or economic background" (Printwear&promotion, 2017). Although the Schoolwear Association did not directly conduct this study, this is a clear example of guiding the narrative one wishes to tell through the questions asked.

## **Conclusion**

Manufacturers of student uniforms have determined that uniforms are a revolutionary innovation that will change schools forever for the better. The ACLU, meanwhile, considers uniforms an unjust intrusion on the intrinsic rights of students nationwide. Have either made a careful unbiased assessment and arrived at a nuanced and flexible worldview? That seems dubious. However, educators, parents, and students, all presumably with the best interests of

student education at heart, likewise arrive at diverse opinions. No universal school uniform policy will work for all schools. Rather, the decision must be made on an individual basis; policymakers must to those affected.

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