School Dress Codes Are Necessary and Constitutional

Students' Rights, 2005

According to the following viewpoint, school dress codes promote school safety and foster a positive learning environment. Specifically, Stephen Daniels writes, dress codes reduce conflict associated with name brand and gang clothing, decrease the gap between poor and rich students, and encourage a sense of belonging that contributes to overall order and discipline. The author asserts that dress codes are constitutional, citing court cases that found they do not infringe on students' rights or suppress their speech. Daniels is director of research for the North Carolina Family Policy Council.

As you read, consider the following questions:

In many schools, students do not have restricted rights to publish on controversial topics in school newspapers or other forums. Write a letter to your school newspaper in which you explain what you feel are reasonable and unreasonable freedoms of speech for students. Use at least two resources from the Opposing Viewpoints Resource Center as evidence to support your stance.

1. What are the benefits of school uniforms, as cited in the U.S. Department of Education's Manual on School Uniforms?
2. The author cites the Long Beach School District's uniform policy as decreasing crime by what percent?
3. What are the three Ps of school safety?

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 principles had either instigated a uniform policy, were currently writing one, or had it on their agenda for consideration. With so many schools and school districts adopting school dress policies, it is important 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.

The Benefits of School Uniforms

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.
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.

In North Carolina, the feedback from Halifax County is also positive. Dr. Viola Vaughan, principal 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. Alan Sledge, assistant principal 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."

The Positive Impact of School Dress Codes

Feedback on school dress codes has also been positive. According to Don Woodard, a high school principal in Johnston County, the students' "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." Commenting on his school's dress code, Shelly Marsh, a middle school principal also from Johnston County, said: "We have high expectations.... Students' attitudes are different according to their dress."

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.

Promoting School Safety

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 themselves 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.

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. Interestingly, these improvements came about without any other security measures having been implemented at the time uniforms became mandatory. 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.

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.

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.

**Self-Esteem and School Unity**

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. 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.

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. 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....
Dress Codes Do Not Infringe on Rights

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. 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.

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 students' interest in expressing themselves through their choice of clothes was outweighed by the school's attempt to create a "safe and peaceful environment."

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)....

Dress Policies Are in the School's Best Interest

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.

Further Readings

Books


**Periodicals**


**Full Text:** COPYRIGHT 2005 Gale, COPYRIGHT 2006 Gale.