

UNIFORMS

Are They a Good Fit?

By Marsha Boutelle
From California Schools

Sixth-grader Tiffany gets sent to the principal's office because her teacher thinks the girl is inappropriately dressed. Tiffany is wearing a micro-mini skirt rolled down to just above her belly button and a halter top that exposes her midriff.

Principal Judy Montgomery, of Sacramento's Bear Flag Elementary School, takes Tiffany home to change her clothes and to check in with her parents. Their reaction isn't what she expects.

"Her mother was upset with me," Montgomery says. "She said, 'I think she looks cute!'"

In an era where some parents seem unwilling or unable to draw the "clothes" line with their children, where pop culture influences kids' clothing choices as never before, and school safety—including

gang violence—is at the top of everyone's minds, school uniforms and dress codes can play a significant role. But what that role should be is open to interpretation and can be a source of frustration—and skirmishes.

Dress Codes and the Ed Code

California Education Code 35183 gives school districts the power to regulate student attire, declaring that "schools need the authorization to implement uniform clothing requirements." On the other hand, it also states, "The governing board shall provide a method whereby parents may choose not to have their children comply with an adopted school uniform policy."

This legislation can be exasperating. For the most part, districts allow schools to decide whether to

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impose dress codes or require uniforms. School officials I interviewed sought their constituents' buy-in, asking parents and students to vote on the issue and typically requiring about 75 percent approval to proceed. That leaves the 25 percent who don't approve, and disapproving parents certainly influence their children's attitudes, which adds to the difficulty in administering the rule. Then there are parents who opt their children out of the provision.

At Montgomery's school, only about 1 percent of parents officially opt their kids out, "But there is a huge problem with about another 30 percent who do not sign a waiver and do not abide by the policy.... There is not enough meat in the policy to actually require families to abide by the uniform, which makes it very hard to enforce."

Every day, teachers must try to remember which students who are not in uniform have turned in waivers signed by their parents allowing them to opt out, or they must take up valuable class time checking each child's status against a list. The task can be complicated by students who show up out of uniform without a waiver and students in only partial compliance—wearing the proper pants with a nonstandard shirt or, in a school that prohibits prints, wearing socks embossed with the image a Winnie-the-Pooh character. (Napa Valley

Unified School District is appealing a trial court judge's ruling that its restriction on prints violates students' freedom of expression.)

At Barbara Comstock Morse Elementary School, Principal Mike Gulden uses a combination of logic and humor.

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"Kids don't want to do their homework, either," Gulden says. "The reality is, there's an instructional purpose [to requiring uniforms]. I tell them, 'We wear uniforms because (1) that's our policy, (2) you see me wearing it, and (3) what if your parents came in to see me in the office, and I had my shirt-tails hanging out and three or four layers of clothes on?'"

Gulden wears the school's uniform colors in some combination every day, and he believes that staff needs to "walk the walk" as well.

The vigor with which schools enforce apparel policies differs from school to school. Some will send children home for what may seem like a minor infraction. Others try to be accommodating, realizing that neither parents nor children can always adhere to policy.

"It comes up quite often from parents who are tired of trying to

get the child to wear the uniform," Gulden says. "I try to strike a happy medium and say, 'Wear it only two or three days a week' or 'rearrange the styles a bit.'"

"What if the uniforms disappeared tomorrow?" Gulden asks. Differences between "our needy kids and fairly well-to-do kids might become magnified and polarize the campus," creating resentment and tension. "Life has enough hurdles for families and kids; I don't think one of them should be here at school. There's that stigma of 'my socioeconomic status.' Kids 5, 6, 7 years old shouldn't have to deal with that."

Leveling the Playing Field

Still, uniforms offer a variety of benefits, according to supporters. Uniforms "promote school safety and enhance the learning environment, and diminish the clothing competition," says Linda Rondeau, assistant superintendent of educational services at Pittsburg Unified School District.

Her district's transition to uniforms didn't occur without some snags.

"Elementary was really all right with it, [since] most of the students at our sites had been voluntarily wearing uniforms for a couple of years," Rondeau says. "The junior high students were quite unhappy with it. Overall, parents were thrilled.

"Now, no one is looking at shirts

with graffiti or wondering if what [students] are wearing is affiliated with a gang or worrying about someone's designer sweatshirt," Rondeau adds.

Judy Hunt-Brown, principal at Maeola R. Beitzel Elementary School in Sacramento, says classmates who are dressed alike are far less distracted.

"With today's fashions of minimal dress, there are fewer issues with clothes that are too revealing," Hunt-Brown says. "Students spend less time talking about and analyzing everyone's dress. There are also fewer issues with the kind of shoes students need to have to be able to participate in physical education."

Empirical Data and Everyday Experience

In his 1996 State of the Union Address, Bill Clinton challenged schools "to teach character education, to teach good values and good citizenship. And if it means that teenagers will stop killing each other over designer jackets, then our public schools should be able to require their students to wear school uniforms." This often-quoted remark is cited by advocates as a primary argument for uniforms in public schools. But whether—or how much—uniforms promote safety remains subject to debate.

"It is not true that there has been no empirical research conducted to assess the effectiveness

of school uniforms on student behavior and educational outcomes, yet there is much to be done," David Brunσμα, a sociology professor at the University of Missouri, wrote in *The School Uniform Movement and What It Tells Us About American Education*.

He went on to use reports from the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics to debunk the notion that there is a correlation between school safety and uniforms. Quoted in a July 2006 article on GreatSchools.net, Brunσμα said critics "appear to want to continue relying on anecdotal aspects of the debate while simply disregarding rigorous, scientific study of the issue."

It's not known how much time Brunσμα has spent standing in a crowded hallway when classes let out. But elementary principals who do that regularly have a store of personal experience that contradicts Brunσμα's academic argument.

And, in any event, ridding their schools of gang colors is just one benefit principals attribute to uniforms. There's also the ease with which students can be identified on field trips—and, on campus, the ease with which intruders out of uniform can be detected.

Hunt-Brown also embroiders a broader benefit onto the list: "Overall improved student behavior as a result of uniforms results in few-

er behavior incidents on campus."


John Ginn, principal at Sacramento City USD's Bowling Green Charter School, adds another observational benefit to the mix.

"Wearing uniforms is promoting job skills at a young age," Ginn says. "We learn to dress properly for work, church, play, et cetera. Whenever we are lucky enough to have a student wear his uniform

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with a sports coat or blazer, we tell him that he is looking like an adult going to work."

To those who question whether uniforms smother students' creative freedom of expression, Rondeau says no way.

"We hope to see students' creativity [expressed] academically and artistically," Rondeau says. "There was a great article written by Jeffrey Earl Warren regarding school uniforms (*San Francisco Chronicle*, April 2, 2007). His ending statement reads: 'Uniforms allow children the right to distinguish themselves by the deeds they've done, not the duds they wear.'" 

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