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ON ASSIGNMENT: RESEARCH

Uniform Effects?

Schools cite benefits of student uniforms, but researchers see little evidence of effectiveness.

Dateline: Clinton, Md.

There's something about a student in uniform, muses Principal Rudolph Saunders as he scans the busy lunchroom here at Stephen Decatur Middle School. Under Decatur's policy, all students wear the standard school attire consisting of khaki pants with polo shirts in white, burgundy, or navy blue. Some of the shirts also sport an embroidered Decatur eagle, an optional embellishment.

Saunders' instincts tell him that students behave better when they're dressed alike, that they fight less and focus on their schoolwork more. Plus, the uniform puts all students on a more equal social footing, regardless of whether they come from comfortable middle-class households or one of the group foster-care homes that lie in Decatur's attendance zone.

"It's like night and day," Saunders says. "We have 'dress down' days, and the kids' behavior is just completely different on those days."

Yet national studies on the effectiveness of school uniform policies tell a story distinctly different from educators' experiences here at Decatur, according to David L. Brunsmas, a researcher at the University of Missouri-Columbia. Brunsmas, an assistant professor of sociology, has been studying the movement for public school uniforms since 1996. That was the year that President

Canton propelled the movement into the national consciousness by endorsing the idea in his State of the Union Address. In a book published in November by Scarecrow-Education, Brunnsma seeks to set the record straight on what uniforms can and cannot do for public schools.

And his general conclusion is "not much." "Despite the media coverage," Brunnsma writes in *The School Uniform Movement and What It Tells Us About American Education*, "despite the anecdotal meanderings of politicians, community members, educators, board members, parents, and students, uniforms have not been effective at attacking the very outcomes and issues they were assumed to aid."

That means, he says, that uniform policies don't curb violence or behavioral problems in schools. They don't cultivate student self-esteem and motivation. They don't balance the social-status differences that often separate students. And they don't improve academic achievement. (In fact, uniforms may even be associated with a small detrimental effect on achievement in reading, his research shows.)

Brunnsma's message is not new. With research partner Kelly Rocquemore, he arrived at similar conclusions in a 1998 study published in the peer-reviewed *Journal of Education Research*. Among the first of its kind, the study was just a drop of evidence in an area of study that was thirsting for some solid signs of effectiveness.

"We were actually a little bit shocked that [uniforms] didn't have the kind of impact people were discussing," Brunnsma says of his early research with Rocquemore. He says the two cooked up the idea for the study one day over coffee after they had read a national newspaper headline pointing to Clinton's mention of school uniforms as a possible cure for schools' ills. "The idea of school uniforms does seem commonsensical as a way to equalize social status," he adds.

Brunnsma has expanded his work since then and compiled it all in his book, which is probably the most exhaustive collection to date of quantitative research on the nationwide movement to embrace school uniforms.

He bases his own conclusions on analyses of two massive databases. They are the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988, a federal data archive that tracks a nationally representative sample of 8th graders throughout their years of schooling, and the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, a more recent database that began tracking children from preschool on in 1998.

In conducting hundreds of analyses, Brunnsma looks for effects among individual students and entire schools, and among younger children and teenagers. He also controls for differences that might also account for varying test scores, such as the socioeconomic status or race of students. And, for the most part, he continues to come up empty-handed on any evidence that school uniform policies are effective.

Yet such conclusions run counter to the real-life experiences of some of the districts that have been at the forefront of the school-uniform movement, like the Long Beach Unified School District

in California. In 1994, the 97,200-student urban district, located in the southern part of the state, became the first public school district in the nation to require all students in grades K-8 to wear uniforms. A two-year evaluation of that effort, conducted from 1993 to 1995, turned up some remarkable improvements: a 28 percent drop in suspension rates at the elementary level, a 36 percent decline in middle school suspensions, a 51 percent decrease in fights in grades K-8, and a 34 percent drop in assault and battery in elementary and middle schools.

To Brunsma's way of thinking, though, that study suffered from two major problems. For starters, it involved just one district and, second, it failed to account for other changes, such as demographic shifts, that might also explain the results. Brunsma says newer case studies looking at uniform-adoption efforts in schools in Baltimore, Denver, and Aldine, Texas, a suburban Houston district — all of which also point to positive effects — have an additional shortcoming. Besides being largely anecdotal, they were sponsored by French Toast, a leading manufacturer of school uniforms based in Martinsville, Va.

"If you look at the published stuff on this, the ones that conclude positive results, by and large come from clothiers," he says, noting that school uniforms have grown into a multimillion-dollar industry. Another study of school uniforms was financed by Dodgeville, Wis.-based Lands' End Inc., which started its school uniform division in 1997.

The statistics seem to matter little, however, to parents and school leaders here in Prince George's County, Md., a middle-class, largely African-American suburb bordering Washington that includes Stephen Decatur Middle School, or to the thousands of other public schools around the country that continue to embrace the use of uniforms.

In fact, Brunsma estimates that as many as 27 percent of all public elementary schools by the year 2000 had some sort of uniform policy in place. Those schools tend to be in areas where families are disadvantaged, or in places like Prince George's County where most students are members of minority groups.

The impetus for uniforms in the 135,000-student Prince George's County district came in the mid-1990s from a vocal group of parents. By the start of this school year, 80 of the district's 196 schools had adopted either mandatory or voluntary uniform policies. The first county high school to join that list adopted a school uniform policy this year.

"When a school or a PTA decides to go in that direction, they go in that direction," says Howard A. Burnett, the district's chief administrator for human resources. For the most part, he says, the district has neither encouraged schools to adopt the practice nor discouraged them, choosing instead to let local communities take the lead and to support their efforts.

For that reason, Prince George's officials never formally tracked the impact that uniform policies have had in their schools. Neither has Decatur, which began requiring uniforms in 1998.

But Betty Makesell-Bailey, the school-improvement resource teacher at Decatur, says test scores have been going up and in-school suspensions have been going down ever since the

middle school made the switch. Once targeted for "reconstitution" because of its low scores under the state's former testing program, Decatur has been improving every year. Now it meets most of its achievement targets on Maryland's new assessment. The lone exception comes among special education students, who still fail as a group to make the annual test-score gains state officials expect.

Whether those improvements have anything to do with uniforms, Mikesell-Bailey can't say for sure. She's fairly certain, though, that the policy has cut down on the teasing to which middle school children subject one another.

"Children at this age are always going to find something wrong with someone," says Mikesell-Bailey. She tells a story about some boys she observed watching a fellow student make a presentation in the school's media center. She noticed the boys were making fun of the other boy's sneakers, which were plain white, in contrast to their more fashionable two-tone shoes. It was the only clothing item that differentiated the student from his classmates, because there is some leeway in the type of shoes students can wear.

"What I'm saying is," Mikesell-Bailey adds, "children at this age are so impressed with dress that, if we can eliminate that little aspect of their daily lives and get their minds focused on academics, that's half the battle."

On that point, even the students agree. Without clothing to focus on, they say, students pick on one another for other reasons.

None of this is to say, of course, that these students like their uniforms. Seventh grader Aaron Morton, for one, says "uniforms are uncomfortable. They make you feel all stiff like robots or something."

Other students have similar complaints. "People can't be who they are if they have to wear the same thing every day," says Alexis Richardson, who's also in 7th grade.

To some degree, Brunσμα believes the students may have a point when it comes to the potentially dehumanizing effects of uniforms. Some of his historical research suggests, for example, that school uniforms originated in England in the 16th century as a way to signal the lower-class status of some children.

"Most people assume uniforms are heavily correlated with elite status, but early on, they were used as a marker for orphans and charity children," he says. That's why he's worried now that most of the public schools that have adopted uniform policies serve student populations that are often disadvantaged.

While he can't prove that uniforms are purposely being used to stigmatize groups of students, he does marshal some statistical evidence to suggest that they don't help when it comes to bolstering self-esteem in the early grades. One of uniform proponents' hopes has been that, by evening out social status differences between students, uniforms could raise the sense of self-

worth of students from poor families.

But educators and parents in Prince George's County also note that uniform policies may carry benefits that studies like Brunnsma's do not measure. For example, J. Showell, the middle school's security officer, says the uniform policy makes it easier for him to spot outsiders coming into the building.

"I can scan a whole group of folks and see those people that belong to Decatur," he says.

Mikesell-Bailey, Decatur's school-improvement resource teacher, says the uniforms also Sag students when they try to ditch class and head home. She occasionally sees them along the road as she drives to pick up lunch at a nearby shopping center.

"When I see the uniform, I always stop, because I know it's one of my children," she says.

Rhonda E. Chandler, the parent of a 7th grader at Decatur, likes not having to buy more expensive designer clothes or worrying that her child will change into less appropriate clothing in the school restroom or on the bus going to school.

"I love the fact that my daughter wears a uniform," says Chandler, who also is president of the school's PTA. "It's just one less thing to worry about."

Decatur and district officials say parental support may be the biggest reason for the policy's longevity here. Elsewhere around the country, in comparison, some schools and districts have abandoned efforts to impose uniform requirements on students.

A case in point is Highland-Goffe's Falls Elementary School in New Hampshire, where Principal James Paul says less-than-unanimous support from parents helped undo a short-lived experiment with mandatory uniforms in 2000-01.

"We had seven very negative parents out of 454 families," says Paul. "Those seven children never wore uniforms, which, from my point of view, kind of derailed us."

After the school board declined to allow Paul to transfer those students to a different elementary school, the school scrapped the policy — even though officials said instances of bullying had decreased in the year that uniforms were worn.

"I would say it was a successful failure," Paul says now.

To avoid a similar fate at Maryland's Decatur Middle School, educators work hard to enforce their policy. When students come to school missing regulation wear, Saunders makes a call to their parents. Repeat offenders must serve an in-school suspension. Some teachers also keep uniform items on hand for students who are new to the school.

"If a child walks in today and enrolls, in the next hour or so, I would bet you're going to see a uniform on that child," says Mikesell-Bailey. "It's because we don't want other students to see a

child without a uniform."

Though enforcing the policy takes up Principal Saunders' time, it's more clear-cut and less time-consuming than trying to decide whether students are complying with the district's standard dress code. How low-cut can a girls' shirt be before it crosses from appropriate to inappropriate, for instance? How baggy is baggy?

"I would spend 60 to 90 minutes a day on dress-code violations before," says Saunders, who served as an administrator at county secondary schools with no uniform requirements before coming to Decatur. "I wouldn't be surprised if every school in the county moves to uniforms."

Still, even he concedes that uniforms alone can't overcome all the challenges that public schools face.

"I think some people think if you change the clothes, everything else is going to change magically," he says. "But it all has to be part of a package."

"I think some people think if you change the clothes, everything else is going to change magically. But it all has to be part of a package."

— Rudolph Saunders Decatur Principal

PHOTO (COLOR): Students gather during a December lunch at Stephen Decatur Middle School in Prince George's County, Md. School officials believe Decatur's mandatory student-uniform policy has improved behavior and learning. But some researchers suggest such policies have virtually no effect on discipline or academic achievement.

PHOTO (COLOR): Stephen Decatur Middle School Principal Rudolph Saunders, center, stands with students wearing school-approved outfits. The students, from left to right, are Cory Darby, Liane Robinson, Craig Hines, and Kiauna Womack.

PHOTO (COLOR): Decatur students review material during a Civil Air Patrol class. Some students say that the uniforms are uncomfortable and that they discourage individual expression. But in the same breath, they generally agree that the school's policy helps cut down on the number of fights caused by insults regarding clothing.

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Photos by Hector Emanuel

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