What the United Kingdom Can Teach the United States About School Uniforms

Wearing school uniforms can create a more respectful atmosphere for learning and ease the burden on parents.

By Angela Walmsley

Students walk the school hallways in an orderly fashion, dressed professionally in uniforms consisting of blazers with the school’s crest and skirts for girls and trousers for boys. They don’t walk with hands in their pockets. Students are polite and wait for the teacher outside the classroom door. When he says to enter, all students enter and stand at their desks until everyone is inside. They don’t sit until the teacher invites them to sit. Students prepare for their lesson and are, for the most part, quite content and respectful. Where am I?

This description sounds like it might be from a wealthy preparatory school, but instead it’s a regular state school in England where

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School uniforms in public schools are becoming associated with schools facing violence problems — that is a mistake.

I was never an advocate of school uniforms. Having attended a U.S. public school myself, I couldn’t imagine wearing a uniform. When I taught in an American public school, I thought uniforms were significant only because they identified anyone who attended a private school. But I began to see the benefit of school uniforms when I taught in a British school a number of years ago and later when my own children attended English schools.

To understand the benefits, readers need a short background of British education. Every British school requires that students wear a school uniform. Schools choose their own required uniform, and parents are responsible for providing the uniform. Some schools may offer support or discounted items for needy children. I used to think American schools couldn’t do this because schools would be required to pay for the clothing for anyone who couldn’t afford it. However, because the school uniform is part of the British culture, U.K. schools do not need to provide students with the clothing. Children have a job, and that job is to attend school. Just as their parents must wear appropriate clothing for work, students must wear appropriate clothing for school. Parents are used to wearing uniforms or appropriate clothing for their own professions, and this culture is passed down to their children. But the “catch” is that school uniforms in the United Kingdom are not that expensive.

NOT A COSTLY ALTERNATIVE

In the United States, most private schools that require uniforms choose a plaid or specific item that the students must buy to signal that they belong to that school. This may be costly because these items might be available only at one or two places. In the United Kingdom, schools choose “generic” items that can be bought anywhere. When every school must follow the rule, more of the items become available at lower costs. In the United Kingdom, most primary schools require boys to wear dark-gray or black trousers and a white polo shirt with a school sweatshirt; they require girls to wear dark-gray pants or skirts with tights and a white polo shirt and school sweatshirt cardigan. This means the school item with the logo is the sweatshirt or cardigan, and all other items can be found in multiple shops in Britain. For example, a family can buy a summer jumper for about $6. Trousers cost about $12. Because of competition, uniform costs go drastically down. Parents can usually buy school-specific items through the school at a reduced cost. At a recent school fair (carnival) at my children’s school, used items were about 75 cents per item.

When students attend secondary school, they usually require more formal dress. They follow the above guidelines, but a blazer or jacket replaces the school sweatshirt or cardigan. The dress code also specifies black shoes, a black backpack or bag with limited writing, and limited jewelry and makeup.

British parents generally prefer school uniforms because the cost can be less than buying multiple designer outfits. Also, there are no battles in the morning about what to wear to school — the choice is simple. Parents appreciate needing to buy only a few shirts, a few trousers, skirts, tights, and possibly a blazer, cardigan, or sweatshirt for the entire school year. It’s actually more reasonable to do this than to buy the many clothes that U.S. parents feel they must buy. As a parent with children who attended both a U.S. public school followed by a U.K. school, I know I spent less money and needed far fewer items of clothing for my children when they wore school uniforms.

Teachers appreciate the fact that the presence of school uniforms brings a sense of duty to the students and respect for the school and teachers. U.K. teachers told me they believe school uniforms help students focus on school and not each other’s clothes. Because everyone looks basically the same, differences in economic status are not as blatant. Because students dress in uniforms, they’re reminded that their “job” is to be a student.

Does this mean that all students behave and study all the time? Certainly not, but it’s helped create a culture where students generally are proud of their school and more respectful to teachers and administrators. Also, because students are identified by their school clothing, teachers and parents can easily see who belongs in the school. This can also be helpful on field trips, in an emergency, etc.

Another issue related to school uniforms is the teacher dress code. Because schools consistently use student uniforms, U.K. schools often have a dress code for teachers. Primary teachers typically dress very professionally, but in clothing that allows them...
to work with children. They may wear trousers, skirts, and sometimes adult versions of the school sweatshirt. On the other hand, secondary teachers wear the more formal dress of suits or business-type clothing. Again, the school culture is affected in a positive way because teachers always look professional, and students generally treat them as professionals.

In an era when some students lack respect for teachers, the presence of school uniforms seems to automatically promote a culture of respect. This is true in the student-teacher relationship, the teacher-teacher relationship, and the parent-teacher relationship. While the United States spends time and money on the parent-teacher-student triad, the addition of school uniforms would be something simple that would strengthen this relationship.

UNIFORMS AND POVERTY

Targeting school uniforms to high-poverty areas in the United States is a mistake. While the benefits of school uniforms are reaching these schools, we’re creating a culture where only the wealthiest (private schools) and poorest (high-poverty public schools) wear school uniforms. Most high-poverty schools suggest school uniforms because they believe that will reduce the threat of violence. While this seems to be working for these schools (Wade and Stafford 2003; White 2000), we’re creating a culture where parents think that a public school where children wear uniforms is an unsafe place to send their child. In other words, school uniforms in public schools are becoming associated with schools facing violence problems. If we want the true benefits of school uniforms to reach all children, we must create a culture where it is not only accepted but expected in all schools.

Making this cultural shift can begin by strongly recommending school uniforms in a school or district. Provide information to parents on the benefits of wearing school uniforms. Choose a uniform that’s reasonable and simple to obtain. For example, request black or khaki trousers and white polo shirts for all students. Eventually introduce a school logo on items. Inform parents that students don’t wear exactly the same outfit every day. For example, in the United Kingdom, girls can choose from jumpers or pinafores, skirts, or trousers. Boys sometimes alternate between shorts and trousers.

Schools or districts could seek funding to provide items for students who would have difficulty buying them. Create a “hand me down” closet at the school where parents can donate items after their children outgrow them.

ENFORCING DRESS CODES

Some have argued that school uniforms will never work because making a rule that requires them would not be enforceable. Many suggest that students, particularly at the high school level, would claim that they have the constitutional right to opt out. In the United States, for those schools that adopt school uniform policies, about 40% make the wearing of uniforms voluntary while 60% make wearing uniforms mandatory (Daugherty 2001). My experience in the United Kingdom leads me to believe that even if the policy was voluntary, once students began wearing them, the culture would shift and most students would move toward wearing uniforms, especially if this policy is initiated in younger grades.

In the United Kingdom, most schools have a few nonuniform days each year when they raise money for charities by allowing students to donate funds in exchange for dressing as they want for the day. While
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Most U.S. schools have written dress codes. Furthermore, administrators and teachers spend considerable time addressing issues when students don’t comply with the school dress code. One principal said he spends 60 to 90 minutes each day dealing with dress code issues (Viadero 2005). Compliance is easier with school uniforms because the rules are clear and, for the most part, very straightforward. When issues surrounding the dress code are diminished, there is more time for student learning.

The research concerning the academic changes and changes in the self-confidence and motivation of students who wear school uniforms in the United States is mixed (White 2000; Lumsden 2001; Anderson 2002). Much of the research does not support major gains in self-confidence and motivation. But that might be because much of this research is done in only poorer schools — the ones that introduce uniforms to help students avoid gang violence. A variety of schools must be analyzed in order to see if cultural change and changes in self-perception and motivation occur across a variety of students. Furthermore, almost all the research on this topic in the United States is done in elementary and middle schools (Lumsden 2001). Little research on school uniforms in the United States occurred before the early 1990s, so we have had less than two decades to understand the benefits or to see school culture shift in response to school uniforms.

Anderson (2002) provides four basic reasons for promoting school uniforms: 1) enhanced school safety, 2) improved learning climate, 3) higher self-esteem for students, and 4) less stress on the family. Anderson further states that when students dress alike, a “team-like” culture develops, and this promotes school spirit and positive self-images. Also, students who wear uniforms can focus on academics, rather than on what others are wearing. “Uniforms set the tone for a proper attitude towards work” (Anderson 2002: 6). This climate should also bring higher self-image and more respect for teachers.

Critics of school uniforms believe that decreases in gang violence and better school climate can be attributed to other causes and that not enough empirical evidence exists to link changes to school uniforms. While little quantitative research supports uniforms, many principals report seeing better student behavior and more concentration on school work (Viadero 2005; Boutelle 2008). One must be careful not to discredit the qualitative data about school climate. If students feel more comfortable and teachers see that students are more settled and ready to learn when wearing school uniforms, then this data is solid and must be credited.

While the debate over school uniforms continues, educators must realize that school uniforms won’t solve the many problems facing schools today. Instead, they should be used to create a positive school climate in which students focus on learning. School uniforms can bring back a little bit more respect for teachers and students in the classroom.

REFERENCES


