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Dress Codes Versus School Uniforms

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Numerous schools throughout the United States implement some type of clothing requirement or restriction, usually classified as a dress code or a uniform. Many differences exist between the two. School dress codes are often less restrictive than school uniforms and allow mild variation of dress, unlike school uniforms, which do not permit much variation and look nearly identical. Most private schools, which tout their academic excellence, require uniforms, and this has inspired many public schools to begin implementing dress code policies in an effort to boost academic success.

Implementation of dress code policies in US schools has become a hotly debated issue. Advocates believe dress codes will improve students' academic standings and create a more unified student community. They also believe it will promote safety in schools and reduce gang-related activity. Opponents disparage dress codes, arguing they limit a student's freedom.

Critical Thinking Questions

- What is the difference between dress codes and uniform codes?
- What are the potential advantages and disadvantages of school dress codes?
- Do you think schools should enforce dress codes or uniform codes? Why or why not?

Differences Between Dress Codes and Uniforms

School dress code policies are generally much less restrictive than school uniform policies. Dress codes are more commonly found in public schools than private institutions, though they are found in both. Some dress codes require a student to wear a certain type of top and bottom in particular colors. Only solid-colored garments are typically permitted as a part of these codes, and clothing with images, patterns, or logos is often banned. Most dress codes extend beyond a student's attire, however, and cover other aspects of their appearance. Many schools ban body decorations such as tattoos, piercings, or regalia that present social or political messages. Other banned accessories may include scarves, bandanas, leggings, and jewelry. Restrictions frequently also limit body exposure, prohibiting bare midriffs, low necklines, open-toed shoes, and exposed backs. Despite the many limitations set by dress code policies, they are still less strict than uniform policies.

School uniforms allow little, if any, dissimilarity in student's dress and are typically more formal. Uniforms are more commonly worn in private and parochial schools. Outfits usually involve a set of clothes that differs by gender. Males are normally required to wear collared shirts with ties and dress pants. Females typically wear collared shirts and ties with either skirts or pants. Sometimes jackets and specific shoes are required. Some schools allow different combinations of tops and bottoms, including polo shirts, turtlenecks, knee-length shorts, and jumpers (dresses). Allowable colors are dictated by the schools.

School Dress Code Debate

Studies show that private schools often see greater academic achievement among students than public schools, which is one reason that many public school officials look to the methods of private schools to improve performance in their districts. Many correlate academic performance with the institution of school uniforms and have become inspired to implement similar standards at public schools. Lower instances of violence and crime are reported at private schools, which further encourages the idea of dress codes. Decisions to introduce dress codes in public schools, however, have been met with varying opinions. Many of the arguments made against dress codes do not pertain to private and parochial school uniform policies because private education is not taxpayer funded. Parents who pay to send their children to private schools are normally in agreement with the school's policies, including the requirement of uniforms. Studies include findings relevant to private school uniforms, however, and both sides of the debate have used this data to support their arguments.

Proponents of Dress Restrictions

Supporters of school dress restrictions claim that limiting a student's apparel is beneficial in many ways. Many school officials believe that dress codes can lead to greater discipline and lessen the chance of violence and crime among students. In some school districts, particularly in urban areas, school violence and crime often is related to gangs. This has prompted many school boards to enforce dress codes that eliminate gang paraphernalia. Students who violate the dress code can be suspended or expelled. Certain restrictions are also used to ensure apparel cannot be used for violent means. Many schools forbid items such as zippered tops or heavy jewelry that potentially could be used for harm. Dress codes are considered important to students' safety as they can help identify nonstudents, potentially reducing the threat of strangers entering schools. Clothing restrictions can also reduce school crime, as students can no longer wear expensive items of clothing and accessories that are usually targets of theft.

Many proponents also believe that the disciplinary effects of dress codes will lead to greater emphasis on school work, though few studies have clearly confirmed this correlation. Advocates also believe dress codes can help cut down on bullying, as fewer social distinctions can be made among students who wear similar dress. Equal dress could help diminish economic barriers, lowering peer pressure and improving self-esteem for students who cannot afford expensive clothes.

Opponents of Dress Restrictions

Detractors of school dress codes cite a lack of evidence proving the benefits of dress restrictions. Little proof exists that dress codes increase academic excellence in public schools. Since various biases limit the amount of substantial findings that demonstrate decreased violence or bullying in schools with dress codes, opponents consider dress codes unnecessary and a violation of individual freedoms outlined in the First Amendment of the Constitution. Critics also believe that the expense of restrictive dress codes and uniforms is an additional burden for low-income families.

Opponents also cite studies that show school dress codes may discriminate against female students, who may be required to wear skirts instead of pants. This idea, traditional in many parts of the world, has come under increasing criticism. However, it remains common and opponents have had little success in challenging it. In 2023, opponents of a North Carolina charter school requirement that female students wear skirts as a sign of traditional femininity took the rule to court; the case ultimately proceeded to the US Supreme Court which, in June of that year, declined to hear it.

Dress and uniform codes may also restrict the rights and self-expression of students who identify as gender non-binary, who may be disallowed from dressing in the manner they feel is most appropriate for them. Still more, students may be denied the ability to wear certain kinds of clothing or accessories with religious significance, such as headscarves, due to dress codes or uniform policies.

Overall, detractors argue that a school district's overall academic performance can only be improved by adjusting learning methods, not student appearance.

Dress Codes Outside of School

In addition to schools, sometimes employers require dress codes to create a safe and professional work environment. Business dress codes usually require employees to be well dressed and groomed. Men may be expected to wear suits and ties, while women may be expected to wear pant suits or skirts. Casual clothes such as jeans and t-shirts are frequently prohibited as well as any apparel that is offensive or exposes too much skin. Some work places implement a business casual dress code, which is a relaxed version of business dress.

Some professions require that a standard uniform be worn by all workers, usually to ensure they are easily recognizable. Police officers, firefighters, and military personnel must dress in uniform when on duty. Other industries such as restaurants sometimes require uniforms be worn by their staff to promote hygiene and safety. Similar uniform policies can also be found in hospitals, where doctors and nurses are required to wear a specified set of clothes.

Fast Facts

- In the 2017–2018 school year, 20 percent of public schools in the United States required students to wear uniforms, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. This is an increase from the 1999–2000 school year, when 12 percent of public schools required uniforms.
- In a 2022 report, the US Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that 93 percent of all US schools have a dress code policy.
- The 2022 GAO report estimated that 90 percent of dress codes prohibit clothing items typically worn by girls, while 69 percent prohibit items generally associated with boys.
- Uniforms used for physical education classes in school may include short-sleeved shirts and short pants. These items may conflict with religious customs, such as among Muslim female students.

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