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School Uniforms

Date: 2022

From: Gale Middle School Online Collection

Publisher: Gale, part of Cengage Group

Document Type: Topic overview

Length: 913 words

Content Level: (Level 3)

Lexile Measure: 1000L

Full Text:

In some countries, all public and private school students wear uniforms. This is true of students in the United Kingdom. School uniforms are much less common in the United States. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 20 percent of US school students wore uniforms in the 2017–2018 school year. That figure is up from 12 percent in 2000. Uniforms are more common in elementary schools. According to the NCES, 23 percent of elementary school students wear uniforms. That is compared to 18 percent of middle school students and 10 percent of high school students.

Schools have uniform policies for a variety of reasons. School uniforms help build a shared identity. They give students a sense of belonging. School uniforms can also foster helpful attitudes. They can reduce signs of income differences among classmates.

Main Ideas

- In the 2017–2018 US school year, dress codes were in place in 43 percent of elementary schools, 63 percent of middle schools, and 56 percent of high schools.
- In the United States, uniform policies are more common in high-poverty schools than in low-poverty schools.
- Those who are in favor of uniforms feel they eliminate clothing that shows the difference between wealthy and poor students. This can reduce bullying and violence
- Those who are against them feel that uniforms limit students' rights to freedom of expression.

School Uniforms vs. Dress Codes

School uniforms are not the same as dress codes. Dress codes simply place limits on the type of clothing that students are permitted to wear. For example, it is common for school dress code policies to state that skirts worn by female students must be at least a minimum length. Dress codes also ban some types of clothing. They frequently ban ripped or torn clothing and exposed underwear. They also ban gang-related clothing or "colors" and items with obscene or offensive slogans or images.

School uniforms, on the other hand, require all students to wear the same type of clothing. For example, male students may be asked to wear white, button-down, long-sleeved collared shirts. They may be asked to wear neckties and dress pants. Female students are typically given the option to wear dress pants or a skirt. School uniform policies may also require students to wear the same type of clothing in physical education classes.

Where Are School Uniforms Most Common?

In the United States, states have the power to allow school districts to create uniform policies. This means that a state can pass a law stating that schools cannot require students to wear uniforms. It also means that a state can pass a law stating that schools can require uniforms. Then it is up to an individual school to decide. About half the states allow schools to enact uniform policies if they choose to do so. The NCES states that school uniforms are more commonly worn in major cities than they are in towns, suburbs, and rural areas. They are also more frequently used in schools with higher rates of poverty among members of the student body. Statistics compiled in 2015 show that 47 percent of high-poverty public schools have uniform policies. In low-poverty public schools, just 6 percent have uniform policies.

Did You Know?

States and regions with laws allowing schools and districts to require students to wear uniforms include:

- Arizona
- Arkansas
- California
- Colorado
- Connecticut
- Delaware
- District of Columbia
- Florida
- Illinois
- Louisiana
- Maryland
- Minnesota
- Mississippi
- Missouri
- Nevada
- New Jersey
- North Carolina
- Ohio
- Oklahoma
- Pennsylvania
- Rhode Island
- Tennessee
- Texas
- Utah
- Virginia

Common Arguments for School Uniforms

School uniforms are believed to help create a safe, equal learning environment. This is especially true in high-poverty schools. School uniforms eliminate clothing that shows the difference between wealthy and poor students. This can reduce bullying and violence. In some cases, students have been assaulted and harassed because of their clothing choices. Some have even been violently robbed of expensive fashion items and accessories. Uniforms greatly reduce such activity. School officials have also reported that the students at schools with uniform policies get better grades and were less likely to get into trouble.

In January 1996 US President Bill Clinton brought up the topic of school uniforms in his State of the Union address. Clinton spoke up in favor of uniforms. He said that they may help curb violence in schools. Because of this, educators should have the right to require students to wear them. He repeated these views on several other occasions, including during a speech he made at an American Federation of Teachers convention in 1998.

Common Arguments Against School Uniforms

Some people are against school uniform policies, however. They say these policies limit rights of freedom of expression. Some cases have gone to court. Most court judgments have come down in favor of the schools and their right to require students to wear uniforms. However, some have not. For example, in January 2000, a woman took North Carolina's Halifax County Board of Education to court. The case was about a nine-year-old boy who was suspended on two occasions for refusing to wear a uniform to school. He did this for religious reasons. The student was represented in court by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). The ACLU successfully argued that the school board's uniform policy interfered with the student's freedom of religion rights. The Halifax County Board of Education then made changes to its uniform policy. Students who did not want to wear uniforms for religious reasons did not have to do so.

Words to Know

ban

To forbid.

freedom of expression

An individual's right to make choices.

slogans

Attention-getting phrases.

United Kingdom

A country that includes England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

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Source Citation (MLA 9th Edition)

"School Uniforms." *Gale Middle School Online Collection*, Gale, 2022. *Gale In Context: Middle School*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/CRXLAO608267779/MSIC?u=nysl_ro_cmhs&sid=bookmark-MSIC&xid=ffd8a293. Accessed 28 Jan. 2025.

Gale Document Number: GALE|CRXLAO608267779