Pros and cons of school dress code

Anonymous
November 11, 2007

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Thanksgiving is coming, which means Christmas sales loom on the horizon. This week Scholars Speak offers a two-for-one offer on school dress codes from faculty of the Fresno Pacific University School of Education:

Scott Key opposes school dress codes because they teach students that conformity is more important than adaptability and do not prepare young people for the workplace and its emphasis on flexibility and problem-solving.

Larry Wilder favors school dress codes because they lead to a safer educational environment that increases students’ ability to learn, increases equality between the sexes and tolerance among ethnic and social groups.

Pros of school dress code: helping students dress for safety

By Larry Wilder, Ed.D.

Each year more and more schools adopt some form of dress code. While some challenges have been made concerning their constitutionality, in general court rulings have supported codes that are instituted properly and can be shown to be rationally related to a legitimate pedagogical purpose. The safety of the children in the schools appears to be the overriding concern considered by the courts.

Public schools have the responsibility to have safe and orderly schools that maintain an environment conducive to learning. The National School Board Association estimates that approximately 135,000 guns are brought to America’s 85,000 public schools each day. This is one reason school districts use to implement dress codes. Some schools even require students to have the belt line exposed at all times for fear of guns concealed under clothing. Additionally, educators report a decrease in violence, a reduction of fights in schools and improved student achievement when dress codes have been implemented.

Safety is one reason for a dress code; however, many educators believe that a dress code also promotes a positive educational environment. In an attempt to counter violence, many public schools implement a dress code or require students to wear uniforms. The idea of uniforms even reached the halls of Congress when then-President Clinton endorsed them in his 1996 State of the Union address. After this
speech, the U.S. Department of Education disseminated the Manual of School Uniforms to all 16,000 school districts in the nation. The manual stated potential benefits, such as decreasing violence and theft, preventing students from wearing gang-related colors to school, instilling student discipline, helping to resist peer pressure, helping students concentrate on academics and aiding in recognition of intruders.

It is estimated that almost 25 percent of the nation’s public schools are expected to have a dress code this year. In September, Philadelphia public school students started wearing uniforms for the first time. They joined districts like Long Beach, Clovis, Fresno, Huston and Dade County, Florida, in having a dress or uniform code. These codes were established because of the success demonstrated by districts with a dress code.

A survey reported by the New York Police Department listed many positive results after a uniform policy was begun in 2000: overall crime was down 14.7 percent and there was an improved sense of belonging and tolerance.

Other results of the research revealed that 68 percent of the parents believed the uniform policy improved overall academic performance. Eighty-eight percent of the parents thought the code reduced teasing between boys and girls. Eighty-four percent felt the uniform code promoted equality between the sexes. Perhaps most revealing was the fact that 80 percent of the girls and 62 percent of the boys reported liking to wear uniforms.

The United States has changed drastically since the early common schools. Horace Mann thought the best school was on a log with the student on one end and the teacher on the other. This was truly individualized instruction. With the number of students growing every year, problems arise. There are more people living in California than live in the entire nation of Canada. One out of every eight students in school in the United States is in school in California. Larger numbers bring different problems from those faced by Horace Mann.

It seems that if a dress or uniform code can possibly improve academic success, reduce violence, increase the safety of students, reduce class/economic envy and improve deteriorating schools, why not implement a code? The public schools must take whatever actions are needed to protect the children. If a dress code helps, then one should be implemented within the constitutional boundaries established by the courts. This issue seems not to be about civil liberties or freedom of speech but about improving our public schools.

Larry Wilder, Ed.D., directs the administrative services program in the Fresno Pacific University School of Education. He served the Clovis and Selma unified school districts in various capacities and spent 19 years at the Fresno County Office of Education, retiring as assistant superintendent.
Cons of school dress code: helping students dress for success

By Scott Key, Ph.D.

The last days of summer saw students and parents shopping for school supplies and clothes from the list given out by their schools. Parents spent precious dollars, being told that this investment would pay dividends in increased student learning.

According to Yolanda Valdez, principal of Dinuba High School, “The dress code sets the tone for the atmosphere on your campus.” While there are different types of dress codes, from school uniforms to acceptable attire, the primary rationale is increasing student safety through easing gang tensions. If students feel safe, they will learn more. Yet, perhaps the more important question may be: What are students learning?

Many educators suggest dress codes are intended to teach students what is acceptable in the workforce. This seems reasonable. However, it assumes there are uniform workplace expectations. Work does not only take place in offices and factories. Some employers—some dotcom companies, for example—care less about how their employees dress and more about their work. In addition, as technological advances continue, some traditional corporations encourage employees to work at home, with no dress codes required. There are also the people who run their own home businesses.

The lack of uniform approach to acceptable workplace dress does not mean each workplace does not have expectations. Rather, it means students need to adapt, not conform. Students need to learn to dress appropriately based on context. Dress codes do not facilitate this learning. Instead, dress codes teach students that conformity and obedience to authority are most important. Individuality is suppressed. Student voice is suppressed.

These outcomes do not match the qualities employers look for. Employers want adaptable workers adept at creative and critical thinking, good decision-making and effective problem-solving. While schools are charged with helping students develop these qualities, the purpose of schools has changed very little over the past 170 years.

During the early years of our republic, children went to private school, had a private tutor or learned at home. These approaches worked because the population was fairly homogenous, with a common language and set of values. However, increased immigration led many to conclude there was a need for an institution to Americanize children. Horace Mann started public schools to promote a common set of values through a common language used to teach a common curriculum. The structure, rules and expectations of the school also conveyed these mainstream values. Success in school depended on children learning both hidden and taught curriculum.
Today, children from diverse backgrounds come together in the giant melting pot called public schools. Mainstream values are still conveyed through expectations, rules, structure and curriculum. Dress codes are part of the hidden curriculum. It isn’t enough for students to graduate with basic and advanced skills. Society expects them to be committed to capitalism and democracy, to hard work, honesty and the American Dream—and to dress appropriately.

Public schools are supposed to prepare students to participate in and contribute to American society. One way to succeed is to assimilate into the mainstream: to develop competence and internalize certain values. This means that conformity is the rule and students fit in or are left behind.

While developing skills and values is a good starting point, should conformity be the goal of public education? No. Our community and nation face many challenges such as discrimination, health care and pollution. New challenges will emerge. We need competent young people to meet these challenges and offer ways to move us toward a more just society. We need schools that help students develop skills-based competencies and critical thinking skills to become agents of change.

Schools need to move away from conformity to adaptability. Instead of suppressing students, schools should promote the development of individuality and voice to better prepare them for life after school. This means dress codes have no place in schools.

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