

# CENTER FOR SCHOOL SAFETY

## School Uniforms/Dress Codes and School Safety

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### **The Issue**

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The recent acts of violence in public schools have placed an emphasis on the responsibility of school officials and school boards to provide safe learning environments for students. Many methods have been suggested, including the use of school uniforms or dress codes. The resurgence of interest in school uniforms or dress codes dates back to the 1980's when public attention focused on students' wearing of designer clothing, punk styles, and T-shirts with certain types of messages (Kaiser, 1997, p.378). Concerns were expressed then about the use of clothing to: foster competitiveness; symbolize gang membership; or characterize lifestyles condoning drugs, alcohol, disrespect for authority, and even violence (Elliott, 1984).

Current concerns have focused on the relationship of clothing to gang violence and associated symbolism. The use of trench coats by the students in the Littleton, CO, tragedy to conceal weapons has emphasized a very tangible consideration of clothing worn to school. But it also illustrates a less tangible consideration, i.e., the use of clothing to create a group identity that will affect the manner in which group members interact with each other as well as the outside world. In Littleton, the outside world was other members of the student body, and the interaction was violent.

The purpose of this issue brief is to: 1) summarize research on the general relationship of clothing to behavior which suggests the use of school uniforms; 2) summarize findings on the current use of school uniforms/dress codes in Kentucky

schools; and 3) summarize research on the relationship of clothing to student behavior in schools, especially with regard to safety.

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### **Methodology**

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In response to a request from State government officials, the Center for School Safety reviewed newspaper items on the school uniform issue in Kentucky and interviewed selected school administrators regarding their experience with the use of school uniforms or dress codes as a method to increase school safety. The Center also reviewed research literature on the efficacy and impact of school uniforms on safety and academic achievement.

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### **Findings**

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**The Rationale for Standardized Appearance Through Uniforms/Dress Codes.** Adolescence is a time when individuals place an emphasis on appearance as well as belonging to a group. It is generally accepted that members of groups or organizations share common beliefs and behaviors. These group beliefs and behaviors can provide guidelines for individual behavior which may result in cohesiveness and mutual interests. Shared usage and understanding of clothing can cultivate a sense of cohesiveness among group members. Such cohesiveness can be seen in the 'uniforms' of gangs with the accompanying behavior that frequently is disruptive (Hethorn, 1994). However, in the case of school uniforms/dress codes, the cohesiveness could be a shared expectation of good conduct at school which would result in a safe and disciplined learning environment (Manual on School Uniforms, 1996).

*Uniforms* prescribe a certain standard or style of clothing to be worn, while *dress codes* proscribe or prohibit clothing or grooming practices considered objectionable (Kaiser, 1997, p. 378). These two alternatives represent possible ways to promote standardized appearance but may still offer the freedom to add some individual touches to group-condoned appearances through the use of accessories. While basic attire is prescribed, individuality can develop because of the ease with which students can 'add to' the basic uniform to distinguish themselves from the larger group.

**School Uniforms/Dress Codes in Kentucky.** Reactions to the use of school uniforms/dress codes in the Kentucky press reflect a continuum of opinion. It has been suggested that the State consider the possibility of using school uniforms to curb gang-related fashions (Leonard-Boone, April 23, 1999), and in fact, several districts have begun investigating the need to establish dress codes and backpack policies (Rivers, May 11, 1999; Schaefer, April 13, 1999, & May 15, 1999). Issues being considered include improving student safety and eliminating clothing with sexually explicit messages (Kreimer, March 31, 1999), as well as decreasing the likelihood of disruptions to classes because of clothing (Honeycutt, April 24, 1999; Stacy, April 24, 1999). Some schools have adopted uniform policies with 'opt out' provisions that permit alternative dress if parents choose not to participate (Schaefer, May 15, 1999).

Those speaking in support of dress codes indicate that individual rights are not being violated and that discipline improves in schools when dress codes are instituted (Love, April 5, 1999). Some students, however, expressed concerns about assumptions made on the basis of appearance, saying that those who dress different are not necessarily out for trouble (George, et al, April 22, 1999; Hetzer-Womack, April 23, 1999).

Kentucky school superintendents were surveyed regarding district school uniform/dress code policies. Ninety-seven of 176 superintendents (55%) responded. Those who responded indicated school uniform policies are used in one school district and three individual schools. Specific dress codes are used in 15 districts and one individual school. With the majority of Kentucky schools participating in school-based decision making, school councils are more inclined to develop specific uniform/dress code policies. There are approximately 1400 public schools in Kentucky, and a survey of schools would provide a more detailed indication of individual school policies relative to uniforms/dress codes.

Despite the limited nature of the results to date, several themes, pro and con, emerged. Some reflect national themes regarding school uniforms and dress codes.

**Arguments for School Uniforms and Dress Codes.** Individuals in favor of standardized dress in school contend that educational goals will be more easily reached if everyone looks alike. Several reasons have been offered in support of standardized dress:

- Discipline and respect for the teacher are increased;
- Group spirit (esprit de corps) is promoted;
- Academic standards are maintained by uniformity;
- Family budgeting problems are eased because of decreased emphasis on wearing the latest fashion; and
- Cultural and social class distinctions are blurred (Kaiser, 1997, p.377).

**Arguments Against School Uniforms and Dress Codes.** Individuals opposed to standardized dress address legal, historical, and contextual issues. Reasons given for opposition to standardized dress include:

- Uniform policies infringe on students'

First Amendment rights to freedom of expression;

- Uniform policies impede students’
- Uniform policies may discriminate against minority and low-income students;
- Uniform policies do not address the use of accessories and other items such as backpacks that can be used to convey status; and
- Uniform/dress code enforcement has the potential to be very time-consuming.

### **Reported Outcomes of Required School Uniforms and Dress Codes.**

There are some documented findings related to the impact of required school uniforms and dress codes in school systems nationally.

- The Long Beach, California Unified School District required uniforms for elementary and middle school students. During the first year of the policy, suspensions decreased by 32%, school crime by 36%, fighting by 51%, and vandalism by 18% (Cohn, 1996).
- At Whittier Elementary, attendance has risen since implementing the policy, reaching a high of 96% (Caruso, 1996).
- Student reactions range from relief at not having to choose what to wear to displeasure at looking like a nerd.
- The issue of infringement of rights to freedom of expression has generally been found nonpersuasive when dress codes have been designed to protect students, as in the instance of banning gang-related clothing (Stover, 1990, 27). Even if clothing were protected by the First Amendment, some types could still be prohibited if it could be shown they were disruptive to school (Walsh, May, 1999).

While these findings imply that there are positive changes *related directly to the use*

natural tendencies to experiment with their identities and independence;

*of uniforms*, one study found that uniforms may instead act as a catalyst for change and provide a highly visible opportunity for additional programs (Brunsma, D.L., Rockquemore, K.A., 1998). When the data from Long Beach (reported above) were statistically analyzed to determine whether uniforms decreased substance abuse and behavioral problems, but increased attendance and academic achievement, no direct effect of uniforms on behavioral outcomes or academic achievement could be found. What was found, however, was that several additional reform efforts were implemented simultaneously with the uniform policy, and these may, in fact, have been the cause of the positive outcomes.

### **Guidelines for Uniform and Dress Code Policies.**

A number of suggestions that may aid the decision process in establishing policies are apparent.

First, there is a range of alternatives for school uniform/dress code policies as follows:

- Do not implement a dress code.
- Implement a dress code that outlines general goals, and let schools formulate policies specific to the student population.
- Implement an itemized dress code that will be applied throughout the district
- Establish a voluntary uniform policy.
- Establish a mandatory uniform policy with or without a clearly defined ‘opt out’ provision (Isaacson).

Second, regardless of the level adopted, the following considerations are suggested:

- Get parents involved from the beginning.
- Protect students’ religious expression.
- Protect students’ other rights of

expression.

- Determine whether to have a voluntary or mandatory school uniform policy.
- When a mandatory school uniform policy is adopted, determine whether to have an 'opt out' provision.

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### **Recommendations for Further Study.**

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Addressing the relationship of clothing and school safety calls for a multidisciplinary approach which will integrate perspectives of youth, school officials, and community organizations. Many questions can be examined, including:

- Does the use of uniforms or dress codes help address the issue of school safety?
- What input is required from youth and parents in establishing appearance requirements?
- How do other events impact the effectiveness of uniforms or dress codes?

It is timely to examine the issue of school uniforms/dress codes in Kentucky, and the individual school councils should be surveyed regarding policy establishment, individual school or district requirements, and the effectiveness of those policies in promoting school safety.

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- Take all possible steps to eliminate arbitrary or capricious requirements (Manual on School Uniforms, 1996).

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