

FACT SHEET #6: Student Uniforms

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BACKGROUND

- School uniform policies typically require all students to wear clothing that meet specific criteria, such as color of clothing, type of pants, and length of a skirt. Such criteria vary greatly across schools.
- While school uniforms have been a common practice in many private schools, about 14% of public schools required students to wear uniforms in 2005-2006 (NCES, 2007).

KEY ISSUES

- School uniform policies should be distinguished from school dress codes that merely prohibit certain kinds of clothing from being worn in the school. For example dress codes might prohibit:
 - Wearing clothing that is revealing or provocative, or associated with gangs
 - Carrying backpacks and similar items that might hide weapons, alcohol or drugs
- According to advocates, school uniforms
 - Increase safety by decreasing peer conflict and gang activity that might be linked to clothing.
 - Reduce school discipline problems, including rates of suspension and expulsion
 - Increase academic achievement
 - De-emphasize the disparity in apparel across socioeconomic groups
 - Differentiate strangers from students on school grounds
 - Reduce distractions in school related to apparel, and reduce competition related to clothing
 - Increase student self-esteem and school spirit
 - Increase student sense of responsibility for the school environment, and improve school climate
- Potential concerns about school uniform policies:
 - Infringement on the right to freedom of expression by dictating what must be worn. Some argue that uniform requirements devalue diversity and individuality in the school community.
 - Purchasing uniforms might impose a financial strain on some families.

RESEARCH SUMMARY

- Long Beach Unified School District was one of the first public school districts to implement a mandatory school uniform policy in the mid '90s. Although school discipline problems declined after the policy was implemented, there were other changes that occurred at the same time that might have produced these positive effects.
- A study of a nationally representative sample of 8th graders found that students who attended schools with uniforms did not differ from other students in attendance, attitudes toward school, or behavior problems (Brunsma & Rockquemore, 1998).
- Most of the research on school uniform policies has been survey research assessing perceptions of teachers, administrators, parents and students of the usefulness of these policies. Virtually none of these studies used direct behavioral measures (such as records of fighting and bullying at school), and most did not account for the effects of other strategies or interventions that may have been implemented concurrently.
- Despite supportive testimonials and anecdotal reports, the quality of research on school uniforms is insufficient to demonstrate any effect on reducing school violence or improving academic achievement.
- There is a need for scientifically rigorous studies of school uniforms using control groups and independent measures of school conditions and student achievement before and after the new policy is implemented.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

There is insufficient scientific evidence to endorse implementing school uniform programs as a school violence prevention strategy. Thus, the CPSV cannot recommend that schools require student uniforms. However, some school districts may choose to do so for other reasons or as a part of dress code policies. Before implementing a new school uniform or dress code policy, consider the following recommendations.

- When implemented, school dress code policies should be developed with input from students, families, and other school community stakeholders.
- If schools consider adopting a more highly restrictive school dress code policy, either voluntary or mandatory, it should be done on an experimental basis with recognition that there is meager or non-existent research support for the impact of such policies on school dropouts, discipline, climate, crime reduction or other related issues.
- In cases where families would be required to make special purchases, assess the financial needs of at-risk students' families and develop a support program to ensure that all students can obtain required attire without undue hardship.
- Be clear about the specific outcomes expected; develop methods of measuring these outcomes, and methods for accounting for other factors that may affect outcomes.
- When introducing a school dress code policy, provide sufficient advance communication through multiple avenues to ensure that all school community members are fully aware of the program.

CAUTIONS

- Recognize that a school uniform policy, as a first line strategy, is not likely to be of great significance in preventing school violence. Like other prevention strategies, such an approach needs to be considered within a more comprehensive framework for developing a positive school climate.
- Avoid framing a school uniform or school dress code policy in zero tolerance language.
- Be careful to protect students' rights of expression (e.g. religious and political expression), and don't prohibit students from displaying expressive items such as political campaign buttons so long as the items do not lead to disruption or infringe on the rights of other students.
- Minimize punitive approaches to fostering compliance with a new school uniform or dress code policy.

RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION

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- Cohen, C. A. (1996). Should students wear uniforms? *Learning*, 24, 38-39.
- Konheim-Kalkstein, Y.L. (August, 2006). A uniform look: When students dress alike, proponents say, the school climate may be improved. *American School Board Journal*.
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- Stanley, M. S. (1996). School uniforms and safety. *Education and Urban Society*, 28(4), 424-435.

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