



# Student Uniforms

## Resources

- *Manual on School Uniforms*, published by the U.S. Department of Education, provides recommendations for developing student uniform policies, and gives several examples of schools across several states that have school uniform policies.  
<http://www.ed.gov/updates/uniforms.html>
- *School Uniforms Why and How* is a free booklet written by the National Association of Elementary School Principals with the partnership of Land's End, Inc. The booklet discusses NAESP's survey related to school uniforms, gives examples of schools that have implemented uniforms, and gives suggestions on how to develop a student uniform policy.  
<http://www.naesp.org/misc/uniformsbg.htm>
- *Order in the Classroom: Violence, Discipline, and Student Achievement*. Education Testing Service Policy Information Report. Education Testing Service. May be downloaded free or purchased in book.  
<http://www.ets.org/research/pic/pir.html>.
- Lumsden, Linda (May, 2001). *Uniforms and Dress-Code Policies*. ERIC Digest 148 - May 2001;  
<http://eric.uoregon.edu/publications/digests/digest148.html>
- Simonson, Mary Ellen. (March 1998). *School Uniforms: A Blueprint for Legal Challenges*. *Inquiry and Analysis* 1-7. [ED 426 488](#).
- Starr, Jennifer. (January 2000). *School Violence and Its Effect on the Constitutionality of Public School Uniform Policies*. *Journal of Law & Education* 29, 1 113-18. [EJ 606 478](#).

Requiring specific student dress in school is viewed by some as one component of a solution to creating a climate for improved school discipline and preventing violence, as well as increasing academic performance of students (Paliokas, Futrell & Rist, 1996). A variety of public and private schools have implemented student uniforms, in part, to achieve these aims.

### What are student uniform policies?

In this approach, school policies are created which require students to wear clothing that fits an identified set of criteria. In some cases, the schools may actually require the purchase of a specific uniform for students. Examples may include the plaid jumpers which girls have historically worn in many parochial schools, or the shirts or blazers with school insignia worn in some public and private schools. In other cases, the policy may merely require the type and color of clothing to be worn. For example, some schools may simply require blue pants or shorts, and a white shirt or blouse be worn by all students, without specifying specific styles or brands. There may be a considerable range in the degree of specificity of these student "uniform" requirements.

School uniforms should be distinguished from school dress codes that merely prohibit certain kinds of clothing from being worn in school. For example dress codes might include prohibitions against students wearing athletic team clothing, jackets or hats associated with gangs, clothing which is revealing or provocative, carrying backpacks which could contain drugs, alcohol, or weapons, etc. Most schools have dress codes, and typically, there are specific reasons for prohibiting specific items from being worn or carried in school.

Those who support requiring student uniforms in school present several arguments. They contend that uniforms can affect students' safety by decreasing gang activity and fights by removing clothing as a potential source of conflict. Student uniforms can eliminate differences in brands, logos, colors, etc., which are difficult to regulate in school dress code restrictions. They may diminish the disparity in dress across socioeconomic levels. Uniforms also differentiate strangers from students on school grounds. Advocates also believe that uniforms increase student learning by increasing positive attitudes toward school and enhancing the learning environment by reducing distractions related to clothing or dress, and by developing a sense of belonging, cohesion, and camaraderie among students for their school. For similar reasons, advocates also believe that wearing uniforms leads to decreased competition among students regarding clothes resulting in fewer behavior problems, increased attendance rates, and lowered rates of suspension and substance use among students. Finally, advocates believe that diminished competition and conflict related to dress may lead to increased self-esteem and increased school spirit (Brunsma & Rockquemore, 1998).

Despite these potential benefits, obstacles to school wide uniform policies remain. Because a mandatory uniform policy dictates what a student shall wear, instead of listing what they may not wear, uniforms are a much more serious infringement of students' rights than are ordinary dress codes. Certain kinds of self-expression have been found to be rights of students in school, and uniform policies need to be sensitive to these legal issues. Groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union have expressed concern over the financial strain uniforms would place on some families to purchase uniforms for their children, especially in those school districts with larger numbers of disadvantaged families. The strongest opponents of uniform policies charge that no empirical evidence exists to support the numerous and varied claims of uniform proponents (Black, 1998; Brunsma & Rockquemore, 1998).

## What do we know about student uniforms?

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) of the U.S. Department of Education, only 3% of all public schools require students to wear uniforms. Results of the National Association of Elementary School Professor's February 1998 telephone survey of 958 principals in 10 states showed the majority (87%) of schools did not have uniforms, nor were they considering them.

Long Beach Unified School District is believed to be the first public school system in the country to adopt mandatory public school uniforms in grades K-8. Long Beach also appears to be the only district so far that has provided documented results indicating that uniforms improve student behavior. District officials supply data showing a dramatic decline in violence in their K-8 schools from 1993-94 to 1994-95, including a 51% drop in physical fights, a 34% drop in assaults and batteries, a 50% drop in weapons offenses, and a 32 % drop in suspensions (Cohen, 1996; Stanley, 1996).

However, caution needs to be exercised when interpreting the Long Beach results, as the Long Beach evaluation did not identify or eliminate competing explanations for the decline, and did not indicate whether the student uniform policy was only one aspect of a comprehensive safety plan that included heightened security measures and stricter rules, or other measures. Other methodological questions exist as well. As a result, while the Long Beach data supports their use of uniforms, the study is not viewed as conclusive.

Most of the research on the implementation of student uniform programs is survey research based, assessing the perceptions of teachers, administrators, and parents regarding the usefulness of uniforms when implemented in their school. There are many reports saying that violence has been reduced in their schools employing student uniforms, that the students are more serious, well-behaved, and focused on their studies, and that they have higher self-esteem. Virtually none of these studies used direct behavioral measures on these criteria, and most did also not account for the effects of other measures that may have been implemented concurrently. Other positive outcomes described by uniform supporters have also not been measured in many of these reports.

As a result, the research support for the use of uniform policies in schools is clearly inadequate at present in spite of supportive testimonials. Any adoption of student uniforms should be done with an awareness of these limitations in evaluative data.

## Making Student Uniforms Work

If a school decides to pursue development of a student uniform policy, the U.S. Dept of Education "Manual" and the National Association of Elementary School Principals "Why and How" booklet (See Resources column) provide guidelines and suggestions. Some of these include:

- **Get parents and the community involved from the beginning.** Parental and community support of a student uniform policy is crucial to its success. The strongest push for school uniforms in recent years has come from parent

groups who want better discipline in their children's schools. Many schools that have successfully created a uniform policy, survey parents first to gauge support for student uniform requirements and then ask for parental help designing the uniform policy. Parental support is also important in encouraging students to wear the uniform.

- **Protect students' rights of expression (e.g., religious, political).** A student uniform policy must accommodate students whose religious beliefs are substantially burdened by banning the display of religious attire. Also, a student uniform policy may not prohibit students from displaying expressive items. For example, wearing a button supporting a certain political campaign – so long as the item does not lead to disruption or infringe on the rights of other students.
- **Determine whether to have a voluntary or mandatory school uniform policy.** Some schools have adopted a voluntary policy, which lets the students determine if, and under what circumstances they will wear the uniforms. Alternatively, some schools have determined that school uniform policies are more effective if they are mandatory.
- **Assist families that need financial help.** Typically, a student uniform is less costly than the clothes that a student would typically wear to school. However, purchasing uniforms can still pose a financial burden on families. School districts with mandatory policies should offer some sort of assistance to these families. For example, having community and business leaders provide financial assistance or asking graduates to donate their used uniforms to incoming students.

## Conclusion

While there is insufficient research to support its effect on violence prevention or discipline, student uniform policies are nevertheless viewed by some as one possible component of a plan to improve discipline and overall school safety. Working with parents, teachers, students, and administrators can make uniform policies more likely to be a successful part of an overall school safety program, one that is broadly supported by the community.

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## References

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## About the Safe and Responsive Schools Project

The Safe and Responsive Schools Project, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, is dedicated to developing prevention-based approaches to school safety, discipline reform and behavior improvement in schools.

Websites: <http://www.indiana.edu/~safeschl/> or <http://www.unl.edu/srs/> Or Contact:

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