

## Uniforms in Public Schools

An Overview of School Uniform Policies in U.S. and North Carolina Public Schools

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### Introduction

While commonplace around the world, in the United States school uniforms were until recently the province of parochial and private schools, where they are viewed as a key element of the educational environment. In the 1980's, however, interest in implementing school uniform programs in public schools began to grow. This movement was parent-driven and based on the belief that uniforms would increase discipline, create a better learning environment and reduce violence in their children's schools.

Momentum built during the 1990's, boosted in part by then President Clinton's endorsement of school uniforms during his 1996 State of the Union Address and in appearances and speeches in following years. Support also came through a voice vote from the National Association of Secondary School Principals during their national conference in February, 1996. As part of President Clinton's efforts the U.S. Department of Education distributed a manual to all of the nation's school districts with suggestions on how to make school uniforms mandatory and reviews of several model programs underway in public schools (US Department of Education, 1996.) This manual is available at [www.ed.gov/updates/uniforms.html](http://www.ed.gov/updates/uniforms.html).

By the 1999/2000 school year, 12 percent of principals reported that their school required students to wear uniforms. That number grew to 14 percent for the 2005/06 school year (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2008). Also, in 2005/06, about 55 percent of school principals reported that their school has a strict dress code, which is an increase from 47 percent in 1999/00. (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2008.) Nationwide there are 23 states who authorize school systems to institute dress code and uniform policies (Addison, 2008.)

Implementation of uniform policies in public schools has not been without controversy. Those who report success with uniform policies claim that they improve academics, reduce truancy and violence, lower costs and improve the social environment of their schools. Opponents question whether the benefits claimed by some districts are actually the result of uniforms or other factors. Much of the evidence is anecdotal, based on the opinions of educators, administrators and parents. Because uniforms in public schools are relatively new, no long range research has been completed and the research that exists is conflicting. For example, researchers using data collected as part of The National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 to test claims made by those who support uniforms found that uniforms have no direct effect on substance use, behavioral problems, or attendance (Brunsma and Rockquemore, 1998.) In contrast, researcher Sharon Pate found in a large Florida study that uniforms improved behavior and reduced violence (Pate, 1999.)

Please Note: At this time Wake County is not considering a district-wide uniform policy. The purpose of this report is to give administrators and parents who are interested in exploring the possibility of uniforms at their individual schools some basic information. In Wake County, uniforms can be implemented by specific schools with the majority vote (70%) of families at the school.

### How common are Uniforms in Public Schools?

The first large public school district to adopt school uniforms was Long Beach, CA in 1994, with many other school districts following. The adoption of school uniforms for all 200,000 students by the Philadelphia Board of Education in May 2000 was another landmark. Uniforms have been adopted either system-wide or in individual schools in many of the country's largest districts. Districts with uniform policies include Los Angeles/Long Beach; New York City, NY (the country's largest); Houston, Dallas/Fort Worth; Washington, DC; New Orleans; Detroit; Jacksonville, FL; Atlanta; Baltimore; Boston; Chicago; Cleveland; Miami; Nashville; Phoenix; Seattle; and St. Louis.

Other cities that have widespread uniform use in their public schools include:

100% of Newark, NJ elementary students (as of Dec.1, 2008) This will affect 30,000 students.

85% of Cleveland's public schools require uniforms

80% of Chicago's public schools require uniforms

65% of Boston's public schools require uniforms

60% of Miami's public schools require uniforms

50% of Cincinnati's public schools require uniforms

In North Carolina, Charlotte-Mecklenburg School district has 34 elementary schools (33%), and 9 (27%) middle schools that require school uniforms. In New Hanover County 9 of 23 elementary schools and 2 of 7 middle schools implemented uniform policies this year. All students in Pitt County public schools started wearing uniforms this school year, from kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. ([www.cms.k12.nc.us](http://www.cms.k12.nc.us)) Uniforms are already commonplace in charter schools and the NC Department of Public Instruction's Office of Charter Schools estimates that 80% require uniforms.

A National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) survey in 2000 found that 21% of all public schools polled had a uniform policy. A 2007 Voice of America report on the subject of uniforms estimated 24% of public elementary schools require uniforms. NAESP which includes middle level principals has not taken an official stand on school uniforms, leaving it to be decided school-by-school ([www.naesp.org](http://www.naesp.org))

### **Research on Uniforms in Public Schools**

Because it has been requiring uniforms longer than any other district, the Long Beach school district is often looked to by those attempting to quantify the positive and negative affects of uniforms. A case study of the effects of adopting school uniforms in Long Beach, CA which appeared in *Psychology Today* in September, 1999, reported the following effects from the switch to uniforms in 1995:

Overall, the crime rate dropped by 91%

School suspensions dropped by 90%

Sex offenses were reduced by 96%

Incidents of vandalism went down 69%

Also reporting on the Long Beach Unified School District, an *Education Week* article in 1998 reported that since implementation in 1994, assaults in grades Kindergarten through 8 had decreased by 85%.

Other studies support this view of the positive benefits for uniform wear. A Florida study of 88 schools (Pate, 1999) found academic improvement the school year following the adoption of uniforms. Pate also found that discipline infractions resulting in out-of-school suspensions and juvenile referrals also showed a significant statistical improvement in the same school year. The

schools in the study also reported improved grade promotion rates. Other studies, and much anecdotal evidence from schools that require uniforms, support this viewpoint.

Yet some researchers paint a different picture from Pate. Using tenth grade data from The National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988, Brunsmma and Rockquemore tested proponents' claims including decreased substance abuse, decreased behavioral problems, less truancy, and improved academics (1998.) Their research found no direct effect in any of the areas and actually pointed to a negative link between school uniforms and student academic achievement. Brunsmma and Rockquemore acknowledge an indirect improvement in school environment and student outcomes due to the adoption of school uniforms, but they believe that the result uniform proponents claim are in fact the result of other changes in the schools policies or structure. Other researchers likewise question whether the uniforms themselves are responsible for improvements in the schools or other factors such as increased parental involvement (Wallin.)

The American Civil Liberties Union says there's no link between school uniforms and safety or good grades. Former California high school Principal Dennis Evans says teenagers who decide what to wear in the morning are developing decision-making skills and learning to take responsibility for their choices in life. Many students agree. ([www.buzzle.com/articles/facts-against-school-uniforms.html](http://www.buzzle.com/articles/facts-against-school-uniforms.html).) One interesting study conducted in private schools found a gap between the benefits perceived by parents and educators and the benefits perceived by those who actually wear the uniforms (Firmin, Smith, and Perry.)

These findings are by no means conclusive and clearly more research is needed to quantify the affects of uniforms. With uniforms in public schools recent phenomena in the U.S. no long range studies have been completed.

### **Benefits of School Uniforms**

Proponents of school uniforms generally list the following as advantages of requiring students to wear uniforms.

#### **Improved academic performance and reduced detractions**

Uniform proponents believe that students who wear uniforms perform better academically. This has always been the principal argument for their commonplace use in private schools. Uniforms create a more serious tone in the classroom. Just as an adult gets in the "work" mindset when he or she dons a business suit or work uniform children get in the "school" mode when they are wearing a uniform.

#### **Enhanced Social Environment**

Schools with uniforms point to an improved social environment as a primary benefit. With everyone dressing similarly, clothing and fashion become less significance. There is less peer pressure to have the latest fashions in clothing and less embarrassment on the part of those who do not. Social standing is based less on a child's economic status.

#### **Improved Behavior**

Many educators and parents believe that students who wear uniforms behave more appropriately. They believe that uniforms dictate a stricter atmosphere. Crimes involving stealing items of apparel are unlikely to be perpetrated if everyone's apparel is identical. Many districts have reported a decline in violence and theft following the implementation of a uniform policy. Another benefit often sited is that with uniforms teachers and administrators spend less time dealing with students who wear inappropriate or offensive clothing.

#### **Values**

School uniforms stress that individuality and self-expression are not determined by designer clothing or the latest fashion fad.

#### Builds Community

Backers argue that uniforms build or enhance school spirit. They help create a team spirit that comes from each child having the same membership/group identity.

#### Lower Clothing Costs

One of the major arguments in favor of uniforms is cost savings. With fashions constantly changing, parents have always felt the pressure to provide their children with the latest peer-pleasing designs. Uniforms reduce the cost of keeping up and over the long haul are less expensive than buying current fashions for children. See Appendix A for a breakdown of uniform cost. Once a uniform program is up and running, there are opportunities to reduce the cost for families. Those who rely on second-hand items from older siblings, neighbors and friends can continue to do so either formally or informally. In addition, including school logo items on the list of approved garments may greatly help families where cost is a factor.

#### Enhanced Security

With all children dressed in similar colors and styles proponents believe it is easier for staff and teachers to recognize people who don't belong on campus.

### Objections to School Uniforms

#### Suppressed individuality and creative expression

Some experts believe that uniforms stifle self-expression, diversity and individuality. They argue that an academic program encouraging students to pursue individual thought is much more important than what students wear. Critics believe uniforms inhibit creativity and self-expression, forcing students to conform. Some opponents feel that uniforms can be ugly and/or unflattering, and are not good for students' self-image.

#### Increased Clothing Cost

Opponents of uniform policies state that uniforms are an unnecessary expense and can create an economic hardship themselves. Some experts believe the cost is not a wash because families have to buy "play clothes" as well as uniforms. They also believe uniforms can be more expensive for families who buy from 2<sup>nd</sup> hand stores or rely on hand-me-downs.

#### Limited Impact on Behavior

Opponents point out wearing uniforms does not prevent students but actually cause discipline issues. Some students reject any rules, and they worry forcing them to wear school uniforms only aggravates their rebellious spirit. Uniforms, according to one researcher "have little if any impact on student behavior, achievement, and self-esteem" (Brosna, 2006)

#### Difficult to Measure Relationship to Improvements

Critics argue that much of the evidence on uniforms at this point is anecdotal, with more research needed to validate arguments both for and against uniforms. They state that it isn't always possible to attribute positive changes to uniforms alone. Child psychologist Pauline Wallins has found that many schools that adopt a uniform policy also make other changes in how the school

is run including upgrading curriculum, and new rules or better enforcement of existing rules (Wallins, 2003.) She found that parental involvement may increase as result of the uniform adoption process.

#### Comfort

Critics argue that different types of clothing feel comfortable to different people. Uniforms reduce one's ability to choose clothing that fits individual comfort.

#### Harms transition into adulthood

Denying students their ability to express individualism and belief in a sub-culture, whether preppy, hip-hop, punk, or jock, could stymie the students' transition from childhood into adulthood. Opponents believe controlling the socialization process could harm the student as an adult, as they are not prepared for the real world, where they will indeed be judged by their appearances.

#### Mixed perception of results

Critics argue that parents and educators tend to have a higher opinion of the merits of uniforms and of their benefits than students who wear them. One study, conducted in two parochial schools, found that while educators and parents frequently reported that uniforms achieved the goals of lower cost, less peer pressure and competition and more appropriate appearance, their children often disagreed on the extent that the goals were accomplished (Firmin, Smith and Perry.)

#### **What would uniforms look like?**

Typical school uniforms tend to be navy or khaki pants, skirts, skorts, shorts, or jumpers accompanied by a solid- colored collared shirt, either polo or button down style, or turtlenecks. Colors tend to be school related. There are usually two or three choices for shirt colors. In many cases school labeled polo or t-shirt are permitted.

In the case of Wake County, where implementation would be on a school by school basis, the specifics of a uniform would be worked by interested parents, teachers and possibly students at the school.

By way of an example, a possible uniform for Leesville Elementary, with school colors of blue, yellow, and red might look like this:

Tops: children would wear a short or long-sleeved collared shirt in one of the following colors: navy, light blue, yellow or red; or an official logoed LES t-shirt or polo shirt in any of the designated colors. Turtlenecks in the same colors, as well as white or black short or long-sleeved t-shirt underneath the polo shirt, would be allowed during colder weather.

Bottoms: children would wear solid color bottoms in navy blue or khaki. Shorts, long pants, skorts, skirts, and capris would be permitted.

#### **Legal Issues**

In preparing this report we learned that public school districts that require uniforms do provide families the option of opting out for religious or philosophical reasons. Parents and guardians must complete a document if they chose not to participate. In our conversations with other districts, and in our research, it does not appear that many families opt out. Indeed we found that in schools where uniform policies are voluntary, participation at the elementary school level usually increases the longer the policy is in place.

## How To Implement a Uniform Policy?

The U.S. Department of Education's 1996 manual on uniforms in public schools outlined the following recommendations for successful implementation of school uniforms:

1. Get parents involved from the beginning.
2. Protect students' religious expression.
3. Protect students' other rights of expression.
4. Determine whether to have a voluntary or mandatory school-uniform policy.
5. When a mandatory policy is adopted, determine whether to have an opt-out provision.
6. Do not require students to wear a message.
7. Assist families that need financial help.
8. Treat school uniforms as part of an overall safety program.

## Availability and Cost of Uniforms

School uniforms are widely available in stores and online. One can buy a school uniform from Wal-Mart, Target, Sears, Land's End, GAP, J Crew, Kmart, LL Bean and many others. The majority of local department and large discount stores stock school uniforms. See Appendix A for a breakdown of uniform costs at local Triangle retailers.

It is important to note that most public schools that require uniforms keep a small supply of uniforms on hand to help families in need. This can be handled discreetly, with the supply coming from donations of new and used items by the school community.

## Appendix A:

### 2008 Uniform Price List from Target, Wal-Mart & Sears

Target				
Boys	Sizes	Styles	Color	Price Range
Shorts	4-16 Husky	various (cargo too)	Khaki/Navy	\$9.99-\$11.99
Pants	4-16 Husky	various	Khaki/Navy	\$12.99-\$16.99
Polo Short Sleeve	xsmall - xx large		Various	\$7.99 - \$9.99
Polo Long Sleeve			White/Navy	\$9.99 - \$10.99

## Girls

Shorts	4-16 (petite/6x too)	Various	Khaki/Navy	\$10.99- \$12.99
Pants	4 -16 (6x)	Various	Khaki/Navy	\$12.99 - \$14.99
Capris	4 -16 (6x)	Various	Khaki/Navy	\$12.99 - \$14.99
Skirts/Skorts	4-16 Plus sizes too	Various	Khaki/Navy	\$8.99 - \$14.99
Polo Short Sleeve	xsmall- xx large		Various	\$7.99- \$8.99
Polo Long Sleeve	not listed			

## WALMART

Boys	Sizes	Styles	Color	Price Range
Shorts	4-14 Slim/Husky avail.	Various	Khaki/Navy	\$9.88 - \$10.88
Pants	4-16 Husky/Slim avail.	Various	Khaki/Navy	\$8.00 - \$13.00
Polo Short Sleeve	4-18		Navy/White	\$10.00 for a 2 pack
Polo Long Sleeve	4-18		Navy	\$4.00

## Girls

Shorts	4-16 Plus avail.	Various	Khaki/Navy	\$9.88
Pants	4-16 Plus avail.	Various	Khaki/Navy	\$8.88
Capris	4-16 Plus avail.	Various	Khaki/Navy	\$8.88-\$11.00
Skirts/Skorts	4-16 Plus avail.	Various	Khaki/Navy	\$5.88 - \$10.00
Polo Short Sleeve	4-16 Plus avail.		Navy/White/Yellow	\$6.00 - \$6.48
Polo Long Sleeve	4-16 Plus avail.		Navy/White	\$7.00

## Sears (Dockers)

Boys	Sizes	Styles	Color	Price Range
Shorts	4-14 Slim/Husky avail.	Various	Khaki/Navy	\$13.19-\$14.99
Pants	4-16 Husky/Slim avail.	Various	Khaki/Navy	\$14.99-\$16.19
Polo Short Sleeve	4-18		Navy/White	\$10.19-\$11.39
Polo Long Sleeve	4-18		Navy	\$11.99-\$13.19

## Girls

Shorts	4-16 Plus avail.	Various	Khaki/Navy	\$11.99-\$13.19
Pants	4-16 Plus avail.	Various	Khaki/Navy	\$14.99
Capris	4-16 Plus avail.	Various	Khaki/Navy	

Skirts/Skorts	4-16 Plus avail.	Various	Khaki/Navy	\$11.99
Polo Short Sleeve	4-16 Plus avail.		Navy/White/Yellow	\$11.99
Polo Long	4-16 Plus avail.		Navy/White	\$11.99

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\*For more pros and cons of school uniforms, including legal aspects of this debate, visit the National Association of Elementary School Principals.

### Testimonials and Comments from Interviews

#### Mr. Mark Tracy- Principal, Alderman Elementary School Wilmington, NC

Uniforms still cost money so I would hesitate to say it save families' money. They still have to buy clothes. Places such as Wal-Mart and Target may work with you and offer discounts, etc. I would suggest you first decide what is your goal and set up guidelines and not make your uniform policy too confining. Pick at least 3 colors of polo shirts they can wear and allow for a variety of options for bottoms such as Khaki, navy & black. There are skorts, shorts, capris & pants available. In winter allow the same colors for turtle necks and long sleeved collared shirts to wear under polo shirts for warmth. We have someone on our staff who is responsible for distributing uniform clothes that parents have donated from their children who have outgrown them. Because we have a large disparity in urban vs. affluent kids it helps with competition on clothing styles, although if you cannot afford clothes your uniform pieces are still going to look worn out. Having a donation of uniform pieces is helpful. If a student comes to school in jeans and/or the wrong shirt if the office has in-stock a variety of uniform pieces then they can give the student some pants to wear and at the end of the day the student can come back and trade back in their jeans.

#### Mrs. "Josie" Smith- Special Education Coordinator, Kettering Middle Upper Marlboro, MD

Uniforms have benefited the student because they are not concentrating on what they are wearing (the latest fashion); There is no more bullying about clothes. The students' behavior also improved. It has been wonderful. Teachers give less attention to what is and is not appropriate clothes and they can focus on teaching. Uniforms have also benefited the students because they are not concentrating on what they are wearing (the latest fashion); You can also not identify now the students who do not have the means to buy the expensive clothes. There are NO CONS to wearing uniforms. It was not difficult at all to get the information out to the parents. The PTSA sent information home with students, in the mail, and on the web-site. Because we have so many schools now wearing uniforms they can get them at Target, Wal-

Mart, and Kohl's. We also have the name of a company you can purchase them from. \*8th grade parents as well as all parents donate good uniforms that either no longer fit or because they are leaving the school. We clean them and put them in a closet and student some to us or we notice their uniform is pretty worn and we give them a better one. It is done pretty much in private so the other students don't know. There is not a school in our county that has given up their uniform policy.

Comments from a teacher:

I'm a teacher and worked for a district that felt putting kids in uniforms would solve the problems that were starting in our schools with gangs. It did nothing at all. The kids just found other ways to show their colors. As a matter of fact, in many cases it made things difficult. Parents like the way it looks when all the kids look the same....go figure. They think it breaks the lines from those who have and those who don't. It doesn't. Everything right down to the difference between a \$1 notebook or a \$35 notebook is caught by kids! You are ABLE to find a number of things about how uniforms SAVE a school. It isn't the uniforms. It is the way the teachers work with the children; the rules that are consistently used; the respectful environment of the school; and a LOT of hard work.

Mrs. Cynthia Wicks- Registrar, Apple Grove Elementary School Fort Washington, MD 20744

The reason we went to school uniform 5 years ago was for the simple reason that it looks more professional and can create an atmosphere more conducive to learning and teaching. It too can minimize competition among students. The vote was cast and the majority of parents' voted in favor of the uniform. Teachers can focus more on instruction and minimize disruptions due to inappropriate dress. We have a donation program whereby parents can contribute school uniforms to the school. Our school uniform colors are navy and white only. This policy was adopted by the parents in the spring of 2002 and approved by the Prince Georges County board of Education in accordance with Administrative Procedure Number 5152. Students are expected to be in uniform on a daily basis.