

# Public school uniforms: first step toward fascism?

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If public school students had one thing over their private school counterparts it's about to change. That's right: not only are public schools notorious for large classes and limited resources but now some of them are adopting what has always been most dreaded by the youth attending private schools: school uniforms. The very idea seems a bit strange. Agonizing over what to wear to school (and whose logo or face to wear across on your T-shirt) has always been a kind of right of passage for young people. Yet increasingly, that process is being limited on campus. Uniforms were virtually unheard of in public schools 6 years ago. Today 11 percent of schools around the country are requiring that their students don uniforms. (According to a survey of principals conducted in May by the National Association of Elementary School Principals). The reasons for uniforms are almost always the same. Uniforms will decrease crime and violence in schools while improving the behavior of students, say experts. Students less concerned about who is wearing what brand name clothing are less likely to judge their fellow students or to form cliques. Also, they say, uniforms cause school pride to increase. Students feel more united, more connected, and therefore their school becomes a safer, healthier environment; students test higher on standardized tests and their grades improve, proponents of uniforms argue. One thing that does not often get mentioned by adults and experts is the fact that uniforms are now being made by huge clothing manufacturers like DKNY, Esprit, and Bugle Boy. The NPD Group, a market research company in New York, estimated that parents spent \$900 million on uniforms for elementary school children in 1998. That comes out to about 7 percent of the total amount spent on children's clothing and this number has likely risen since then. The exact size of the industry has become increasingly difficult to

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determine as more schools have adopted uniforms that might sound like strict dress codes. Many schools require no more of students than that they wear clothes in a limited number of colors and that shirts have collars and be tucked in. There are dangerous implications to this; however, in that many students and their families are losing what rights they have as consumers. These are all laudable goals but a number of questions remain unanswered. Do young people believe that uniforms decrease social pressures? What do they think about uniforms in general? And finally do uniforms represent an increased attack on the rights of young people? Safer and Better Schools? Are schools any safer with uniform policies? Do students actually perform better or take more pride in their school? Claims that uniforms increase safety are quite attractive in the current political climate where school shootings have received high profile media attention, but there is little data to suggest that uniforms actually decrease school violence. The school district in Long Beach, CA was the first in the country to make uniforms mandatory for all students in its elementary and middle schools in 1994. The number of fights did decline there by over 50 percent in the first year, but so did the number of fights in the neighboring Los Angeles, although schools in Los Angeles there did not adopt a uniform policy. In several areas uniforms have been part of larger efforts to reduce violence, so it is difficult to isolate out uniforms as a single factor. Academic performance is another area where uniforms tend to get credit where credit is not due. A few of the schools that have adopted uniforms have seen improved test scores. However, sociologists David Brunson and Kerry Rockquemore looked at the effect of uniforms on students in a 1998 paper published in the Journal of Education Research and found that uniforms actually had a negative effect on

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academic achievement. Brunnsma and Rockquemore also found in looking at students wearing uniforms in both private and public schools, that uniforms didn't do much to increase school pride. Given the lack of data supporting uniforms, what explains their proliferation in recent years? It may be a case of adults and school administrators hungry for control in an easy to achieve, visible way. As Mike Males, the author of " Framing Youth" and " The Scapegoat Generation" says, " school administrators feel good about school uniforms and when you feel good about something, you attribute good things to it." What do Young People Think? The voice of youth is notably missing from most discussions of uniforms. A number of surveys have looked at the attitudes of parents and adults towards uniforms but no comparable research has examined what young people think. Do uniforms improve the social climate of schools by taking attention away from designer clothing and fashion? Adolescence is of course a time when many people feel awkward and a standard set of clothing could do lessen this sense. On the other hand, young people are also trying to establish their identity and clothing can be a great way to take risks. " Uniforms are cool because you don't have to decide what you are going to wear," said one ninth-grader from Phoenix who asked to remain anonymous. " If you dress not very cool then uniforms are better." Still this student wasn't completely comfortable with uniforms. She thought uniforms might be OK for students in elementary and junior high but not for those in high school. " When you are little you don't have style, you wear whatever your parents want. But in high school you should have the free will to wear whatever you want." Eleventh grader Cheyenne of Louisville, Kentucky doesn't like the idea of uniforms for students at any level. " The uniform solution is only adding to the problem. Students have <https://assignbuster.com/public-school-uniforms-first-step-toward-fascism/>

other ways of expressing themselves." She adds, " It turns the whole system into an accessory war, in which in the student without a class ring is discriminated against instead of the kid without a Tommy Hilfiger shirt." A number of students expressed revulsion with uniforms. " Uniforms are evil. They destroy a sense of individuality amongst students," says eighth grader Randy Patterson of Sarasota, Florida. His sentiment seems shared by many. In fact, " fascism" and " totalitarianism" are two words that come up a lot when you talk to students about uniforms. Are Uniforms an Attack on Youth Rights? Are uniforms, in fact, part of an attempt to control young people on the part of schools, the government or even adults as a whole? The number of cities with youth curfews has increased dramatically in recent years and the criminal justice system has also become much harsher on juvenile offenders in recent years. Are uniforms in schools linked to these shifts? Mike Males devotes a chapter in his 1999 book Framing Youth to debunking the myth that young people are not oppressed. However, he doesn't see uniforms as anything more than a " cosmetic crackdown." " School uniforms don't put a burden on anybody but students and they don't put much of a burden on students." Not everyone sees it this way. Cheyenne says that some school administrators " have embraced uniforms as a realistic way to impose control on students." David Brunnsma and Kerry Rockquemore echo this sentiment in their research. They label uniforms as means of " social control" that " establish boundaries between members of separate statuses (teachers and students) and promote the internalization of organizational goals." Resistance to uniforms is growing. Some schools have faced legal challenges, and parents' organizations have pulled the most weight. But some students are taking matters into their own hands. 41 high school

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students in Hurley, Mississippi violated their schools uniform policy this past March when they attended class with t-shirts reading, " School Uniform Laws are Unconstitutional." Administrators threatened the students with suspensions but students like Ryan Palmer did not back down, telling the Mississippi Press newspaper, " Our rights are being violated and there is always a price to pay." The right to feel comfortable in yourself, in your clothes, the right to choose: these are all very real things to believe in. And, as Kristina King, another one of the protesters in Hurley, was quoted as saying, " You've got to stand up for what you believe in."