

About Dress Codes and School Uniforms*

One of the rationales for policies mandating dress codes and school uniforms is the belief that such policies help enhance a safer environment for learning. Researchers report findings for and against this rationale; however, most studies have focused on the impact on school academic performances and not enhanced safety. Given an inadequate research base for such policies, decisions tend to rest on the power and persuasiveness of proponents and opponents with some guidance from court cases.

Major points made by proponents include the claim that dress codes and school uniforms help

- reduce discipline problems and on campus gang formation
- protect students from clothing that includes hateful messages or promotes drug and alcohol use
- enhance a positive school climate (e.g., a sense of belonging, unity, and school pride)
- decrease pressure to buy “trendy” clothes and reduce signs of economic and social differences among students
- identify intruders on campus

There are also claims that academic performance and attendance are improved.

Opponents assert that dress codes and school uniforms

- violate freedom of expression, promote conformity, and negatively effect self-image
- do little to enhance school safety and worse make students targets (e.g., for bullies from other schools; for sexual advances from those who find classic school uniforms sexually seductive)
- are a financial burden for poor families and a expense that is inconsistent with a tax-based free public education
- are an added enforcement problem for school staff
- can be sexist (e.g., require girls to wear skirts)
- take attention away from making fundamental school improvements

Dress codes often ban clothes that have images or writing. The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that attempts to protect students from clothing that conveys a political message about drug and alcohol use or uses hateful speech violates a student’s right to free speech.

With respect to uniforms, litigation has raised issues about free speech, costs, and more. Decisions have been mixed.

Available data suggest that uniforms are mandated in about a quarter of all elementary schools and about half that many middle and high schools. Consensus is that the difference is due to the resistance of older students and many parents to dress codes.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics’ data from U.S. public schools:

- In 2013-14,, about 20 percent of schools mandated uniforms; this was up from about 12 percent in 1999-2000.
- Schools with a minority student population of 50% or more are four times as likely to require uniforms than schools with a minority population of 20-49%, and 24 times more likely than schools with minority populations of 5%-19%.
- Around \$1 billion per year is spent on school uniforms.

It is noteworthy that there are proposals to establish dress codes for teachers.

*The material in this document reflects work done by Ciara Martin as part of her involvement with the national Center for MH in Schools and Student/Learning Supports at UCLA.

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Some Research

The following are reported by Harvard University's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy.

<https://journalistsresource.org/studies/society/education/school-uniforms-research-student-achievement-behavior>

>Dressed for Success? The Effect of School Uniforms on Student Achievement and Behavior Gentile, E., & Imberman, S.A. (2012). *Journal of Urban Economics*, 71, 1-17.

<http://www.nber.org/papers/w17337>

Abstract: *Uniform use in public schools is rising, but we know little about how they affect students. Using a unique dataset from a large urban school district in the southwest United States, we assess how uniforms affect behavior, achievement and other outcomes. Each school in the district determines adoption independently, providing variation over schools and time. By including student and school fixed-effects we find evidence that uniform adoption improves attendance in secondary grades, while in elementary schools they generate large increases in teacher retention.*

>Are School Uniforms a Good Fit? Results from the ECLS-K and the NELS.

Yeung, R. (2009). *Educational Policy*, 23, 847-874. <http://journals.sagepub.com/>

Abstract: *One of the most common proposals put forth for reform of the American system of education is to require school uniforms. Proponents argue that uniforms can make schools safer and also improve school attendance and increase student achievement. Opponents contend that uniforms have not been proven to work and may be an infringement on the freedom of speech of young people. Within an econometric framework, this study examines the effect of school uniforms on student achievement. It tackles methodological challenges through the use of a value-added functional form and the use of multiple data sets. The results do not suggest any significant association between school uniform policies and achievement. Although the results do not definitely support or reject either side of the uniform argument, they do strongly intimate that uniforms are not the solution to all of American education's ills.*

>Effects of Student Uniforms on Attendance, Behavior Problems, Substance Use, and Academic Achievement. Brunsmma, D.L, & Rockquemore, K.A. (1998). *Journal of Educational Research*, 92, 53-62.

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00220679809597575>

Abstract: *Mandatory uniform policies have been the focus of recent discourse on public school reform. Proponents of such reform measures emphasize the benefits of student uniforms on specific behavioral and academic outcomes. Tenth-grade data from The National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 was used to test empirically the claims made by uniform advocates. The findings indicate that student uniforms have no direct effect on substance use, behavioral problems, or attendance. Contrary to current discourse, the authors found a negative effect of uniforms on student academic achievement. Uniform policies may indirectly affect school environment and student outcomes by providing a visible and public symbol of commitment to school improvement and reform.*

cont.

>School Uniforms, Academic Achievement, and Uses of Research. Bodine, A. (2003). *Journal of Educational Research*, 97, 67-71. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27548012>

Abstract: School uniforms are being advocated for a range of social, educational, economic, and familial reasons. In 1998, *The Journal of Educational Research* (The JER) published an article by D. Brunnsma and K. Rockquemore that claims that uniforms correlate negatively with academic achievement, but data presented in this article actually show positive correlation between uniforms and achievement for the total sample, and for all but 1 school sector. Examination of structure of argument reveals that the erroneous claim results from misleading use of sector analysis. Simultaneous with The JER article, and on the basis of the same National Education Longitudinal Study: 1988 database, an Educational Testing Service article reported that no correlation exists between uniforms and achievement. The two articles are contrasted in this study. The effect of new communication technology in amplifying political uses of academic research is discussed.

>Public School Uniforms: Effect on Perceptions of Gang Presence, School Climate, and Student Self-Perceptions. Wade, K.K., & Stafford, M.E. (2003). *Education and Urban Society*, 35, 399-420. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0013124503255002>

Abstract: This study attempts to clarify the relationships between public school uniforms and some of their intended results: student self-worth and student and staff perceptions of gang presence and school climate. The instruments used in the study included a questionnaire on gang presence and identity, the National Association of School Principals Comprehensive Assessment of School Environments, and the Harter Self-Perception Profile for Children. Participants consisted of 415 urban public middle school students and 83 teachers. Findings indicate that, although perceptions did not vary for students across uniform policy, teachers from schools with uniform policies perceived lower levels of gang presence. Although the effect size was small, students from schools without uniforms reported higher self-perception scores than students from schools with uniform policies. Student and teacher perceptions of school climate did not vary across uniform policy.

>The Effect of Uniforms on Nonuniform Apparel Expenditures. Norum, P., Weagley, R.O. & Norton, Marjorie J. (1998). *Family & Consumer Sciences*, 26, 259-280 <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1177/1077727X980263001/abstract>

Abstract: The uniform industry has grown steadily the past 20 years with increased attention from employers trying to create a professional image among workers as well as school administrators considering uniforms to curtail school violence. Although an important part of human dress for centuries, uniforms have received little attention from researchers of the clothing market. This study examines the impact of uniform purchases on household expenditures for selected nonuniform apparel subcategories based on an economic model of conditional demand. Expenditure equations are estimated using the 1990-1991 Consumer Expenditure Survey. The results suggest that, on average, consumers do not substitute uniforms for other apparel purchases. Rather, uniforms and nonuniform apparel appear to be complements in consumers' purchases, resulting in greater household expenditures on nonuniform apparel. These results are a first step in understanding the economic effect that uniform purchases, mandated by employers, schools, or others, have on household clothing expenditures.

Additional References and Resources Used in Preparing this Document

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