

# The Debate Over Dress Codes and Uniforms

The heated debate over school uniforms shows no signs of cooling off.

By Marian Wilde, GreatSchools.net Staff

Recent data indicates that 23% of public elementary schools in the U.S. have a school uniform policy, but a new book makes the case that uniforms do not improve school safety or academic discipline.

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- [Back-to-School Shopping With Your Tween or Teen](#)
- [Bright Ideas From Our Readers: Handling Disputes About School Dress](#)

## Why Do Some Public Schools Have Uniforms?

In the 1980s, public schools were often compared unfavorably to Catholic schools. Noting the perceived benefit that uniforms conferred upon Catholic schools, some public schools decided to adopt a school uniform policy.

President Clinton provided momentum to the school uniform movement when he said in his 1996 State of the Union speech, "If it means that teenagers will stop killing each other over designer jackets, then our public schools should be able to require their students to wear school

uniforms."

## What Studies Say About School Uniforms

University of Missouri assistant professor, David Brunσμα had a different reaction to President Clinton's remark. He decided that some scientific methodology was in order.

In a 2004 book, [\*The School Uniform Movement and What It Tells Us About American Education: A Symbolic Crusade\*](#), Brunσμα offers a comprehensive look at the studies conducted to date on the effect of uniforms on academic performance.

Brunσμα also analyzed two enormous databases, the 1988 National Educational Longitudinal Study and the 1998 Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, and found no positive correlation between uniforms and [school safety](#) and academic achievement.

## How Have Educators Reacted to This Research?

"I'm generalizing here," says Brunσμα, "but by and large I feel a stronger sense of support and understanding of the results from teachers who are on the ground working through these issues on a daily basis. However, administrators (principals and board members) seem to have more of a problem with the results and arguments presented across my body of work and the work of others who study this issue. Administrators appear to want to continue relying on anecdotal aspects of the debate while simply disregarding rigorous, scientific study of the issue."

## How Common Are School Uniforms in Public Schools?

The school uniform movement has now spread to about a quarter of all public elementary schools. Experts say that the number of middle and high schools with uniforms is about half the number of elementary schools.

Why, if uniforms are intended to curb [school violence](#) and improve academics, are they not more prevalent in middle and high schools, where these goals are just as important as they are in elementary schools? Because, notes Brunσμα, "It's desperately much more difficult to implement uniforms in high schools, and even middle schools, for the student resistance is much, much higher. In fact, most of the litigation resulting from uniforms has been located at levels of K-12 that are higher than elementary schools. Of course, this uniform debate is also

one regarding whether children have rights, too!"

## The Pros and Cons of School Uniforms

According to proponents, school uniforms:

- Help prevent gangs from forming on campus
- Encourage discipline
- Help students resist peer pressure to buy trendy clothes
- Help identify intruders in the school
- Diminish economic and social barriers between students
- Increase a sense of belonging and school pride
- Improve attendance

Opponents contend that school uniforms:

- Violate a student's right to freedom of expression
- Are simply a Band-Aid on the issue of school violence
- Make students a target for [bullies](#) from other schools
- Are a financial burden for poor families
- Are an unfair additional expense for parents who pay taxes for a free public education
- Are difficult to enforce in public schools

## Uniforms vs. Dress Codes

Schools and districts differ widely in how closely they adhere to the concept of uniformity.

### What's a uniform?

One school might require white button-down shirts and ties for boys and pleated skirts for girls and blazers adorned with the school logo for all. Another school may simply require that all shirts have collars.

In Toledo, Ohio, for example, elementary school students have a limited palette of colors that they can wear: white, light blue, dark blue or yellow on the top half and dark blue, navy, khaki or tan on the bottom half.

Toledo girls are allowed a fairly wide range of dress items, however: blouses, polo shirts with collars, turtlenecks, skirts, jumpers, slacks, and knee-length shorts and skirts. Boys have almost as many choices: dress shirts, turtlenecks, polo or button-down shirts, pants or knee-length shorts.

And when these Toledo kids reach junior high, they are treated to one more color choice: maroon.

### What's a dress code?

Dress codes are less restrictive than uniform policies. They usually focus on promoting modesty and discouraging anti-social fashion statements.

In Tulsa, Oklahoma, the public schools have a fairly specific dress code. Among many other items, their code prohibits:

- Decorations (including tattoos) that are symbols, mottoes, words or acronyms that convey crude, vulgar, profane, violent, gang-related, sexually explicit or suggestive messages
- Large or baggy clothes
- Holes in clothes
- Scarves, curlers, bandanas or sweatbands inside of school buildings (Exceptions are made for religious attire.)

- Visible undergarments
- Strapless garments
- Bare midriffs, immodestly low cut necklines or bare backs
- Tights, leggings, bike shorts, swim suits or pajamas as outerwear
- Visible piercings, except in the ear
- Dog collars, tongue rings and studs, wallet chains, large hair picks, or chains that connect one part of the body to another

#### Related links:

- To learn more about each state's policy on school uniforms and dress codes, check out [School Uniforms and Dress Codes: State Policies](#), on the Education Commission of the States Web site.
- For a guide on how to adopt a school uniform policy at your school, check out the U.S. Department of Education's [Manual on School Uniforms](#).

#### How Have Dress Codes Changed over the Years?

If a school principal from the 1960s — when the prime concern was that skirts reached to the knees — were to visit a school today, he might wonder at our current attitudes.

Today, principals have bigger concerns than exposed knees, such as exposed stomachs, backs and cleavage — risqué styles that originated with such pop stars as Madonna, Jennifer Lopez and Britney Spears.

The newest trend, in the world of school dress codes, is mounting pressure to establish dress codes for teachers. Apparently the same casual mind-set toward revealing outfits is cropping up in the ranks of our teachers.

#### It's a Big Issue

The debate over uniforms in the public schools encompasses many larger issues than simply what your child should wear to school. It touches on issues of school improvement, freedom of expression and the "culture wars." It's no wonder the debate rages on.

#### Additional Resources

##### Books

*The School Uniform Movement and What It Tells Us About American Education: A Symbolic Crusade*, David Brunsma. Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2004.

*School Dress Codes: A Pro/Con Issue*, Barbara C. Cruz. Enslow Publishers, 2001.

#### Give Us Your Feedback:

How do you resolve disputes about what your child wears to school? Does your school have a uniform or dress code policy? Do you agree or disagree with it? Please fill in the box below and we will share some of your responses.

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