

Chapter 1:

Introduction



Today's schools are developing their dress codes and school uniform policies in a complex and rapidly changing environment. Many recent developments in curriculum and pedagogy in Victoria reflect a trend towards student-centred approaches and individualised learning. This growing emphasis on diversity in the classroom has challenged the traditional notions of conformity that school uniforms are often seen to embody. At the same time, education is becoming more competitive, placing pressure on schools to demonstrate high standards and develop a brand or image that will distinguish them in the educational market. The student uniform (or absence thereof) can be a powerful expression of the unique identity or culture of a school.

Developing dress codes and school uniform policies also requires schools to negotiate within a complex commercial environment. Schools that choose to have uniforms can select from a vast array of options, from a variety of Australian and overseas sources. At the same time, today's students are becoming increasingly discerning consumers, especially with respect to fashions and clothing. For many schools, this has strengthened the importance of school uniforms as a means of protecting students and their parents from marketing pressures. For others, it has heightened the need to give students the opportunity to experiment with clothing, and learn to make independent choices.

Changes in the legal framework surrounding dress codes and school uniforms have placed further pressures on dress codes and school uniform policies. The increased prominence of human rights and anti-discrimination legislation has affected the ways in which schools manage the growing diversity in their student populations. School dress codes and uniform policies must also reflect obligations under law to provide safe and healthy environments for work, play and learning.

While all of these factors have caused the nature and implementation of dress codes and school uniforms to evolve over time, they remain an important part of school life in the majority of Victorian schools. Whether wearing it, purchasing it, enforcing it, or simply being part of the community that it represents, a dress code or school uniform affects all members of a school's community in some way. For this reason, dress codes and school uniform policies must take into account not only the educational, commercial and legal environment in which they are developed, but also the views of school communities.

It is in this context that the Committee investigated and considered the issues facing Victorian schools in establishing and implementing dress codes and school uniform policies for their students. The Committee believes that the recommendations in this report will support schools, communities and education systems in considering these issues, and developing dress codes and school uniform policies that comply with all relevant policy and legislation. At the same time, the Committee intends for its recommendations to be implemented in such a way as to provide sufficient flexibility to enable schools to take advantage of the choices available to them, in tailoring their dress codes or school uniforms to the needs and preferences of their communities.

Functions of the Committee

The Education and Training Committee comprises seven Members of Parliament, with five drawn from the Legislative Assembly and two from the Legislative Council. Mr Geoff Howard MP chairs the Committee.

The Education and Training Committee is constituted under the *Parliamentary Committees Act 2003*. The Committee's specific function under the Act is to:

Inquire into, consider and report to the Parliament on any proposal, matter or thing concerned with education or training if the Committee is required or permitted so to do by or under the Act.

Terms of Reference

On 1 March 2007, the Education and Training Committee received a terms of reference, by resolution of the Legislative Assembly, to inquire into, consider and report on dress codes and school uniforms in Victorian schools. In particular, the Committee is to consider and report on:

- a) the benefits and costs of mandatory school uniforms;
- b) the views of school communities about dress codes and school uniforms;
- c) the most cost efficient and practical uniform procurement arrangements;
- d) matters which need to be considered to ensure dress codes and uniform policies are consistent with anti-discrimination legislation and health promotion policies;
- e) appropriate enforcement and sanctions;
- f) appropriate exemption criteria and processes; and
- g) national and international trends.

The Committee is required to table a report in Parliament no later than 31 March 2008.

Inquiry Methodology

Call for Submissions

The terms of reference were advertised in the following newspapers:

The Age	Saturday 24 March 2007
Herald Sun	Saturday 24 March 2007
Education Age	Monday 26 March 2007
Herald Sun Learn	Tuesday 27 March 2007
Education Times	Thursday 19 April 2007
Local Newspapers	Saturday 6 May – Friday 12 May 2007

In addition to advertising, a mail-out of approximately 240 organisations was conducted, advising them of the terms of reference and inviting written submissions. The mail-out targeted key government departments and agencies; the school sector; parent organisations; teacher associations; cultural and religious organisations and associations; school uniform manufacturers and suppliers; and social welfare organisations.

The Committee received 125 written submissions to the inquiry (Appendix A), along with a substantial body of supplementary written material. Submissions came from a wide range of school communities, government agencies, industry representatives, community organisations and individuals, reflecting the broad public interest in the inquiry.

Literature Review

The Committee undertook an extensive review of Australian and international literature regarding dress codes and school uniform policies. The review incorporated many government, academic, media and online sources, covering approximately the last decade. The literature review aimed to:

- provide a context for the inquiry in terms of current theory, policy and research; and
- identify emerging local and international trends, issues and developments.

Briefings and Public Hearings

Ms Helen Clarke, Manager, Community and Stakeholder Relations Branch, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, attended a Committee meeting on 16 April 2007, to brief the Committee on the Department's current policy on dress codes and school uniform policies in Victorian government schools. She also outlined some of the major issues facing schools when developing, implementing and reviewing their dress codes and school uniform policies.

A series of formal hearings took place during the period April 2007 to September 2007, involving 181 witnesses (Appendix B). Participants in public hearings included members of a range of school communities and representatives of a wide range of educational organisations, across all sectors and levels of schooling. In addition, the Committee heard from school uniform manufacturers and suppliers, the Textiles, Clothing & Footwear Union and other relevant industry bodies. Various community and cultural groups also contributed to the inquiry through public hearings.

The Committee conducted one public hearing at a school site, at Princes Hill Secondary College on 31 July 2007. The hearing was scheduled in response to an invitation made by Princes Hill Secondary College, Carlton North, for the Committee to experience its 'uniform-free' culture first-hand. The Committee heard the views of Princes Hill Secondary College students, staff and parent representatives regarding the College's policy of not requiring students to wear a school uniform. At the hearing, the Committee also heard from teacher, student and parent representatives from one of the College's feeder schools, Princes Hill Primary School.

Interstate Investigations

On 20 April 2007, the Committee wrote to education departments throughout Australia, seeking information about their dress code and school uniform policies. The Committee was pleased to receive responses from all states and territories and was particularly interested in the introduction of a compulsory school uniform policy in the Northern Territory. It was decided that the Committee would conduct investigations in the Northern Territory in June 2007. Individuals involved in these discussions are listed in Appendix C.

Public Hearing for Students at Parliament House

Of particular value to this inquiry was the public hearing held for students at Parliament House on 6 September 2007. The hearing brought together 125 Victorian students from 30 government schools selected by the Committee to represent a diverse range of locations and communities, and a variety of dress codes and school uniforms. The eight primary schools selected each sent teams of four or five students, comprising 38 attendees in total. All except one of the 22 secondary schools sent four students, resulting in a total of 87 attendees (refer Appendix B).

Structure and Purpose

The Committee intended the hearing to serve two main purposes:

- 1) to obtain the views of Victorian primary and secondary students regarding dress codes and school uniforms; and
- 2) to provide students with an educational experience of Victorian parliamentary processes.

To fulfil these objectives, the Committee structured the hearing around the discussion of a mock 'Bill' drafted by the Committee, entitled the *'School Uniform Bill 2007'*. The 'Bill' was divided into six clauses covering the major issues that had been raised in submissions, public hearings, and research for the inquiry. Each secondary school was allocated one or two clauses to discuss during the hearing and each primary school was allocated three clauses. A copy of the 'Bill', together with the clauses allocated to each school and the discussion questions prepared to assist students with their preparation, can be found in Appendices D, E and F.

The 'Bill' was discussed by primary students in the Legislative Council Chamber, and secondary students in the Legislative Assembly Chamber. One student from each school delegation delivered a three-minute statement on each of their school's allocated clauses. Students were also given the opportunity to move amendments to any clause in the 'Bill', and to answer questions from Committee members in the course of the hearing. A vote was taken on each amendment and each clause, and on the 'Bill' in its entirety at the conclusion of the discussion. This provided students with a range of opportunities to make their views heard throughout the day, and ensured a richness of discussion across all major issues covered by the inquiry.

Additional Aspects of the Hearing

The program for the hearing included a morning briefing session, as well as morning tea and lunch for all participants and their supervising teachers/parents. During these times, students had the opportunity to speak with Committee members and parliamentary officers, as well as to explore Parliament House and further their knowledge of Parliament and its activities. The morning briefing session included instruction on rules and procedures for conduct within the chambers, which were adapted from the rules applied to Members of Parliament on normal sitting days. Students in both chambers were expected to adhere to these rules throughout the hearing.

At the end of the hearing, students in each chamber participated in a mock 'Adjournment Debate'. Each school was invited to deliver a 90-second statement on any issue of importance to their school community that they wished to bring to the attention of the relevant minister. While this aspect of the hearing did not contribute directly to the inquiry, it served to enhance students' understanding of Victorian parliamentary processes and provided them with a unique opportunity to articulate their communities' concerns. The Committee sent transcripts of these statements to the relevant ministers for their response.

Outcomes

The hearing gave the Committee an unparalleled opportunity to obtain evidence from a diverse group of students from Victorian government schools. The Committee was impressed with the outstanding quality of students' contributions throughout the day and gained a substantial amount of valuable evidence for the inquiry. Feedback on the hearing from students and teachers in participating schools suggests that the hearing's second objective was also fulfilled, and that all participants found the event to be an engaging and worthwhile learning experience.

Survey of School Principals

From July to September 2007, the Committee conducted an online survey of a sample of Victorian school principals. The survey sought data on current school uniform policies and practices, based on the issues and trends that had been identified in the literature review, written submissions and public hearings. It also collected basic information about each school, to assist with identifying any potential demographic differences. A sample of the online survey form can be found in Appendix G.

Sampling

The Committee wanted to obtain statistically valid data for schools in each sector (Catholic, government and independent) and level (primary, secondary, primary/secondary and special) in Victoria. Minimum sample sizes for each variable were determined using a p-value of 0.5, a t-value of 1.65 and a 95 per cent confidence level.¹ Sample sizes were then increased to allow for a non-response rate of 30 per cent. Table 1.1 shows the total number of each type of school in Victoria, the total sample size and the actual number of responses received.

Table 1.1: Sample of schools for Education and Training Committee *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*

	<i>Number of Victorian schools</i>	<i>Number sampled</i>	<i>Number responded</i>	<i>Response rate</i>
BY SECTOR				
Catholic	484	224	182	81%
Government	1594	326	274	84%
Independent	218	160	127	79%
BY LEVEL				
Primary	1636	287	230	80%
Primary and secondary	195	141	124	88%
Secondary	365	193	175	91%
Special/language	100	89	54	61%
TOTAL SAMPLE				
Total	2296	710	583	82%

Source: Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September 2007.

Due to the requirement to obtain a statistically valid sample size for all variables, the percentages of each type of school in the sample is not proportional to the total population of Victorian schools. After the sample size was determined, schools were identified using a multistage random sample from a complete list of Victorian schools provided by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

Distribution and Collection

Sample schools were initially informed about the survey through formal correspondence from the Committee Chair. However, an online survey program was chosen to maximise cost-effectiveness in data collection. A link to the online survey form was emailed to sample schools on 19 July 2007, with two follow-up emails sent to non-responding schools. The email included an option to opt out of the survey, which only two schools followed. Schools were also able to request the survey in hard copy format, to eliminate bias against those experiencing difficulties with the online program. Hard copy surveys were received from 34 schools.

¹ Figures obtained using National Statistical Service *Sample Size Calculator*, available at National Statistical Service website, <<http://www.nss.gov.au/nss/home.NSF/>>.

The survey received 583 complete responses, representing a total response rate of 82 per cent. This included the minimum sample sizes required for statistical validity from primary, secondary, primary and secondary, and special schools; and schools from the Catholic, government and independent sectors. The survey was closed on 7 September 2007, when all required sample sizes had been attained.

Analysis of Survey Data

Data collected through the survey was downloaded from the online program and analysed in detail by the Committee across the two key variables of school sector and level of schooling. A number of additional variables were also investigated, including differences between schools in regional and metropolitan locations and any trends relating to the gender or socioeconomic background of student populations. The results of this analysis are presented throughout this report.

Analysis of School Uniform Policies and Price Lists

The Committee obtained dress code and school uniform policies and price lists from a sample of 65 Victorian schools. The initial sample comprised 30 primary schools and 30 secondary schools, with equal representation from each sector in metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. The schools were selected randomly, from a full list of Victorian schools supplied by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Where a single-sex school was included in the random sample, the next qualifying school was also included in the sample (ie either a single-sex school of the opposite gender or a co-educational school where only data for the relevant gender were examined). Similarly, if a school in the initial sample did not have either a compulsory or optional school uniform, a replacement school was selected. In total, the Committee examined policies from 65 Victorian schools, in order to obtain its sample of 60 girls and 60 boys school uniform policies and price lists.

The policies and price lists were analysed in detail to ascertain which garments are required components of the school uniform for boys and girls at each school in the sample, and the cost of each of those garments.

Definitions

'Dress code' is the term used by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development to refer to any 'detailed written statement of the expectations that a school council holds regarding student appearance'. The Department goes on to define a student dress code as follows:

A dress code may require students to wear a school uniform and may define specifications for garment design and colour. Alternatively, a dress code may merely set out broad guidelines as to the appearance of students.²

Other education departments throughout Australia also use the term 'dress code', or similar terms such as 'dress requirements' (WA) or 'uniform requirements' (NSW). For the purposes of this inquiry, two terms have been adopted: dress code and school uniform policy.

The Committee notes that 'uniform policy' and 'dress code' are frequently used interchangeably by Victorian schools. However, the two terms have been differentiated in this inquiry, to better distinguish school policies that require or identify specific student clothing from policies that make more general rules relating to student appearance and attire.

² Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2007, 'Student dress code', section 4.8 (updated May 2006), *Victorian Government Schools Reference Guide*, DEECD, Melbourne.

School Uniform Policy

For the purposes of this inquiry, a **school uniform policy** is taken to mean any policy made by a school which sets out the characteristics of a compulsory or non-compulsory school uniform. The school uniform policy may include requirements or recommendations relating to:

- 1) the specific garments to be worn;
- 2) how the garments are to be worn, such as tucking in shirts or hem length for dresses;
- 3) when the garments are to be worn and by whom, such as uniforms for different seasons or year levels;
- 4) processes, prices and outlets for purchasing school uniform items;
- 5) exemption processes;
- 6) enforcement processes;
- 7) regulations relating to non-clothing aspects of student appearance, such as hair length or jewellery;
- 8) any special considerations relating to student attire in the school, such as SunSmart or religious requirements; and/or
- 9) review processes.

Dress Code

For the purposes of this inquiry, a **dress code** is taken to mean any policy made by a school which sets out requirements relating to student clothing or appearance which do *not* include a specific school uniform. A dress code will typically include only items 6 to 9 from the above list.

