

Chapter 2:

Current Policies and Practices



Introduction

It is an important issue and it is something that school communities are very passionate about...They are as passionate about having a uniform as not having a uniform.³

One of the fundamental questions raised in this inquiry was whether uniforms should be compulsory in Victorian schools. Staff, parents and students from schools with uniforms spoke proudly of the advantages of their uniform for all members of their school communities. While schools without uniforms constitute a much smaller proportion of Victorian schools, the Committee found that their school communities are no less passionate in supporting their approach to student dress and appearance. This chapter outlines the diversity of views on school uniforms across governments and school communities in Australia, followed by an overview of current dress codes and school uniform policies and practices in Victorian schools.

Victorian Policy Context

Government Schools

In Victoria, all school councils have the authority to create and implement dress codes and school uniform policies for their students. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development outlines its policy on student dress codes for government schools in the *Schools Reference Guide*, a comprehensive resource document compiled to assist schools in all aspects of governance, management and administration.⁴ The policy includes a number of recommendations for schools to apply in establishing dress codes and uniform policies, in consultation with the school community.

The Department's recommendations do not indicate a preference as to whether schools should have uniforms or not. The Department recommends that in establishing a dress code, schools should recognise 'the positive role of clothing in promoting a sense of individual and collective pride in students, and promoting their identification with the school'.⁵ It does not, however, specify whether 'clothing' necessarily refers to having a school uniform. The Department also suggests that school councils give consideration to the following issues with respect to their dress code:

- Does it respect the cultural norms of the school community?
- Is it reasonable by contemporary standards and does it avoid unnecessarily intruding on a student's rights in matters of personal appearance?
- Is it suitable to the role of being a student and to the tasks and functions performed in that role?
- Have appropriate health and safety considerations been considered?
- Are any gender-specific requirements of the code in accordance with community standards?

³ Mr B. Burgess, President, Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 April 2007, p.8.

⁴ Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2007, 'Student dress code', section 4.8 (updated May 2006), *Victorian Government Schools Reference Guide*, DEECD, Melbourne.

⁵ *ibid.*

'Our college community strongly believes that student uniform is a very important element in the development of student culture, expectations and values. We would vehemently oppose any proposal to take away the right of government college communities to determine their own uniform requirements.'

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- Does it make some provision for individual expression through alternatives within overall garment requirements?
- Has it been made clear to parents/guardians and students prior to enrolment, thereby providing a basis of assent?
- Is it able to be met by all students?
- Will it be reviewed when circumstances change significantly?⁶

The *Schools Reference Guide* encourages school councils to give careful consideration to the consultative process that will be undertaken with the school community in developing a dress code. It also provides general advice about aspects of the dress code's implementation, including: grounds for exemption required by law; appropriate measures for school uniform enforcement; and advice regarding the minimisation of risk in purchasing arrangements with school uniform suppliers.⁷

The Committee believes that the Department's guidelines are an important resource for schools. For many schools, the dress code or school uniform policy may be considered a relatively minor aspect of school administration. The departmental guidelines both ensure that schools are aware of the important issues that need to be addressed in their dress codes and uniform policies and save schools time in researching these issues themselves. The Committee hopes that enhancements to these valuable guidelines will be one of the key outcomes of this inquiry.

Catholic Schools

Requirements for dress codes and school uniforms in the Catholic school sector are determined by local school authorities within each of the four dioceses. In its written submission, the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria summarised the views of three of the four dioceses with respect to school uniforms.⁸

The Dioceses of Melbourne and Ballarat share the view that school uniforms and procedures to enforce them are the responsibility of individual schools. The submission notes that in the views of these dioceses, 'schools can be trusted to identify and implement a uniform policy that suits their culture/community'.⁹ The Diocese of Sandhurst notes that 'Mandatory school uniform policies enjoy widespread support within the diocese'.¹⁰ The submission does not include a statement from the Diocese of Sale.

Independent Schools

Dress codes and school uniform policies in independent schools are determined by individual schools and their communities. The independent sector includes a very broad range of schools, including those with specific religious or philosophical perspectives and, as Mrs Sayers, Board Member, Association of Independent Schools of Victoria, noted, 'one size definitely does not fit all'.¹¹ Entrusting school uniform choices to individual schools also reflects the independent sector's core values of choice, diversity and autonomy.¹²

Mrs Sayers told the Committee that because dress codes and school uniforms are governed at a school level, these issues have not been discussed 'at board level'.¹³ However, the Association often provides advice to schools in response to

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Catholic Education Commission of Victoria Ltd, Written Submission, May 2007, p.1.

⁹ *ibid.*, p.1.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p.2.

¹¹ Mrs E. Sayers, Board Member, Association of Independent Schools of Victoria, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 May 2007, p.32.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*, p.33.

queries about uniform policies, especially relating to compliance with relevant legislation. The Association also disseminates information to schools about any special guidelines that may exist for uniform policies, such as SunSmart options, or refers schools to the appropriate agencies.

Other Australian Jurisdictions

Currently, the Northern Territory is the only jurisdiction in Australia to have a compulsory school uniform policy for government schools. On 25 July 2006, the NT Minister for Education announced a proposal for compulsory school uniforms for all preparatory to year 9 students (optional for senior students), to take effect from 2008. The policy is intended to minimise clothing cost burdens for parents, promote a positive image for schools and eliminate pressure on students to keep up with the latest fashion brands and trends.¹⁴

Under the Northern Territory policy, each government school will develop a school uniform implementation plan in conjunction with parents and school councils. Plans must contain the following elements:

- a) a requirement that students wear an authorised school uniform;
- b) measures to address exceptional circumstances where a student is unable to comply; and
- c) measures to address health and safety considerations including sun protection, appropriate footwear and hats.¹⁵

As part of their implementation plans, schools must also develop guidelines regarding:

- what constitutes the school uniform for the school;
- measures to encourage student compliance with the uniform policy (which must not extend to any student being precluded from attending school);
- a communications plan with details on providing information to and incorporating feedback from the school community;
- mechanisms to review the school uniform over time; and
- measures to deal with students not wearing the uniform.¹⁶

In June 2007, four members of the Committee met with key representatives of the NT education community in Darwin, including the then Minister for Education, Hon Paul Henderson MLA (refer Appendix C). During their investigations, members of the Committee were advised that schools are approaching the implementation plans in very different ways. Interpretations range from general requirements allowing free choice of garments within specified colour schemes, to more prescriptive and traditional approaches. Even in mandating a compulsory school uniform, the Department has thus left ample scope for schools to implement the school uniform policy in the way that is most appropriate to their community.

The Committee found that other Australian jurisdictions have recently considered introducing compulsory school uniforms. In 2004, the then WA Education Minister Hon Alan Carpenter MLA, planned to make uniforms compulsory in Western Australian schools by 2006. However, this met with opposition from school and student bodies.¹⁷ In 2006, the ACT Department of Education and Training called for opinions on the proposed introduction of compulsory school uniforms,¹⁸ but has since continued to leave the decision whether to have a uniform to school

¹⁴ Department of Employment, Education and Training 2007 (Northern Territory), *Policy SM-01.7: Compulsory School Uniforms T-9*, July 2007, DEET, Darwin, p.1.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p.2.

¹⁷ ABC News, 'School uniform plan draws criticism', 17 November 2004, Australian Broadcasting Corporation website, <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2004/11/17/1245168.htm>>, accessed on 7 November 2007.

¹⁸ Mr J. Stanhope MLA, Chief Minister, Australian Capital Territory, 'Minister Calls For Community Discussion on School Uniform Policy', *Media Release*, 15 February 2005.

communities.¹⁹ In Queensland, consultation for the *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006*, which provides for schools to determine their own uniform policies, also included consultation around whether compulsory uniforms should be introduced.²⁰ Despite the attention the issue has received, no other jurisdiction has yet followed the Northern Territory in making school uniforms compulsory.

While most Australian jurisdictions leave it to schools and their communities to decide whether or not to have a school uniform, education departments have articulated their position on the issue in a variety of ways. Tasmania's policy statement, for example, explicitly states that wearing a school uniform is 'strongly encouraged'.²¹ The opening pages of the NSW and WA education departments' school uniform policy statements also seek to convince schools to adopt uniforms by listing the ways in which wearing a uniform will assist school communities.²²

Conversely, the SA Department of Education and Children's Services opens its school uniform policy by listing a range of options available to schools, including both uniform and uniform-free approaches.²³ Similarly, the Queensland Department of Education, Training and the Arts explains in its policy statement that student dress codes 'may or may not include a school uniform'.²⁴ As in Victoria, these education departments indicate a neutral position on the benefits of uniforms for school students. The Committee did not find any jurisdiction in Australia that indicated a preference in its policies for not having school uniforms.

Most Australian jurisdictions accompany their policy statements with guidelines to help schools develop dress codes and uniform policies in consultation with their communities. Currently, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory are the only jurisdictions that do not have guidelines available for dress codes and school uniforms, although relevant issues may be covered in other departmental policies, such as the Australian Capital Territory's school Sun Protection policy.²⁵ Queensland is the only jurisdiction in which detailed guidelines around school uniform policies have been legislated.²⁶

Table 2.1 offers a brief comparison of the departmental position on school uniforms in each state and territory.

¹⁹ Department of Education and Training (Australian Capital Territory), Written Submission, June 2007, p.1

²⁰ Department of Education, Training and the Arts (Queensland), Written Submission, May 2007, p.1.

²¹ Department of Education (Tasmania) website, <<http://www.education.tas.gov.au/school/parents/general/costs/uniforms>>, accessed on 11 September 2007.

²² Department of Education and Training (New South Wales) 2004, *School Uniforms in New South Wales Government Schools*, DET, Sydney; Department of Education and Training (Western Australia) 2007, *Dress requirements for students in WA public schools*, Government of Western Australia, East Perth.

²³ Department of Education and Children's Services (South Australia) 2007, *Administrative Instructions and Guidelines*, May 2007, DECS, Adelaide.

²⁴ Department of Education, Training and the Arts (Queensland) 2007, *Policy SMS-PR-022: Student Dress Code*, November 2007, DETA, Brisbane.

²⁵ Department of Education and Training (Australian Capital Territory) 2006, *Sun Protection Policy*, DET, Canberra.

²⁶ *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006* (Queensland).

Table 2.1: Comparison of approaches to school uniform policies across Australia

State/Territory	Position on uniforms	Guidance provided for schools
Australian Capital Territory	Uniforms supported	No guidelines
New South Wales	Uniforms supported	Guidelines provided
Northern Territory	Uniforms compulsory	Guidelines provided
Queensland	Neutral	Guidelines and legislation
South Australia	Neutral	Guidelines provided
Tasmania	Uniforms supported	No guidelines
Victoria	Neutral	Guidelines provided
Western Australia	Uniforms supported	Guidelines provided

Source: Compiled by the Education and Training Committee, 2007.

Enforcement of school uniform policies is the area where most states and territories provide the strongest guidance. All jurisdictions that provide guidelines place limitations on the sanctions principals can apply for breaches of dress codes or school uniform policies. While the exact wording varies, the common intent is that sanctions which exclude students from learning, including suspension and expulsion, are prohibited. Western Australia and Queensland add that sanctions which may damage a student's career prospects, such as negative comments in school reports, are not permitted.²⁷ In general, education departments throughout Australia encourage schools to seek compliance with school uniform policies through 'positive reinforcement', not punishment.

Most government policies also provide guidance regarding the laws, policies and regulations that schools need to consider in developing a dress code or school uniform policy. Typically, these include anti-discrimination and equal opportunity legislation and laws, policies and regulations relating to health and safety. While some states, including Victoria, provide an overview of how these laws might apply to school uniform policies, others, such as Queensland and South Australia, simply provide a list of relevant legislation.

Communication and consultation with school communities are further areas in which most education departments provide some guidance. Guidelines relating to consultation typically seek to ensure that a wide variety of stakeholder groups within the school community are given a say in the development and review of a school uniform policy. New South Wales and Queensland also require that school uniform policies are actively communicated to parents and readily available to be viewed at any time.

Some departmental guidelines for school uniforms also provide advice regarding costs and purchasing arrangements. In Western Australia, for example, schools are asked to ensure that the cost of the uniform is 'within reasonable limits'.²⁸ The South Australian guidelines make explicit reference to poverty as a common reason for not having a dress code and urge schools to be sensitive to the needs of disadvantaged students in providing financial support or exemptions.²⁹ Some

²⁷ Department of Education and Training (Western Australia), Written Submission, May 2007, p.2; Department of Education, Training and the Arts (Queensland) 2007, *Policy SMS-PR-022: Student Dress Code*, November 2007.

²⁸ Department of Education and Training (Western Australia) 2007, *Dress requirements for students in WA public schools*, Government of Western Australia, East Perth, p.2.

²⁹ Department of Education and Children's Services (South Australia) 2007, *Administrative Instructions and Guidelines*, May 2007, DECS, Adelaide, p.107.

'The wearing of school uniform has a positive influence on how the community perceives the College and is certainly one of the first things that is noticed by a visitor. If worn well and properly policed it helps to promote a positive image of not only the students but also the school.'

Lyndhurst Secondary
College

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states, including South Australia, New South Wales and Queensland, require schools to comply with specific guidelines and regulations relating to government purchasing.

Most departmental policy statements also provide advice to help schools cope with diversity in their student populations, including grounds on which certain students may be exempted from compliance with uniform policies. Permissible grounds for exemption typically include ethnic or religious background and physical disabilities or health conditions. In South Australia, specific mention is made of additional groups in the student body who may require special consideration, including adult and itinerant students.³⁰

Education departments throughout Australia therefore show consensus, in general terms, about the areas in which schools require guidance with respect to dress codes and uniform policies. However, they vary considerably in their priorities and prescriptiveness. While the Committee has not identified any one uniform policy in Australia as exemplary or fully comprehensive, it has noted worthwhile elements across the range of government policy documents within Australia.

To Have a School Uniform or Not?

Victorian schools are charged with the responsibility of determining a dress code or school uniform policy that will reflect the needs and preferences of their particular community. In doing so, schools must assess the pros and cons of the available options, beginning with the decision whether to have a uniform or not. The key arguments relating to the potential benefits of school uniforms raised in evidence to this inquiry, together with one of the many examples to support each argument, are outlined below.

Benefits of Having a School Uniform

- engenders a sense of pride and belonging in the school
The cultural impact and sense of pride in one's school cannot be overlooked. Also, the kids look good and they know it.³¹
- creates an atmosphere conducive to learning
As a teacher with over 20 years experience, I have found that a pupil, correctly wearing a school uniform (ie shirt tucked in etc) in a school that enforces this code, 'somehow' is much more attentive to their school work, more polite and courteous to teachers and fellow students.³²
- reduces competition between students, and bullying on the basis of clothing
It offers less opportunity for bullying, in the sense that everybody looks the same, so there is none of the, 'We look better than you and therefore we're better than you.'³³
- all students feel equal
The school uniform is a good way of making students feel equal to their peers, they don't have to worry about having the best jeans or shoes, all students can come to school feeling comfortable that everyone wears the same outfit.³⁴
- reduces the need for parents to buy expensive clothing
Children request fashion and surf brands etc where there is a choice of clothing and this comes at a high price tag.³⁵

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ Principal, quoted by Mr B. Burgess, President, Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 April 2007, p.3.

³² Mr P. Moore, Teacher, Written Submission, March 2007, p.1.

³³ Mr B. Burgess, President, Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 April 2007, p.2.

³⁴ Heywood and District Secondary College, Written Submission, May 2007, p.1.

³⁵ Spartan School Supplies Pty Ltd, Written Submission, May 2007, p.1.

- **eliminates dilemmas about what to wear to school**

It helps present a positive image to the community and in preventing students from being subjected to peer pressure about what they and the potential stress of choosing new clothes everyday.³⁶
- **offers quality, durable clothing to parents at reasonable costs**

The provision of a college uniform makes it cheaper for parents to provide appropriate and durable clothing for their children to wear to school.³⁷
- **encourages students to attend to personal presentation**

School uniforms engender a sense of respect for self. They set a tone amongst students and in wearing them they reflect a sense of pride in one's own appearance, of being organised and self-disciplined in preparations for the school day.³⁸
- **makes students easier to identify at school and on excursions**

It makes it easier to identify genuine students, as well as those are who not part of the community, and thus to protect the students from undesirable influences.³⁹
- **attracts enrolments to the school**

It is evident, schools are using their image as part of their strategic marketing campaigns to attract new students. Given parents have a choice in deciding where to send their children to school...uniforms and the overall presentation of the schools have become integral to making their final decisions.⁴⁰
- **ensures students are dressed safely and appropriately for school activities**

A compulsory dress code means there is a way of ensuring students come dressed appropriately and practically for the activities they undertake during the day.⁴¹
- **helps students prepare for employment.**

Adherence with school uniform policy reflects possible future workplace expectations and reinforces positive behaviour.⁴²

Benefits of Not Having a School Uniform

- **empowers students to make choices and take responsibility**

It promotes the development of personal responsibility because students choose what they wear, rather than have a uniform enforced upon them [and] contributes to the creative space necessary for children to develop to their full potential.⁴³
- **lets students express their individuality**

It is about letting children develop as individuals, about children learning that not everyone dresses the same, that not everyone thinks the same. They need to express themselves in many ways, through hairstyles and colour, body piercing and body art, music and clothes.⁴⁴
- **supports inclusion by encouraging diversity**

The absolute diversity and range of student styles, the number of sub-cultures that co-exist peacefully seems to allow virtually all students to find a niche.⁴⁵
- **creates a vibrant and colourful school environment**

³⁶ Victorian Student Representative Council, Written Submission, June 2007, pp.1-2.

³⁷ Lyndale Secondary College Council, Written Submission, June 2007, p.1.

³⁸ Heywood and District Secondary College, Written Submission, May 2007, p.1.

³⁹ Lyndale Secondary College Council, Written Submission, June 2007, p.1.

⁴⁰ Noone Imagewear, Written Submission, May 2007, p.1.

⁴¹ Hampton Park Primary School, Written Submission, June 2007, p.1.

⁴² Respondent, Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September 2007.

⁴³ Ms M. Pledger, Representative, Parent Association, Princes Hill Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Carlton North, 31 July 2007, p.4.

⁴⁴ Ms M. A. Rosenthal, Parent, Written Submission, May 2007, p.1.

⁴⁵ Sandringham College, Written Submission, June 2007, p.2.

I think our school is filled with bright, colourful, imaginative young things and some of them express their personalities with an amazing dress sense, but you know most of them wear sensible, comfortable clothes and shoes because what you wear is not who you are...⁴⁶

- teaches students not to make judgements on the basis of clothing

...you do not need a uniform to take pride in your school because students should not be judged on their appearance but on their behaviour and their choices.⁴⁷
- eliminates the need for parents to buy expensive school uniforms

... school uniforms in primary school are usually more expensive than a similar item bought without a school logo; you tend to go through a number of tops and pants, particularly with boys, as they tend to be destroyed fairly quickly. Those that aren't, are grown out of just as fast.⁴⁸
- removes the need to spend teacher time on enforcement of a school uniform

Having no uniform generally allows the teachers to concentrate on other more important issues rather than whether a particular student is wearing the correct colour socks or shirt.⁴⁹
- improves teacher–student relationships

The School strongly fosters a culture of cooperative education that respects diversity of all kinds, encourages a harmonious relationship between teachers and students to be established and maintained throughout all grades, and cultivates self-discipline and responsibility in students.⁵⁰
- improves student engagement with school

No uniform takes away one of the biggest reasons students have to hate school.⁵¹
- supports a student-centred school environment

...uniform reduces an emphasis on differentiated learning and customising curriculum because it values uniformity. It gives adults an excuse to overlook the individual and their needs for a differentiated learning program.⁵²

The Committee commends contributors on both sides of the debate for the strength and sincerity of their arguments. It is clear to the Committee that the vast majority of Victorian schools, whether they have a uniform or not, have based their decision on reasoned consideration of what they feel is best for their school community. It is therefore the Committee's view that it would not be appropriate to expect Victorian schools to conform to a compulsory school uniform policy.

Recommendation 2.1: That decisions regarding dress codes and school uniform policies remain the responsibility of school councils, in consultation with their communities.

Types of Dress Codes and School Uniform Policies

Developing a dress code or school uniform policy does not stop with the decision about whether or not a uniform is to be worn. One of the key findings of the inquiry was the enormous variation between schools as to what it means to have, or not to have, a uniform. For some schools, a school uniform refers to garments that may be chosen by the student, as long as they conform to school colours. Other schools permit a wide range of student choice for most items, but also require some specific garments carrying the school logo. For schools with more stringent

⁴⁶ Princes Hill Secondary College, Written Submission, May 2007, p.7.

⁴⁷ Ms A. Richardson, Year 6 Student, Spensley Street Primary School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Council Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.7.

⁴⁸ Eltham High School Council, Written Submission, May 2007, p.2.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p.1.

⁵⁰ Merri Creek Primary School Council, Written Submission, June 2007, p.2.

⁵¹ Princes Hill Secondary College, Written Submission, May 2007, p.8.

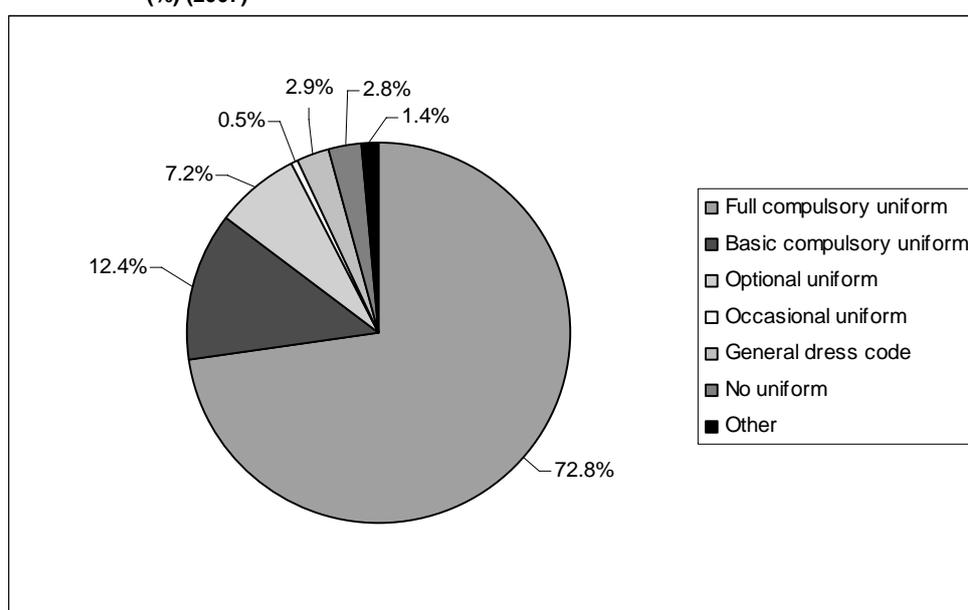
⁵² Dr D. Warner, Principal, Eltham College of Education, Written Submission, May 2007, p.1.

school uniform policies, all students are required to wear a complete set of specified garments, many of which are badged with the school logo. A large number of schools, especially in the primary sector, have optional school uniforms available to their students.

Figure 2.1 shows the types of uniform policies in Victorian schools, as represented in data from the Committee's survey. Full compulsory uniforms are by far the most common type of policy (72.8%), followed by a basic compulsory uniform with limited specifications such as school colours or some items with the school logo (12.4%) and an optional uniform (7.2%). Only 5.7 per cent of schools have no uniform or a general dress code only.⁵³

Of the schools which ticked 'Other', all but two did so because they have a compulsory uniform for some year levels in the school, but no uniform for senior students. The remaining schools were a technical college (which indicated that its only clothing regulation is for safety equipment to be worn in workshops) and a school that only requires students to wear a uniform during excursions.⁵⁴

Figure 2.1: Types of student dress codes and school uniform policies in Victorian schools (%) (2007)



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

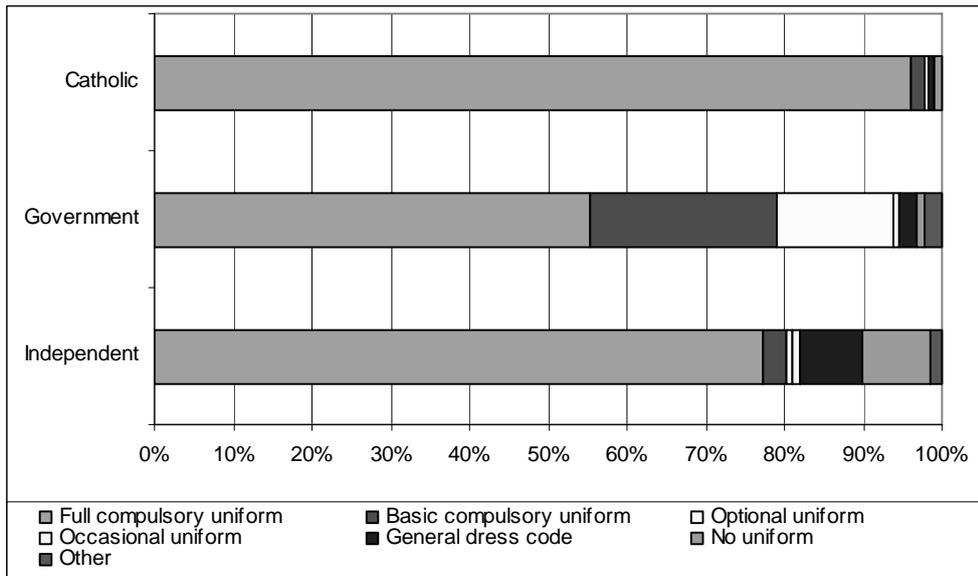
Figure 2.2 shows the different types of dress codes and school uniform policies across the Catholic, government and independent sectors. Full compulsory uniforms are in place in nearly all Victorian Catholic schools (96.1%) and are least common in government schools (55.3%). However, nearly one quarter of government schools (23.8%) have a basic compulsory uniform (limited specifications for clothing, such as wearing schools colours or some items with a school logo) and many others have an optional uniform that students can choose to wear (14.7%). The proportion of students choosing to wear a uniform in schools where it is optional to do so varies greatly; in some instances, nearly all students choose to wear the optional uniform and in other examples, very few students choose to do so. Independent schools have the highest proportion of schools with general dress codes, or no uniform.⁵⁵

⁵³ Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September 2007.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

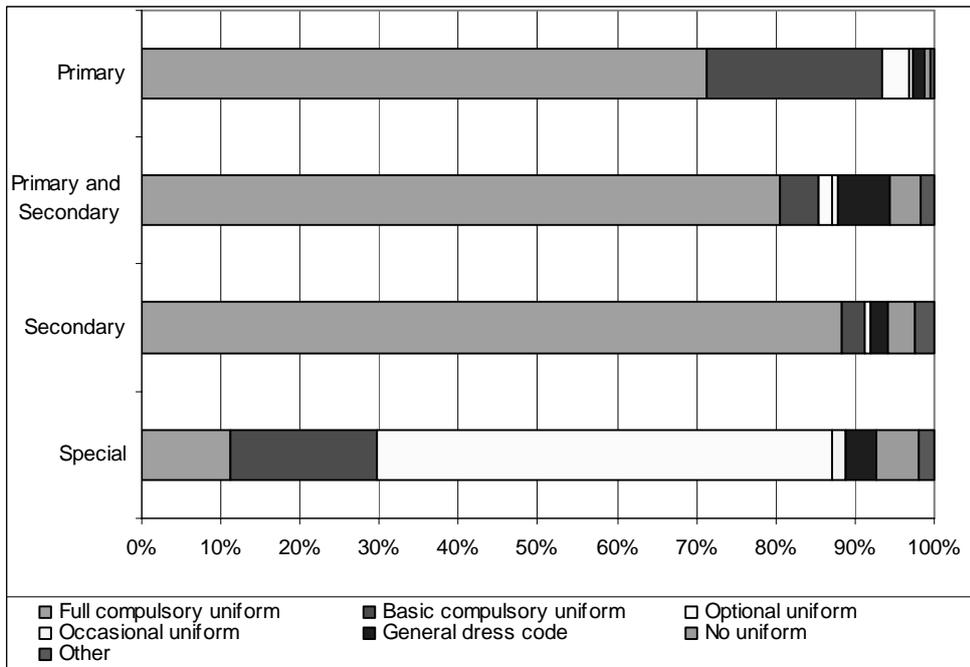
Figure 2.2: Types of student dress codes and school uniform policies in Victorian schools, by sector (%) (2007)



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

Figure 2.3 shows the different types of dress codes and uniform policies across the different levels of Victorian schools: primary, secondary, primary and secondary, and special schools. The differences are less marked between the levels than between the sectors, but there is nevertheless a clear increase in the proportion of schools with a compulsory uniform, as the age of the students increases. Special schools are by far the least likely to have compulsory uniforms, but the majority do have a uniform available, often on an optional basis.⁵⁶

Figure 2.3: Types of student dress codes and school uniform policies in Victorian schools, by level (%) (2007)



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

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

The survey also revealed a correlation between the type of school uniform policy and the socioeconomic background of students. Schools with high numbers of students receiving the Educational Maintenance Allowance are the least likely to have compulsory uniforms. The Committee found no significant differences between the types of dress codes and uniform policies adopted by regional and metropolitan schools.⁵⁷

Characteristics of Dress Codes and School Uniform Policies

In developing a uniform policy, schools must determine a number of general requirements. These relate to what the uniform comprises; when it should be worn; how it should be worn; who should wear it; and any requirements relating to aspects of student appearance other than clothing. The Committee found wide variations across all of these elements.

What to Wear

Typically, the most significant purpose of any school uniform policy is setting out what students are required to wear. Table 2.2 lists the types of garments that are currently included in Victorian school uniforms, based on the Committee's analysis of a sample of 60 school uniform policies.⁵⁸ The sample identified a wide range of compulsory and optional combinations of the items shown below.

Table 2.2: Garments and other items included in Victorian school uniforms

Beanie	Jacket	School bag	Sports socks
Belt	Jumper	Shirt	Spray jacket
Blazer	Kilt	Shoes	Sun protective hat
Blouse	Lab coat/goggles	Shorts	Swimwear
Bomber jacket	Mouthguard	Skirt	Tie
Cap	Netball skirt	Skivvy	Tights
Craft/Technology apron	Pinafore	'Skort'	Trackpants
Culottes	Polar fleece jacket	Socks	Trousers
Dress	Polo shirt	Sports bag	T-shirt
Dress hat	Raincoat	Sports cap/hat	Vest
Gloves	Rugby top	Sports jacket	Windcheater
Hair accessories	Runners	Sports jumper	Winter jacket
Iron-on emblem	Scarf	Sports shorts	

Source: Education and Training Committee analysis of 60 school uniform policies and price lists, October 2007.

As Table 2.2 demonstrates, today's school uniforms include a broad range of formal and non-traditional garments and accessories. The Committee heard mixed opinions as to whether a 'traditional' or less formal design is preferable. In the Committee's survey, one principal commented that the introduction of a more formal uniform transformed the culture of the school:

We moved to a more formal uniform code from a basic one. The tone of the school lifted, attitudes from staff, parents and students improved. It had an amazing uplifting effect.⁵⁹

Western Australia is the only Australian jurisdiction in which an opinion on the design of school uniforms is expressed in departmental policy. In opening the

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

⁵⁸ Education and Training Committee analysis of 60 school uniform policies and price lists, October 2007.

⁵⁹ Respondent, Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September 2007.

'Catholic primary schools, by and large, don't seem to have huge issues over uniform. They are neat, functional and provide a strong sense of school identity. Catholic schools in other states have some pretty fancy uniforms. The Victorian schools are more functional than dressy which I think is a good thing.'

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Department of Education and Training's policy statement on school dress requirements, Minister for Education and Training, Hon Mark McGowan MLA, urges government schools to choose traditional styles of uniform to uphold their reputations:

Traditional styles of uniform will play an important part in keeping up the strong reputation of public schools and ensuring parents continue to send their children to public schools.⁶⁰

On the other hand, Victorian schools with less formal uniforms proudly defended their decision. In a public hearing, one primary school student told the Committee that her school's decision to choose a 'non-traditional uniform' is supported by parents and students as modern, economical, and convenient.⁶¹ In a written submission, year 10 students from Braybrook College also supported their school's current uniform design:

If we get blazers and ties, we will become like a private school. We don't think we should try and be something we're not.⁶²

The sample of Victorian school uniform policies examined by the Committee confirmed that more traditional uniform items, including blazers and ties, are currently most commonly associated with independent and Catholic schools.⁶³

The Committee also found variations in policies and practices in schools that have a general dress code. Some dress codes include broad requirements, such as 'neat and tidy' or 'nothing offensive'.⁶⁴ Some dress codes make statements about fashion and branding, such as 'clothing without aggressive images or expensive fashionable labels'⁶⁵ or clothing without 'brands, slogans or company symbols'.⁶⁶ Other dress codes ban specific items of clothing, such as thongs.⁶⁷ Like school uniform policies, dress codes generally reflect the values of the school community. The link between values and school uniforms is particularly apparent in independent schools founded on a particular philosophy or belief system. In accordance with the specific aesthetic of the Steiner movement, for example, Little Yarra Steiner School specifies light, bright colours, natural fibres and no designs/logos larger than what can be covered by a hand.⁶⁸ Religious schools also often use their school dress code as a means of promoting the specific dress standards of their religion or culture.

The Committee believes that every school has a unique set of values and beliefs that will guide the selection of a school uniform, although they will not always be as clearly articulated as in the above examples. When 125 Victorian students gathered at Parliament House for a public hearing for this inquiry, the Committee was pleased to observe the diversity in student appearance. The Committee was also impressed by the pride with which all students represented their school in their attire, whatever type of dress code or uniform policy they were following. The Committee therefore supports the Victorian Department of Education and Early

⁶⁰ Department of Education and Training (Western Australia) 2007, *Dress requirements for students in WA public schools*, Government of Western Australia, East Perth.

⁶¹ Ms H. Lessing, Year 6 Student, Benalla Primary School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Council Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.18.

⁶² Students of 10C English, Braybrook College, Written Submission, May 2007, p.3.

⁶³ Education and Training Committee analysis of 60 school uniform policies and price lists, October 2007.

⁶⁴ Respondents, Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September 2007.

⁶⁵ Cockatoo Montessori School website, <<http://cockatoomontessori.vic.edu.au>>, accessed on 26 November 2007.

⁶⁶ Respondent, Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September 2007.

⁶⁷ Croydon Community School, Written Submission, June 2007, p.1.

⁶⁸ Little Yarra Steiner School, Written Submission, May 2007, p.1.

Childhood Development's guidelines, in saying that a dress code or school uniform should 'reflect the values of its particular school community'.⁶⁹

How and When it Should be Worn

A school uniform policy may also set rules relating to how a garment should be worn. As one parent noted on Parents Victoria's online discussion forum, simply prescribing school uniform items is not sufficient to ensure compliance:

Students are notorious for corrupting uniform...having a compulsory one does not ensure that it will be worn correctly.⁷⁰

Common examples of regulations relating to how a uniform is worn include shirts being tucked in, skirts being a prescribed length, or torn clothing being mended or replaced.

The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's guidelines advise schools about the times at which a dress code or uniform policy is likely to apply:

The code usually applies during school hours, while travelling to and from school, and when students are engaged in school activities out of school hours.⁷¹

The Committee nevertheless found substantial variation in the actual application of school uniform policies, both in government and non-government schools. For example, the Committee is aware of two schools in which uniforms are only compulsory for students representing the school on excursions.⁷²

It is also very common for schools to have different uniforms for summer and winter. For some schools, the dates on which these uniforms must be worn are fixed. For others, the summer and winter uniforms simply provide a wider range of options, allowing students to choose the clothing that is most comfortable at any time of year.

Who Should Wear it

Schools must also determine to whom their dress code or school uniform policy applies. In some schools, uniforms apply only to students at certain year levels. The Committee's survey found six schools that exempt senior secondary students from wearing uniforms and one P-12 school in which the uniform is only compulsory after Year 5. For some schools, all students are required to wear the uniform throughout their schooling, but the design changes as students move through the year levels.⁷³

A particularly contentious issue raised in the inquiry was whether dress codes and school uniform policies should also apply to teachers and other school staff. The Committee's survey found that 43.8 per cent of Victorian schools have some form of written dress code for their staff, either setting out general or specific standards of dress. A small number of schools even have specific uniforms that their staff are required to wear. In many other schools (43.6%), staff dress codes are 'implicit'; that is, staff are expected to conform to certain standards in their attire, but these standards are not documented.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2007, 'Student dress code', section 4.8 (updated May 2006), *Victorian Government Schools Reference Guide*, DEECD, Melbourne.

⁷⁰ Ms B. Mackay, 'Should school uniforms be compulsory?', *Parents Victoria online forum*, 10 September 2007, Parents Victoria website, <<http://www.cybertext.net.au/pv/discussion.htm>>.

⁷¹ Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2007, 'Student dress code', section 4.8 (updated May 2006), *Victorian Government Schools Reference Guide*, DEECD, Melbourne.

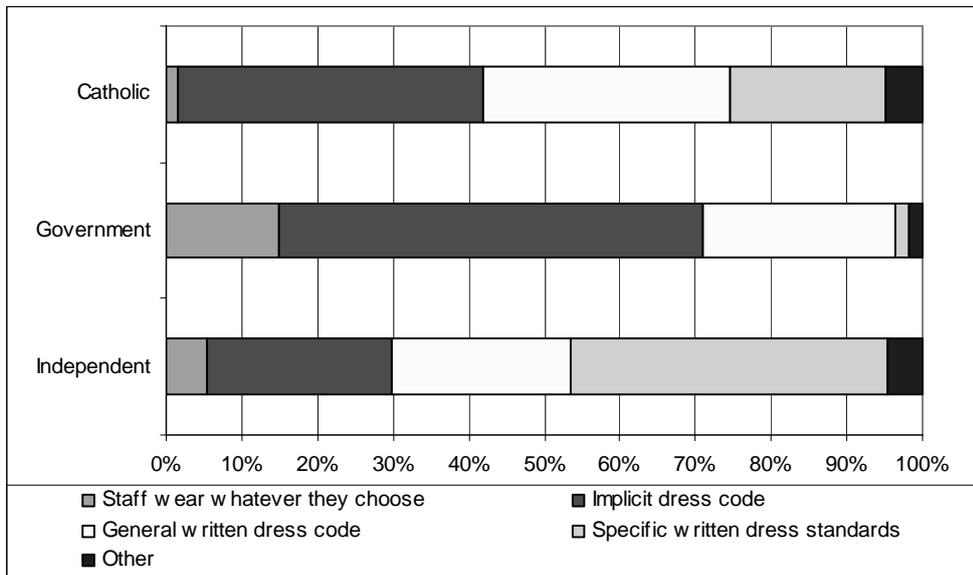
⁷² Respondents, Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September 2007.

⁷³ *ibid.*

⁷⁴ Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September 2007.

The Committee found that staff dress codes vary across the Catholic, government and independent sectors (Figure 2.4).

Figure 2.4: Types of staff dress codes in Victorian schools, by sector (%) (2007)



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

Independent (65.3%) and Catholic schools (53.0%) are more likely than government schools (27.1%) to have written dress codes for staff. These codes are most specific in independent schools. No significant differences were found between staff dress codes across primary and secondary schools, regional and metropolitan schools, or schools with students from higher and lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

The following comments from the Committee’s survey give some indication of the diversity of approaches taken by schools to staff dress codes:

Currently our teachers have the option to purchase school jackets or polo shirts, but that is not compulsory. All teachers are provided with a badge with the school number in navy and gold for easy identification.

It is specified that we do not wear jeans and that male teachers are encouraged to wear a shirt and tie. If this is not comfortable they are requested to wear shirt and tie for specific occasions....We have discussed professional dress as a staff, and have decided that clothing for women needs to be modest - no low tops, nor skin obvious between pants and tops.

We have only introduced a polo jacket with the school logo this week...I would love to have a fitted suit or uniform for staff however find it hard to get agreement.

It is not as yet written but staff have chosen to wear a professional uniform that complements school colours, and this has been well accepted by the school community.⁷⁵

One comment in the survey provided an example of staff dress standards in an Islamic school:

We provide the staff with an Abaya [garment covering the whole body except face, feet and hands], to wear on top of their clothes.⁷⁶

Another school in the survey did not see the need for staff dress standards at all:

Our staff do not have a dress code, it is not something that we require, they all come to work appropriately dressed.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Respondents, Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September 2007.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

The idea of a dress code or uniform policy for teachers received mixed reactions from the students who gave evidence to this inquiry. While some students felt that it was 'about time' teachers were made to adhere to a dress code, others supported the view that teachers are already maintaining appropriate standards in their clothing.⁷⁸ For Ms Morgan Pumpa, Year 10 Student, Collingwood College, self-expression through clothing is just as important for teachers as it is for students:

I think teachers at Collingwood College are just as bold as students in the way they dress. They are just as great as the students at expressing their opinions.⁷⁹

The Committee observed that like student dress codes, policies for staff dress tend to reflect the particular set of values of the school community.

Four principals commented in the Committee's survey that they would like to see clearer guidelines about what teaching staff can wear at school. In a written submission, Mr John Gow, Principal, Mont Albert School, described the specific issues he has dealt with regarding appropriate clothing for teaching staff:

This year already I have had to suggest to female teachers that I don't believe singlet tops and thongs are professional dress. To males I have had to suggest that beach shorts, sandals and collarless t-shirts are not professional dress.⁸⁰

In the survey, one principal noted an apparent decline in standards of staff presentation and the difficulty that principals face in confronting staff about their attire:

It would be helpful if there were some guidelines for teacher dress code as I believe that these have decreased dramatically during my teaching career. As principal, I find this one of the most difficult issues to deal with – teachers sometimes see this as subjective on my part.⁸¹

The Committee notes that the issue of professional clothing can be very personal and sensitive, and believes that clear guidelines or policies determined at a school level may help reduce the likelihood that differences in opinion will occur between employees and school administrators.

It is not within the scope of this inquiry to address staff dress codes as a separate issue. However, it is worthwhile to note that many of the issues discussed in the following chapters may apply to dress codes for staff, as well as for students. This may be especially true for health and safety policies, such as sun protection; and anti-discrimination issues, such as gender equity and clothing with religious significance. As a number of contributors to the inquiry noted, staff attire may have an 'unspoken' but significant influence on students' attitudes and appearance. The Committee therefore believes that schools should encourage staff to demonstrate the values reflected in their student dress codes and uniform policies.

Recommendation 2.2: That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's guidelines encourage schools to consider standards for staff dress and appearance during the development and review of dress codes and school uniform policies.

Other Aspects of Student Appearance

Neither dress codes nor school uniform policies are necessarily confined to what students can or must wear. Most schools make rules about other aspects of student appearance, including hair length, style and colour; facial hair; jewellery;

⁷⁸ Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Assembly Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.11; Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Carlton North, 31 July 2007, p.14.

⁷⁹ Ms M. Pumpa, Year 10 Student, Collingwood College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Assembly Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.11.

⁸⁰ Mont Albert School, Written Submission, May 2007, p.1.

⁸¹ Respondent, Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September 2007.

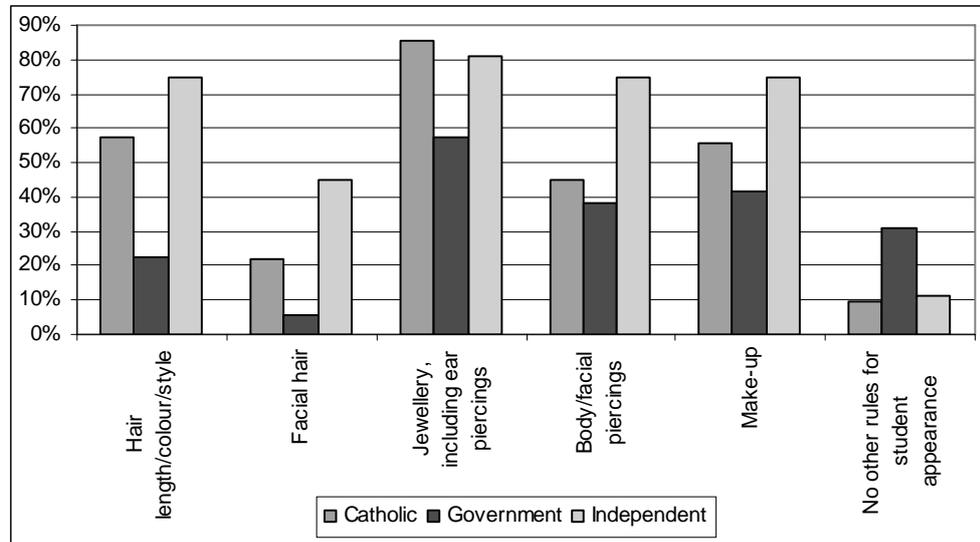
'[If] any forms of individualism, such as piercings or unnatural hair colours, are abolished... [and] there must be no tattoos and no make-up... It almost sounds like the requirements of a military uniform. But high school is not a military operation; high school is an important time of self-reflection and discovery, being creative and opening our minds.'

Lizzie Forrest, Year 11 Student, University High School

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body and facial piercing; and make-up. Figure 2.5 shows the percentage of schools in each sector (Catholic, government and independent) that make regulations relating to specific aspects of students' personal appearance.

Figure 2.5: Incidence of rules relating to aspects of student appearance other than clothing in Victorian schools, by sector (%) (2007)



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

For almost all aspects of student appearance investigated, schools in the independent sector are the most likely to make regulations. The government sector has the highest proportion of schools that do not make any rules about student appearance. Jewellery is the aspect of student appearance most likely to be regulated in all sectors.⁸²

The Committee heard a range of views from students about school rules relating to student appearance. Some students, particularly in older year levels, believe that such rules are an infringement on students' rights:

... it is the student's personal right to do everything in that area.⁸³

Students have a right to wear make-up and grow facial hair to ensure that their education does not suffer from a reduced sense of comfort at school.⁸⁴

For other students, such rules have a worthwhile purpose in preventing distractions or unwanted attention:

At our school we also think that boys and girls should not be allowed to wear make-up, apart from lip balm, so that they do not spend half their day worrying about how they look.⁸⁵

Other uniform policy rules need to cover jewellery, hair colour, make-up and piercings to avoid unnecessary individual student attention.⁸⁶

However, for Ms Anna Richardson, Year 6 Student, Spensley Street Primary School, such rules are irrelevant to the core purpose of schooling:

⁸² Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September 2007.

⁸³ Mr J. Trew, Year 11 Student, Apollo Bay P-12 College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Assembly Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.7.

⁸⁴ Mr A. Greig, Year 12 Student, Frankston High School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Assembly Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.9.

⁸⁵ Mr B. Fernando, Year 6 Student, Laburnum Primary School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Council Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.6.

⁸⁶ Mr N. Facey, Year 6 Student, Benalla Primary School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Council Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.6.

... we feel as long as you are a committed and motivated learner it should not matter how many studs you have, what colour your hair is, or if you have stubble. How you look does not change how you behave in class or what your learning abilities are, which is what we think school is about.⁸⁷

Other contributors to the inquiry demonstrated a similarly diverse range of views.

The aspect of student appearance that attracted the most comment in this inquiry was body jewellery and piercings. As views on piercings are evolving rapidly in Australian communities, students' and parents' values are often at odds with school policies and practices. Mr Brian Burgess, President, Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, reported that piercings often constitute the most contentious issue in school dress codes:

Piercings policy...is the one that draws the most abuse from parents who regard putting holes in their children's bodies as a really nice birthday present!⁸⁸

Contention about facial piercings is not just confined to schools. Two recent court cases involving enforcement of the staff dress code in a supermarket chain have related to visible body piercings, which staff members have been asked to remove.⁸⁹ Piercings also appeared on the Victorian policy agenda in 2007, with legislation proposed to introduce stricter requirements for parental consent for piercings for young people under the age of 18.⁹⁰

The Committee found that schools tend to make rules relating to body and facial piercings for two main reasons. First, schools regulate piercings in order to reflect the image that the school wants its students to uphold. Although facial and body piercings have become increasingly commonplace in society, especially among teenagers, they still carry connotations of rebellion and poor presentation for many people. This is often incompatible with the values that schools typically wish to portray through their uniform policies. Secondly, schools regulate body and facial piercings because they may present a risk to student health and safety. This issue is further discussed in Chapter 3.

Conclusion

Current policies and practices relating to dress codes and school uniforms in Victorian schools are extremely diverse. The Committee found widespread agreement among contributors to this inquiry that choices about uniforms should continue to be made by individual schools and their communities. For this reason, the Committee does not believe it is appropriate to introduce a general requirement for Victorian schools to have a school uniform. To reflect the positive attitude to diversity that characterises the Victorian school system, dress codes and school uniform policies should continue to reflect the individual values, preferences and standards of each unique school community.

⁸⁷ Ms A. Richardson, Year 6 Student, Spensley Street Primary School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Council Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.7.

⁸⁸ Principal, quoted by Mr B. Burgess, President, Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 April 2007, p.4.

⁸⁹ *Woolworths Limited (trading as Safeway) v Brown* (26 September 2005, PR963023) and *Woolworths Limited (trading as Safeway) v Miller* (23 December 2005, PR943241), cited in Lander & Rogers, *Workplace Relations & Safety Bulletin*, March 2006.

⁹⁰ *Summary Offences Amendment (Body Piercing) Bill 2007*, introduced in the Legislative Council on 18 July 2007 by Mr D. Drum (Northern Victoria).

