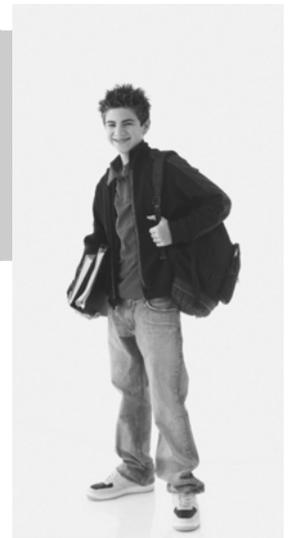


Chapter 3:

Health and Safety



Introduction

Schools have a duty of care to ensure that their students are protected against foreseeable harm.⁹¹

Principals and teachers have a legal, professional and moral duty to take reasonable steps to protect students in their charge from foreseeable harm. As awareness of legal rights and responsibilities has increased within the community, schools have become more adept at identifying potential risks to student health, safety and wellbeing. However, some members of the education community are concerned that schools do not always fully understand what is involved in translating this duty of care into practice.⁹² Within this context, the Committee considered how student health, safety and wellbeing can and should be reflected in dress codes and school uniform policies. In reviewing this issue, the Committee investigated both the direct and indirect impact of dress codes and school uniforms on a range of physical and psychological aspects of student health and wellbeing.

Safe Clothing for School Activities

The Committee found that both schools with and without uniforms have rules relating to general health and safety standards for school clothing. Some schools also reported additional safety clothing for special classes, such as overalls for automotive or engineering subjects. Health and safety standards are also likely to be higher for physical education classes or sport, where increased activity creates special risks.

Many schools also have general health and safety standards for student footwear. The details of such regulations vary from school to school. A requirement for closed-toed shoes in technology classes was commonly reported, and many schools require that closed shoes be worn at all times. The Committee heard that in one case, shoes are required to be leather for safety reasons, although this draws some objections from parents.⁹³

The rules that many schools make for other aspects of student appearance besides clothing are also sometimes triggered by health and safety concerns. A common example is the requirement that long hair be tied back for school activities, especially during sport or technology classes. Safety is also a contributing factor in many schools' rules relating to student jewellery, as a dangling necklace or earring may easily cause injury to the wearer or another student during certain school activities or active play.

Sun Protection

One of the most direct ways in which dress codes and school uniforms can protect student health and safety is through protection from the sun. The Committee heard that over 380,000 Australians are diagnosed with skin cancer each year, despite it

⁹¹ Ms K. Strong, SunSmart Program Manager, The Cancer Council Victoria, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 May 2007, p.17.

⁹² Mr A. Blair, President, Australian Secondary Principals Association, cited in H. Borger 2006, 'OHS in schools', *National Safety*, Vol. 77 No. 10, November 2006, p.36.

⁹³ Mr Jim Alsop, School Principal, Written Submission, June 2007, p.1.

being an almost entirely preventable cancer. It is estimated that more than 75 per cent of all skin cancers could be prevented by practising sun protection in childhood and adolescence.⁹⁴ As sun damage to students' skin represents a foreseeable risk, the Cancer Council Victoria believes it falls within schools' duty of care to prevent it.⁹⁵

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development currently supports sun protective practices within its *Safety Guidelines for Education Outdoors*. Guidelines relating to sun protective clothing are as follows:

- Hats with a broad (at least 8 centimetres) brim made of a closely woven material and legionnaire-style hats may be appropriate, particularly for younger children.
- Sun-protective clothing. Loose, closely woven cotton fabrics and shirts with a collar and long sleeves are ideal.
- Consider the use of sunglasses.⁹⁶

The Department's guidelines also include information about the use of sunscreen.

The most prominent sun protection initiative in Victorian schools is the Cancer Council Victoria's SunSmart Program. SunSmart is a not-for-profit program funded through the Australian and Victorian governments and the Cancer Council Victoria. It provides a range of resources to assist schools to develop appropriate sun protection policies. Schools can join the program by having their sun protection policy assessed against the Cancer Council Victoria's criteria. A SunSmart policy should include a rationale for the policy; sun protection measures; and an evaluation plan for checking the effectiveness of the policy.⁹⁷

The Cancer Council Victoria reports that 67 per cent of Victorian schools are currently registered as SunSmart. Table 3.1 shows the number and proportion of SunSmart schools in Victoria, across sectors and levels of schooling.

Table 3.1: SunSmart schools in Victoria, by sector and level

Sector	Primary		Secondary		Primary and Secondary		Special		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Catholic	292	77%	31	29%	2	13%	1	20%	326	64%
Government	1093	88%	64	20%	29	60%	52	63%	1238	73%
Independent	30	50%	3	6%	49	39%	1	17%	93	35%
TOTAL	1415	84%	98	20%	80	42%	54	58%	1657	67%

Source: Data supplied by the Cancer Council Victoria, May 2007.

While all education sectors in Victoria participate in the SunSmart Program, participation rates in the independent sector are significantly lower than for the government and Catholic sectors. Significant differences are also evident between levels of schooling, with primary schools far more likely to participate in the SunSmart Program. The Committee recognises that there are many reasons that schools may choose not to participate in the SunSmart Program and it should not be assumed that such schools do not have effective sun protection policies in place. Nonetheless, the Committee notes that SunSmart has recently revised its

⁹⁴ Ms K. Strong, SunSmart Program Manager, The Cancer Council Victoria, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 May 2007, p.16.

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, p.7.

⁹⁶ Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2007, *Safety Guidelines for Education Outdoors*, DEECD, Melbourne, available on DEECD website, <<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/management/schooloperations/edoutdoors/guidelinessun.htm>>, accessed on 18 September 2007.

⁹⁷ Further information is available at the SunSmart website, <<http://www.sunsmart.com.au/>>.

sun protection program for secondary schools, to try and achieve higher take-up rates at this level of schooling.⁹⁸

The Committee believes that sun protection is an important issue that should be carefully considered by all schools. The Committee recognises that the needs, activities and environments of schools throughout Victoria vary considerably and therefore does not see mandated standards for sun protective clothing in Victorian schools as necessary at this point in time. Indeed, the Committee was especially pleased at the considerable efforts already made by many schools in devising sun protection policies suitable to their needs and capacity. The Committee believes that all schools should at least consider the potential benefits of sun protective clothing for their students, and include a statement about sun protection within their dress codes and school uniform policies. Specific sun protective items that schools may wish to consider are examined in greater detail in the following sections.

Recommendation 3.1: That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development require all Victorian schools to include a statement addressing sun protection in their dress codes or school uniform policies.

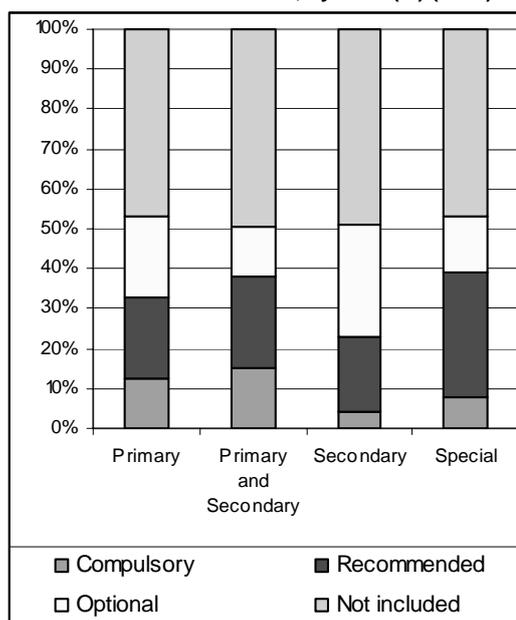
Recommendation 3.2: That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development promote best practice case studies for incorporating sun protective clothing and sunglasses into dress codes and school uniform policies in the guidelines they provide to schools.

Sun Protective Clothing

The Cancer Council Victoria recommends that students wear clothing (including sports uniforms) that covers as much of the students' skin as practical. The Council's sample SunSmart policies recommend that clothing is made of close weave fabric and include: shirts with collars and elbow length or longer sleeves; and longer style dresses and shorts that are at least knee-length. Recommendations for sports uniforms differ, to take account of the need for freedom of movement. They include: a shirt that covers the shoulders; a collar that sits close to the neck; shorts or skirts to the mid-thigh (although longer garments are recommended); a baseball cap where a broad brimmed or bucket hat is impractical; and rash vests or t-shirts for outdoor swimming.⁹⁹

The Committee's survey investigated whether sun protective garments are compulsory, recommended, optional or not included in Victorian school uniform policies. Results for different levels of schooling are shown in Figures 3.1 and 3.2.

Figure 3.1: Policies on elbow-length garments in Victorian schools, by level (%) (2007)



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

⁹⁸ Further information is available at the SunSmart website, <<http://www.sunsmart.com.au/browse.asp?ContainerID=1844>>.

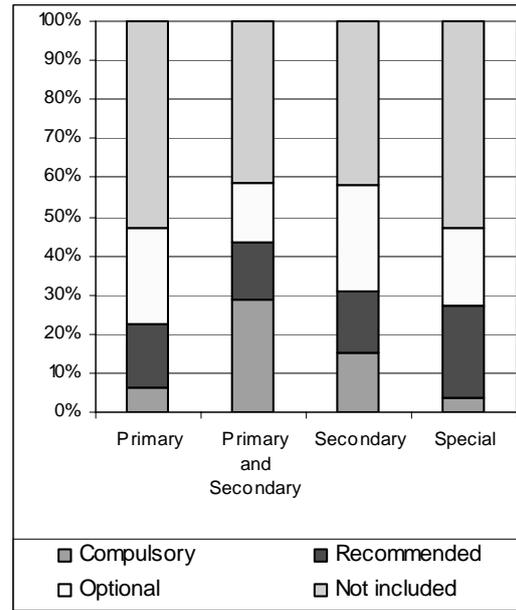
⁹⁹ SunSmart website, <<http://www.sunsmart.com.au/browse.asp?ContainerID=1843>>, accessed on 22 November 2007.

'If it is left up to students to determine whether they wear SunSmart clothing, their ignorance and rebellious spirit may prevent them from wearing such items. Should the ignorance of youth be rewarded with the consequences that might come in later life?'

Stephen Smith, Year 11 Student, Yea High School

The Committee notes that almost half of Victorian schools do not include elbow and knee length garments in their dress codes or school uniforms, even on an optional basis. Elbow-length sleeves are required or recommended in only 31.4 per cent of Victorian schools.¹⁰⁰ However, there is evidence to suggest that many others (including schools without uniforms) have considered sun safety by allowing these garments as optional items, or by requiring students to wear summer tops that at least cover their shoulders.¹⁰¹ Knee-length garments are slightly less common as required or recommended items (30.0%), although a further 22.9 per cent of schools allow such garments as an optional item within the dress code or school uniform.¹⁰² These findings demonstrate that many school uniforms fall short of the Cancer Council Victoria's optimal recommendations, despite the high uptake of SunSmart policies in Victorian schools.

Figure 3.2: Policies on knee-length garments in Victorian schools, by level (%) (2007)



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

Sun Hats

The Cancer Council Victoria recommends that dress codes and school uniform policies include the following minimum standards regarding sun protective hats:

- Broad brimmed hats with a brim of at least 7.5 cm.
- Bucket or 'surfie-style hats' with a deep crown and brim of at least 6 cm.
- Legionnaire hats, which have a flap that covers the neck. The side flap and front peak should meet to provide protection to the side of the face.¹⁰³

The Council recommends the same style hats for PE and sports, where practical. However, the Council notes that schools may need to consider baseball caps as part of their sports uniform where a sun protective hat may restrict vision or be unsafe for particular sports.¹⁰⁴

The Committee's survey found that nearly three-quarters of Victorian schools require their students to wear hats outside during summer (see Figure 3.3). Additional comments revealed that some schools only require hats to be worn during PE classes, or when students are not in the shade.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September 2007.

¹⁰¹ For example, Croydon Community School, Written Submission, June 2007, p.1; Respondents, Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September 2007; St Kilda Park Primary School, Written Submission, June 2007, p.1.

¹⁰² Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September 2007.

¹⁰³ SunSmart website, <<http://www.sunsmart.com.au/browse.asp?ContainerID=1843>>, accessed on 13 November 2007.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September, 2007.

The Committee found primary schools (98.2%), primary/secondary schools (82.4%) and special schools (78.4%) are much more likely than secondary schools (34.7%) to include a compulsory sun hat in their uniform policy. Of particular interest is the finding that 4.8 per cent of secondary schools do not include a sun protective hat in their dress codes or school uniform policies, even on an optional basis.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, it is reasonably common within secondary schools for hats to be compulsory for junior students, but only recommended for seniors.¹⁰⁷

The Committee received written submissions indicating that some parents and carers are concerned that their secondary school children are not required to wear sun hats at school.¹⁰⁸ One such parent told the Committee that the explanation offered by the school was that it is difficult to make secondary students comply with a compulsory hat policy:

Students, after leaving primary school where the wearing of sunhats is compulsory, [find hats are not] a compulsory part of their uniform when they go into Secondary College. After questioning staff on this rather strange decision, we were told that it was hard to make sunhats compulsory for students at this age.¹⁰⁹

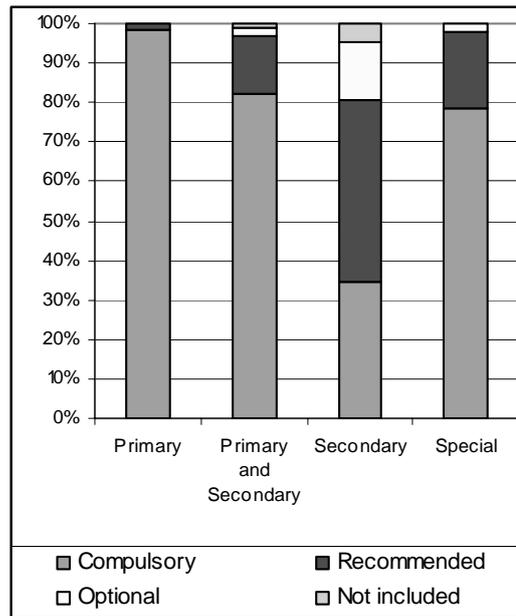
Mr Brian Burgess, President, Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, told the Committee that this view on enforcement is shared by many secondary principals in Victoria. Principals report that they find SunSmart policies 'unbelievably hard to enforce' due to secondary students' dislike for wearing anything other than fashionable, non-protective hats.¹¹⁰

During the public hearing involving 125 Victorian students, the Committee heard that many students reject sun-safe hats because they are considered 'daggy' or 'dorky'. When the Committee asked primary students whether they intended to wear a sun hat at secondary school, two students' responses indicated that bullying and peer pressure may be an inhibiting factor:

If you are the only one wearing it, I would not be happy because you might get teased or bullied.¹¹¹

At most high schools — the high school I am going to — wearing a hat is optional. I think most students do not wear them, and I am not really sure if I will.¹¹²

Figure 3.3: Policies on sun protective hats in Victorian schools, by level (%) (2007)



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

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Respondents, Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September, 2007; Education and Training Committee analysis of 60 school uniform policies and price lists, October 2007.

¹⁰⁸ Parents Victoria, Written Submission, June 2007, p.4; Ms C. Wyatt, Parent, Written Submission, May 2007, p.1.

¹⁰⁹ Ms E. Dickin, Grandparent, Written Submission, May 2007, p.1.

¹¹⁰ Mr B. Burgess, President, Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 April 2007, p.3.

¹¹¹ Mr N. Carlei, Year 6 Student, Essendon Primary School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Council Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.14.

¹¹² Mr G. Steger, Year 6 Student, St Kilda Park Primary School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Council Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.14.

'...at our school, Bendigo Senior Secondary College, half the students are adults — they are 18. They can drink, they can drive and they can smoke — all of which involve health risks — so it seems ridiculous that the school might say it is not their choice whether they wear a hat.'

Jaan Butler, Year 12 Student, Bendigo Senior Secondary College

Inquiry into Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools

Both of these students attended SunSmart primary schools at the time of the hearing. It therefore appears to the Committee that the desire to 'fit in' to the secondary school community can sometimes undermine sun protection practices taught by primary schools.

Ms Jennifer Makin, Research and Evaluation Manager, SunSmart Program, noted that some Victorian students prefer strict enforcement of sun hat policies, to overcome pressure from their peers:

Interestingly, quite a lot of the students have said, 'It would be better if we had stricter rules. If you force us to do it then we will do it; but we cannot choose of our own accord because it is too daggy to wear a hat, but if the department said that everyone had to do it then we would all do it'.¹¹³

Mrs Evelyn Sayers, Board Member, Association of Independent Schools of Victoria, made a similar point, in describing the SunSmart policy at her school:

At my school we are a SunSmart school, so we do have the dorky hats, as the students call them. But because everybody is wearing the dorky hat, it does not become an issue. We have talked about things: 'Well, you're not here to be a fashion statement. We really care about your health and what's going to happen to you later on in life'. So once you get over that part, they understand it is not a choice of just taking it off and not wearing it.¹¹⁴

One parent noted in a written submission that the supposed difficulties of enforcing compulsory hat policies at secondary schools appear inconsistent with successful enforcement of other aspects of their uniform policies:

The main argument against the mandating of sun hats appears to be that it is 'difficult' to make young adults wear hats. These arguments are very unconvincing to me, especially when schools are quite capable of enforcing other aspects of uniform wearing...¹¹⁵

Another written submission from a parent, Ms Bev Johns, supported this view:

...while they say students are encouraged to wear a hat, no child does as they will be bullied by other children...It seems we can make a policy to enforce the wearing of blazers to look good, but not a policy of hats that may be life saving...¹¹⁶

It appears to the Committee then, that many parents and even some students may welcome the introduction of stricter sun hat policies in secondary schools.

However, the following comment indicates that stricter measures would not be well regarded by all secondary principals:

Anyone who has had to nag an adolescent about...a broad brimmed hat will know that detailed compliance will be an untenable and unworkable burden for secondaries.¹¹⁷

Mr Brian Burgess, President, Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, stated that principals would prefer to see recommendations but no mandatory requirements in terms of SunSmart policies.¹¹⁸

The Committee heard that many secondary schools are adopting more negotiated approaches to sun hat policies, rather than taking on the battle of strict compliance. Ms Emma Clarkson, SunSmart's Secondary Schools Program Coordinator, reported that some secondary schools have improved compliance by asking students to design and vote on a hat for their school.¹¹⁹ Mr Stephen Franz-Ford, Chief Executive Officer, Association of School Councils in Victoria, reported

¹¹³ Ms J. Makin, SunSmart Program Research and Evaluation Manager, The Cancer Council Victoria, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 May 2007, p.20.

¹¹⁴ Mrs E. Sayers, Board Member, Association of Independent Schools of Victoria, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 May 2007, p.36.

¹¹⁵ Ms V. McGowan, Parent, Written Submission, August 2007, p.1.

¹¹⁶ Ms B. Johns, Parent, Supplementary Submission, June 2007, p.1.

¹¹⁷ Principal, quoted in Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, Written Submission, April 2007, p.4.

¹¹⁸ Mr B. Burgess, President, Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 April 2007, p.4.

¹¹⁹ Ms E. Clarkson, SunSmart Secondary Schools Program Coordinator, The Cancer Council Victoria, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 May 2007, p.18.

another innovative measure taken by one secondary school, to gain student support for its SunSmart policy:

The problem is that most secondary school kids want the up-market [hat] with the surfing logo...that is worth four times as much as the one without a surfing logo...My school went to the supplier from China that made them for one of the large surfing groups. We were able to incorporate a logo that looked similar to the surfing one, with the school's name on it; so it became fashionable to wear the hat.¹²⁰

The Committee notes that other schools simply permit students to wear whatever hat they choose, within appropriate sun protection guidelines.¹²¹

It is important to recognise that the discrepancy between sun hat policies for primary and secondary schools may reflect fundamental differences in students' environments and activities. Some secondary students told the Committee that their schools are mainly indoors, so sun protection is seldom an issue.¹²² Some members of the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals also remarked that secondary students' school activities do not typically put them in danger of sun exposure:

Many of the older students basically sit around and talk. That is what their lunchtime activity is, and they will sit in the shade.¹²³

Students spend the majority of their day inside when they are at school on a normal day. I have yet to hear from a parent complaining about a student who has been sunburnt whilst at school during a standard school day.¹²⁴

We already consider the timing of activities, we include sunscreen in kits.¹²⁵

The Committee encourages all members of the community to wear sun protective clothing, including a suitable hat, whenever they are exposed to the sun. However, given the above evidence, the Committee does not see it as necessary to make sun protective hats compulsory in all Victorian schools. Rather, the Committee believes that all schools should encourage their students to wear a hat outside during summer months and, as a minimum standard, include a sun protective hat as an option within their dress codes and school uniform policies.

Recommendation 3.3: That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development require all Victorian schools to make a sun protective hat available to students as part of their dress codes or school uniform policies.

Sunglasses

The Committee heard that although a broad-brimmed hat reduces UV exposure to the eye by 50 per cent, the addition of sunglasses can reduce UV radiation to the eye by 97 per cent.¹²⁶ Like hats and clothing, sunglasses must meet certain minimum standards to be effective protection against the sun:

Students and staff are encouraged to wear close fitting, wrap around sunglasses that meet the Australian Standard 1067 (Sunglasses: Category 2, 3 or 4) and cover as much of the eye area as possible.¹²⁷

¹²⁰ Mr S. Franzi-Ford, Chief Executive Officer, Association of School Councils in Victoria, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 April 2007, p.13.

¹²¹ Education and Training Committee analysis of 60 school uniform policies and price lists, October 2007.

¹²² Ms S. Pittard, Year 12 Student, Ballarat Secondary College and Mr P. Clearwater, Year 12 Student, Melbourne High School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Assembly Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, pp.17-18.

¹²³ Mr B. Burgess, President, Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 April 2007, p.3.

¹²⁴ Principal, quoted in Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, Written Submission, April 2007, p.4.

¹²⁵ *ibid.*

¹²⁶ Ms K. Strong, SunSmart Program Manager, The Cancer Council Victoria, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 May 2007, p.20.

¹²⁷ Supplementary information provided by The Cancer Council Victoria, May 2007.

A number of optometrists have recently come forward to recommend that schools require students to wear sunglasses outside during summer as part of their sun protection policies.¹²⁸ The *Herald Sun* reports that Findon Primary School in Mill Park has become the first in Victoria to make sunglasses compulsory for students and that others are expected to follow.¹²⁹ One preschool in Lalor East has also recently introduced a compulsory sunglasses policy for children in its care.¹³⁰

However, the Committee heard from Ms Emma Clarkson, Coordinator, SunSmart Secondary Schools program, that any attempt to make sunglasses mandatory for Victorian students would cause some concerns, due to the associated costs and practical difficulties.¹³¹ Sunglasses are therefore a recommended but optional component of the SunSmart Program's guidelines.¹³² Ms Kate Kohn, Year 6 Student, Laburnum Primary School, explained some of the reasons why sunglasses might present particular difficulties for primary schools:

We think UV-protective sunglasses for students in primary schools would be difficult to achieve due to their cost. They are expensive, and there is the potential for young children to lose or damage the sunglasses. We therefore see sunglasses as an optional item in school uniforms.¹³³

Secondary students also noted potential difficulties with sunglasses, including their fashion status for many young people, cost and the possibility of students wearing them at inappropriate times.¹³⁴ One student also noted that sunglasses are unnecessary within her school environment, as the majority of the campus is indoors.¹³⁵

Although sunglasses are not currently compulsory in most Victorian schools, some schools encourage students to wear sunglasses outside, and only 5.4 per cent of schools reported to the Committee that they do not allow students to wear sunglasses.¹³⁶ The Committee heard that one primary school adopted an innovative approach to overcoming the difficulties associated with sunglasses for primary students by engraving them with students' names.¹³⁷ The Committee also heard the example of a secondary school which strongly encourages sunglasses to be worn at appropriate times during the school day, using staff role modelling to set an example for its students.¹³⁸ The Committee encourages schools to investigate the possibilities for making sunglasses available to students during the summer months, as an element of best practice in sun protection.

Clothing for Other Weather Conditions

The Committee heard that a school uniform policy which prevents children from dressing appropriately for the weather can potentially constitute a health risk. A number of concerns about school uniforms being inappropriate to local weather

¹²⁸ D. Selva, quoted in 'Should sunglasses be part of school uniforms', *Northern District Times*, 1 August 2007.

¹²⁹ P. Rolfe, 'Sunglasses rule', *Sunday Herald Sun*, 2 September 2007, p.18.

¹³⁰ P. Rolfe & C. Lambert, 'Kinder eyes sunnies', *Sunday Herald Sun*, 21 October 2007, p.34.

¹³¹ Ms E. Clarkson, Sun Smart Secondary Schools Program Coordinator, The Cancer Council Victoria, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 May 2007, p.20.

¹³² Ms K. Strong, SunSmart Program Manager, The Cancer Council Victoria, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 May 2007, p.20.

¹³³ Ms K. Cohn, Year 6 Student, Laburnum Primary School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Council Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.13.

¹³⁴ Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Assembly Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, pp.19-21.

¹³⁵ Ms S. Pittard, Year 12 Student, Ballarat Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Assembly Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.17.

¹³⁶ Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September, 2007.

¹³⁷ Ms E. Clarkson, SunSmart Secondary Schools Program Coordinator, The Cancer Council Victoria, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 May 2007, p.20.

¹³⁸ Mr N. Dubbeld, Year 10 Student, Warragul Regional College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Assembly, 6 September 2007.

conditions were voiced to the Committee by students and parents throughout this inquiry. For example:

...we get cold on cold days and we wear overcoats, and [our teachers] are cracking down on us, saying we are not allowed to, but we are not allowed to stay inside, and it gets really cold...¹³⁹

...both of my children have had colds and flu recently but have been told to remove their jackets because they do not conform with the school uniform policy. My son has had his confiscated during recess on several occasions when it has been below 11 degrees outside.¹⁴⁰

The high levels of frustration felt by parents at being prevented from taking basic steps to protect their children's health is exemplified in the following extract from Ms Carolyn Mann's written submission:

...our government school has introduced a compulsory blazer to be worn to and from school – regardless of the weather conditions. This is totally unsuitable when students are required to wear a blazer on a hot day, on a hot bus. It has potential to be a health risk. In addition, this same blazer is useless on a day where students are standing in the rain at a bus stop, in the freezing cold weather with only a wet blazer on. They need waterproof/warm coats and not a blazer which the school decides 'looks good'!¹⁴¹

These comments show how a school uniform that is not appropriate for variable weather conditions can cause resentment among members of a school community. This can also have an adverse effect on compliance with the uniform policy, as students wear non-compliant clothing more suitable to the conditions, often sanctioned by their parents.

The Committee observed that most school uniform policies are flexible, allowing students to readily adapt to prevailing conditions.¹⁴² In summer, most schools allow students to wear dresses or shorts and short-sleeved tops. Most schools with a compulsory blazer do not enforce its wearing in summer, provided that students do not wear an alternative outer garment such as a jumper or windcheater in its place. For winter, most schools incorporate a range of optional items, which students can add for warmth. These include for example, skivvies, beanies, scarves, gloves and a range of jackets and raincoats. Some schools make detailed specifications about such items, while others only require that if worn, they be worn in school colours or even more simply, in 'plain colours' or 'without logos'. Many schools also demonstrate their flexibility on this issue, by allowing students to wear either the summer or winter uniform throughout the year, rather than enforcing strict dates for summer and winter uniforms.¹⁴³

With so many alternatives available, the Committee was surprised to find that some schools seemingly require students to wear uniforms that do not allow for adequate adaptation to the extremes of Victoria's changeable weather. The Committee does not feel that any Victorian student should be prevented from dressing comfortably for the weather, through strict enforcement of an inappropriate or inadequate school uniform. It therefore recommends that information addressing this issue be included in departmental guidelines.

Recommendation 3.4: That guidelines developed by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development include advice to assist schools to develop dress codes and school uniform policies that ensure students can be comfortable in all weather conditions.

¹³⁹ Mr J. Wright, Year 8 Student, Western Heights Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Assembly Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.17.

¹⁴⁰ Ms K. Filgate, Parent, Written Submission, August 2007, p.1.

¹⁴¹ Ms C. Mann, Parent, Written Submission, April 2007, p.2.

¹⁴² Education and Training Committee analysis of 60 school uniform policies and price lists, October 2007.

¹⁴³ *ibid.*

Mental Health and Wellbeing

Over the past ten years, schools and education systems have given increasing attention to students' mental health.¹⁴⁴ The Australian Government funds a national mental health initiative for secondary schools, *MindMatters*, and the *National Mental Health Plan 2006–2011* also recognises the need for school-based mental health promotion.¹⁴⁵ In tandem with these initiatives, there are also growing community expectations that a school's duty of care towards student health encompasses issues of self-esteem, resilience and emotional wellbeing.

One of the most frequently cited benefits of having a school uniform throughout this inquiry was the sense of belonging it engenders in the school community. In its review of related literature, the Committee found evidence that a sense of belonging is one of the mainstays of student emotional health:

Recently, attention has been given to the importance of a young person's sense of attachment or belonging in their social environments...For example, Resnick and associates (1997) found that a sense of belonging to both family and school are the major protective factors against health risk behaviours in young people.¹⁴⁶

Written submissions from the Salvation Army, the Smith Family and several schools emphasised that the sense of belonging and inclusion gained by wearing a school uniform is particularly beneficial for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.¹⁴⁷ Mr Les Twentyman, Outreach Worker, Open Family Australia, made similar remarks during a public hearing:

I guess overall school uniforms are very important in giving young kids a sense of belonging and things like that. Quite often that is basically where they have not had the opportunity of being part of a group before.¹⁴⁸

A range of organisations representing students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds also described how school uniforms can contribute to a sense of belonging to the school community. The Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria and the Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues noted that mandatory school uniforms (whilst allowing for cultural and religious clothing preferences) may assist students from new and emerging communities settle into a new school environment.¹⁴⁹ Dr Mark Rose, Committee of Management, Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc noted similar experiences among indigenous students:

I believe access to be like every other kid is important. There are enough signposts around Aboriginal kids to make them different. A uniform that gives them camouflage to be like every other kid is really important to us...¹⁵⁰

Schools with uniforms also frequently reported that wearing a school uniform gives students a sense of pride, both in their school and in their personal appearance. Ms Jo Silver, Executive Officer, Victorian Parents Council, told the Committee that many parents support this view:

...wearing a uniform is an opportunity to be proud, it encourages self-esteem, and it eliminates any sense of competition in dress standards which might otherwise exist.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁴ H. Borger 2007, 'Wellness in Schools', *National Safety*, Vol. 77, No. 11, December 2006 – January 2007, p.16.

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p.17.

¹⁴⁶ S. Glover, J. Burns, H. Butler & G. Patton 1998, 'Social Environments and the Emotional Wellbeing of Young People', *Family Matters*, No.49, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne, pp.11-12.

¹⁴⁷ The Salvation Army, Melbourne Central Division, Written Submission, April 2007, p.1; Mr A. Leschen, Regional Programs Manager, The Smith Family, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 May 2007, p.3; Merrilands College School Council, Written Submission, May 2007, p.1.

¹⁴⁸ Mr L. Twentyman, Outreach Worker, Open Family Australia, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 4 June 2007, p.30.

¹⁴⁹ Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, Written Submission, May 2007, p.2; Ms L. McGaw, Coordinator of Youth Participation Programs, Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 April 2007, p.31.

¹⁵⁰ Dr M. Rose, Committee of Management, Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 May 2007, p.29.

¹⁵¹ Ms J. Silver, Executive Officer, Victorian Parents Council, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 May 2007, pp.10-11.

Secondary students participating in the public hearing at Parliament House told the Committee that having pride also helps inspire students to achieve:

I think that the uniform is a valuable asset. I think it builds pride in the school and it creates a sense of unity that allows us to aspire to achieve more than we would in those schools that do not have a uniform.¹⁵²

...if a student believes they are part of a close-knit network — in this case, a school — we believe they will be more inclined to take part in the activities that the school has to offer. For example, a footballer like Nick Riewoldt, wearing the St Kilda uniform, will really feel part of that team, and therefore his uniform will create a sense of intrinsic motivation and the will to succeed or achieve.¹⁵³

The Committee heard that having a sense of pride may also contribute to higher levels of self-esteem, which is another key element of emotional health. Self-esteem has been identified as the strongest single factor in preventing depression, a major mental health concern for Australian adolescents.¹⁵⁴

As well as promoting positive mental health attributes, it was also suggested that school uniforms can reduce negative influences on mental health in the school environment. For example, many submissions to the inquiry, from across all stakeholder groups, mentioned that uniforms remove peer pressure to follow the latest fashion trends.¹⁵⁵ Year 10 students at Braybrook College explained in their written submission how students who fail to conform to their peers' standards of dress can be subject not only to peer pressure, but also teasing and bullying:

...if school uniforms were compulsory in every school, certain students who cannot afford the latest item of clothing will not have to worry about bullying because of their financial problems. They will also not have to worry about peer pressure. Students will also not have to worry about rumours and gossip about how they are wearing the same item of clothing that they were wearing the previous day.¹⁵⁶

Bullying and peer pressure are known to be potential contributing factors to mental health difficulties experienced by children and adolescents.

On the other hand, schools without uniforms told the Committee that not having a uniform has important benefits for students' emotional health. Mr Vincent Sicari, Principal, Eltham High School, explained how students build confidence and self-esteem by being challenged to make choices about their personal presentation:

Young people, especially in their teens, are striving to come to terms with their place in the world. Enabling them to develop a responsibility for their own clothing and allowing them a relatively harmless outlet to express their own individuality, can only be positive for their growth and self-esteem.¹⁵⁷

Princes Hill Secondary College's written submission also outlined the benefits of a uniform-free policy for adolescent health and development:

Adolescent health and holistic approach to student identity...emerged as a theme in parent responses. One voice asserted that students were able to break from the clutches of marketing and advertising by experimenting with different dress styles as adolescents, and that has a positive effect in terms of students exploring body image on their own terms.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵² Mr P. Clearwater, Year 12 Student, Melbourne High School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Assembly Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.36.

¹⁵³ Ms J. Shemer, Year 10 Student, Balwyn High School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Assembly Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.7.

¹⁵⁴ A.R. MacPhee & J.J.W. Andrews 2006, 'Risk factors for depression in early adolescence', *Adolescence*, 41.163, p.435.

¹⁵⁵ For example, The Salvation Army, Melbourne Central Division, Written Submission, April 2007, p.1; Ashwood College, Written Submission, May 2007, p.1; Victorian Student Representative Council, Written Submission, June 2007, p.2; Mr L. Deegan, Year 10 Student, Warragul Regional College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Assembly Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.13.

¹⁵⁶ Students of 10C English, Braybrook College, Written Submission, May 2007, p.1.

¹⁵⁷ Eltham High School Council, Written Submission, May 2007, p.2.

¹⁵⁸ Princes Hill Secondary College, Written Submission, May 2007, p.3.

'It is a truism that children do not stop excluding others when everyone is in the same uniform. This highlights the need for school values based on sound, healthy interpersonal relationships.'

Kate Renzenbrink,
Parent

Inquiry into Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools

Similarly, Spensley Street Primary School lists one of its goals in not having a school uniform as 'to enable students to develop a positive self image'.¹⁵⁹

Furthermore, students, parents and staff from uniform-free schools emphatically dismissed concerns that students in such schools are at any increased risk of peer pressure or bullying. The following comments represent a small sample of such reassurances received by the Committee:

I feel there is a misguided sense of what it is really like to go to a uniform-free school. It is not full of bullying, or people are not specifically judged on what they wear.¹⁶⁰

The school deals with few bullying issues, and peer pressure to conform to dress standards is rare.¹⁶¹

...fashion competition quickly disappears, and within a couple of weeks of starting Year 7, is forgotten.¹⁶²

At Collingwood College you do not have to wear a uniform or wear the same thing as everyone else to feel proud of being a part of the community. For those people who think that you have to wear the newest labels or the most fashionable clothes to be cool, it is not true.¹⁶³

Further, some students from schools without uniforms observed that peer pressure relating to clothing may be just as bad, if not worse, at schools with a uniform:

I know that if we did have a uniform, there would still be forms of peer group pressure because you could still tell who was financially not as well off as other people. There is stuff like iPods and phones and other things that people have that you can tell that some kids do not have them and stuff like that. It is just dealt with as any other form of bullying. It should not be separated from bullying as a full issue. If the school has a good bullying policy, then there should not be any at all, in my view.¹⁶⁴

The pressure to wear expensive clothes is much more apparent in uniformed schools on free dress days, when students feel a heightened obligation to impress their peers with grand clothes.¹⁶⁵

The Committee therefore notes that perceptions of bullying and competitive dressing in schools without uniforms may not be borne out in reality.

The Committee believes that all schools, with or without uniforms, should have strategies in place to address student mental wellbeing. Strategies should address a range of areas, including self-esteem, peer pressure and bullying. Schools may also wish to consider how their dress code or uniform policy can influence students' mental wellbeing, as part of their broader mental health promotion strategy.

Physical Activity

Physical activity is another prominent issue for student health. The Victorian Government's Better Health Channel reports that around 20 per cent of Australian children are either overweight or obese. If current trends continue, it is predicted that 65 per cent of young Australians will be overweight or obese by 2020.¹⁶⁶ The weight gain is most often attributed to increased intake of high-energy foods, accompanied by a decline in physical activity. Throughout this inquiry, the

¹⁵⁹ Spensley Street Primary School, Parent Association, Written Submission, May 2007, p.2.

¹⁶⁰ Ms O. Koh, Year 11 Student, University High School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Assembly Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.24.

¹⁶¹ Princes Hill Secondary College, Written Submission, May 2007, p.5.

¹⁶² Eltham High School Council, Written Submission, May 2007, p.2.

¹⁶³ Ms M. Pumpa, Year 10 Student, Collingwood College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Assembly Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.18.

¹⁶⁴ Ms G. Kennelly, Student Representative, Victorian Student Representative Council, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 4 June 2007, p.19.

¹⁶⁵ Mr N. Hudson, Year 12 Student, Eltham High School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Assembly Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.27.

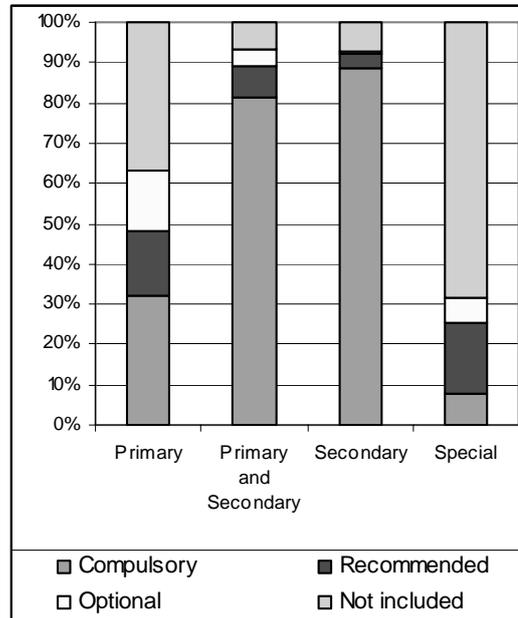
¹⁶⁶ Victorian Government Better Health Channel website, <http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Obesity_in_children?open>, viewed on 26 November 2007.

Committee heard that dress codes and school uniform policies have the potential to either encourage or inhibit physical activity among students.

Students' physical activity typically includes structured school activities such as physical education (PE) classes and sports, as well as active play and active transport (walking or cycling to or from school).

The Committee found that the majority of Victorian schools require or allow students to change their clothes for PE classes or sports, to ensure that their participation is not restricted by their clothing. Figure 3.4 shows the proportion of schools with compulsory, recommended or optional changes of clothing for PE across different levels of schooling. Secondary and primary/secondary schools are significantly more likely to require students to change for PE.¹⁶⁷ This is likely to reflect the fact that primary school uniforms tend to be less formal, and more conducive to active play. Older students are also more likely to require a change of clothes for reasons of hygiene.

Figure 3.4: Policies on changes of clothing for physical education in Victorian schools, by level (%) (2007)



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

However, the Committee received a number of comments relating to the impact of school uniforms on unstructured physical activity among students. In the Committee's survey, one respondent advocated that uniforms be more 'practical and comfortable', so that students are 'able to be active' at school.¹⁶⁸ Mr Max Resic, a Year 6 Student from Princes Hill Primary School, expressed concern to the Committee that it is very hard to kick, play sport, or run in the black leather shoes required by his local secondary school. Mr Resic suggests that it would be a good idea to include black runners in the uniform so students can be more active.¹⁶⁹ A contribution to Parents Victoria's online school uniform forum suggested that students should be allowed to change their footwear during breaks from class:

I would really like it if my kids could both wear runners as the good quality black leather shoes are very expensive and not ideal for them to be out on the oval with the boys at lunch kicking the footy...I asked them to change into their runners at lunch but they are not allowed to.¹⁷⁰

Parent Ms Susanne McCracken also noted the impracticality of more formal school uniform items such as blazers for active students:

I object to the wearing of a blazer as part of the school uniform. This might be appropriate attire for an adult in a working environment but I can assure you that

¹⁶⁷ Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September 2007.

¹⁶⁸ Respondent, *ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ Mr M. Resic, Year 6 Student, Princes Hill Primary School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Carlton North, 31 July 2007, p.22.

¹⁷⁰ Ms K. Farrall, 'Should school uniforms be compulsory?', *Parents Victoria online forum*, 10 September 2007, Parents Victoria website, <<http://www.cybertext.net.au/pv/discussion.htm>>

children do not want to wear such restrictive clothing. Even adults will discard a suit jacket at the first convenient moment.¹⁷¹

Other school uniform items noted by various participants as unsuitable for active play included skirts and dresses, hats and long-sleeved t-shirts.

Furthermore, the Committee notes a reported decline in the number of Victorian children either walking or cycling to school.¹⁷² This suggests that more could also be done to encourage this kind of non-structured regular physical activity, especially given the trend towards more sedentary leisure activities for children outside school hours. It is interesting to note that the UK education department includes light coloured and reflective clothing among its suggested safety measures for school uniforms, to address the needs of students who walk or cycle to school.¹⁷³ A flexible approach to enforcement of the uniform policy outside school hours may be another way in which students may be encouraged to try more active modes of transportation.

In light of growing concerns about childhood obesity, the Committee urges schools to promote a variety of structured and unstructured physical activity to their students, including active transport and active play. It is also recommended that schools review their uniform policies to ensure that opportunities for students to exercise are not unduly compromised by their clothing. The Committee respects the decision of some schools, especially at secondary level, to prioritise other considerations besides freedom of movement in the design of their school uniform. However, there are simple measures that all schools can take, such as permitting partial changes of clothing or footwear at lunchtime or before and after school, which may facilitate and encourage participation in moderate physical exercise among students.

Recommendation 3.5: That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development require all Victorian schools to consider how their school uniform policies can contribute to greater levels of physical activity among students.

Facial and Body Piercings

As noted in the previous chapter, many schools indicated that their rules about body and facial piercings are based on health and safety concerns. The Australian Medical Association reports that such piercings pose many risks, including infections, speech impediments, dental problems and breathing difficulties.¹⁷⁴ In a school context, piercings may also pose a risk to students if they are caught or otherwise interfered with during practical work, active play or physical education.

Mr Stephen Franzi-Ford, Chief Executive Officer, Association of School Councils in Victoria, told the Committee that these risks are of great concern to schools, especially because the threat to student safety may not always be visible:

As far as the risk management for the school council is concerned, if we know that they have some of these piercings—and they have them in all sorts of parts of their body that we cannot see—and if, in the rough-and-tumble games that kids play at school, they are tugged on a jumper and it pulls out or rips them, then where do we sit as a governing body, knowing that these activities take place and we have said that we do not mind them wearing this sort of jewellery? That is one of our greatest concerns.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷¹ Ms S. McCracken, Parent, Written Submission, June 2007, p.2.

¹⁷² J. Salmon, A. Timperio, V. Cleland & A. Venn 2005, 'Trends in children's physical activity and weight status in high and low socioeconomic status areas of Melbourne, Victoria, 1985-2001', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 29, No. 4, 2005, p.340.

¹⁷³ Department for Children, Schools and Families (United Kingdom) 2007, *DCSF Guidance to Schools on School Uniform and Related Policies*, DCSF, London.

¹⁷⁴ Australian Medical Association, *Body Piercing Brochure*, available on Australian Medical Association website, <<http://www.ama.com.au/web.nsf/doc/WEEN-5Y392H>>, accessed on 27 November 2007.

¹⁷⁵ Mr S. Franzi-Ford, Chief Executive Officer, Association of School Councils in Victoria, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 April 2007, p.12.

Prohibiting body and facial piercings may therefore be one way in which schools fulfil their duty of care to protect their students from harm. However, it is interesting to note that most of the school uniform policies examined by the Committee make mention only of visible piercings, and not hidden piercings which may potentially also pose a health and safety risk.

As also noted previously, body and facial piercings are an especially contentious issue as they are sometimes supported by parents but banned by schools. Nevertheless, Mr Franzi-Ford argued that schools' duty of care to students supersedes their duty to reflect community values with respect to piercings. He asked the Committee to request support from the Government to give schools greater leverage to enforce their piercings policies:

There are very strict compliance guidelines around how we go about asking the community to deal with clothing, but the problem we have with body jewellery is a separate issue because it is risk management, as far as we are concerned. We would love there to be stronger guidelines and support from the government with regard to these issues.¹⁷⁶

This view was supported in one of the comments to the Committee's survey:

Facial and body piercing are presenting serious issues for schools and a definitive response from the Department on the OH&S grounds would be most helpful for schools.¹⁷⁷

The Committee believes that the apparent conflict between schools' duty of care and community values regarding body piercings may warrant further direction from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

Recommendation 3.6: That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development investigate the health and safety issues associated with facial and body piercings, and publish guidelines to assist school communities in developing, implementing and reviewing piercings policies.

Student Security

In its guidelines for schools, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development notes that some schools use their dress codes and school uniform policies as a means of addressing student security:

Some schools will see it as a useful element in a strategy for individual student safety and group security.¹⁷⁸

Such suggestions are echoed by other education departments in Australia: both the Queensland and WA education departments noted the advantages of school uniforms for student security in their written submissions,¹⁷⁹ and the NSW department's policy statement lists 'personal safety' as one of the key benefits of wearing a school uniform.¹⁸⁰ Many submissions from schools, students and parents supported this view, suggesting that having a uniform makes it easier to identify non-students on school grounds, or to identify school students during excursions.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ Respondent, Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September 2007.

¹⁷⁸ Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2007, 'Student dress code', section 4.8 (updated May 2006), *Victorian Government Schools Reference Guide*, DEECD, Melbourne.

¹⁷⁹ Department of Education, Training and the Arts (Queensland), Written Submission, May 2007, p.1; Department of Education and Training (Western Australia), Written Submission, May 2007, p.1.

¹⁸⁰ Department of Education and Training (New South Wales) 2004, *School Uniforms in New South Wales Government Schools*, DET, Sydney, p.4.

¹⁸¹ For example, Lyndale Secondary College, Written Submission, June 2007, p.1; Glengarry Primary School Council and Staff, Written Submission, June 2007, p.1; Belvedere Park Primary School, Written Submission, May 2007, p.1; Anakie Primary School, Written Submission, May 2007, p.1.

'Our school, St Kilda Park Primary School, has never had a uniform...We look neat and are easily distinguishable when on excursions; our teachers have never lost any of us.'

Ruby Rees-Wemyss,
Year 6 Student, St Kilda
Park Primary School

Inquiry into Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools

Schools that do not have uniforms reported mixed views on the impact of school uniforms on student security. Sandringham College acknowledged that its uniform-free policy for senior students makes it more difficult to identify non-students on school grounds, but as students carry ID cards, the school suggests this does not present a significant problem.¹⁸² At Princes Hill Secondary College, identifying non-students on campus does not cause difficulties because of the school's close-knit community:

It is pretty clear after a while, I think, who our student population is. It is fair to say that that is something that we have to continually keep an eye on, but I do not think it is such a concern that it would cause us to reflect on or alter a policy like our uniform-free approach.

...our compliance, with student cooperation, with saying, 'Oh, I just saw somebody outside the front of the school who shouldn't be there,' is very good...I do not think it is much of a concern for us at the moment.¹⁸³

Ms Jacinta Cashen, President, Victorian Council of School Organisations, supported the view that school culture is more important than a uniform in enhancing security:

...if you have got a rock-solid community and you have really focused on building community, then you do know who is in the grounds that are not normally in the grounds. It does not matter whether they have got a uniform on or not. It does not seem to have been a particularly big issue.¹⁸⁴

One student from Surfside Primary School added an interesting perspective by suggesting that wearing a school uniform could actually put students at risk:

Being easy to identify could also pose a risk to a child because it makes it obvious to predators where the child attends school.¹⁸⁵

The Committee acknowledges that for some schools, a well-developed and enforced school uniform policy may enhance certain aspects of student security. However, the Committee also notes that student security may be addressed in a variety of other ways. All schools, regardless of their dress code or uniform policy, have an equal responsibility for identifying potential risks to student security and taking appropriate steps to minimise them.

School Bags

The Committee believes that back care is an important matter to be addressed by schools that include a school bag in their dress codes and school uniform policies. The Victorian Government's Better Health Channel reports that around 70 per cent of Victorian school students may be damaging their spines by carrying school bags.¹⁸⁶ According to the Better Health Channel, risks include muscle strain, distortion of the natural 'S' curve of the spine and rounding of the shoulders.¹⁸⁷

New Generation Print & Copy reported to the Committee that thousands of students are affected by back pain, muscle fatigue and poor posture because they either do not fit or carry their heavily loaded backpacks correctly, or choose to use unsuitable fashion day packs.¹⁸⁸ It argued that secondary schools should implement a policy permitting the use of 'student safe' backpacks, such as the new backpack recently developed by the company:

¹⁸² Sandringham College, Written Submission, June 2007, p.2.

¹⁸³ Mr J. Goodman, Assistant Principal, Princes Hill Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Carlton North, 31 July 2007, p.21.

¹⁸⁴ Ms J. Cashen, President, Victorian Council of School Organisations, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 4 June 2007, p.26.

¹⁸⁵ Ms D. Neal, Year 6 Student, Surfside Primary School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Council Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.12.

¹⁸⁶ Victorian Government Better Health Channel website, <http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Back_pain_schoolbags?Open>, viewed on 22 November 2007.

¹⁸⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ New Generation Print & Copy, Written Submission, June 2007, p.1.

New Generation has just completed development of the world's first student backpack that cannot be fitted or carried incorrectly ensuring future generations of students equipped with our G-Force College Backpack can safely transport their books to and from school without being at risk of posture or spinal damage.¹⁸⁹

The Committee notes that other companies also produce school bags that offer spinal protection for students. For example, the Committee's analysis of 60 school uniform policies found that some schools include the 'Chiropak' in their school uniform policies, a backpack produced by Spartan School Supplies and endorsed by the Chiropractors Association of Australia.¹⁹⁰ Similarly, a recent news article reported that Spartan School Supplies has also collaborated with the Australian Physiotherapy Association and the University of South Australia to research and develop another backpack, Physiopak, which was designed to limit postural response to weight load.¹⁹¹

In the Committee's survey, schools were asked whether they include an ergonomic school bag for their students as part of their dress code or uniform policy. The Committee found that around half (51.4%) of Victorian schools, including 34.1 per cent of government schools, require or recommend an ergonomic school bag for their students.¹⁹² The Committee did not, however, ask schools to identify their criteria for determining the ergonomic qualities of a bag and accepts that interpretations of this standard may differ between schools.

The Committee notes the Better Health Channel's recommendation that parents purchase a school bag that is endorsed by an Australian professional organisation, such as the Australian Physiotherapy Association or the Chiropractors' Association of Australia.¹⁹³ The Committee believes that all Victorian students should be given the opportunity to use a school bag that offers appropriate levels of spinal protection. The Committee notes that in order to achieve this, some schools may need further guidance on the issue, to ensure that the bag they select provides students with the best possible spinal protection. Galvin Park Secondary College noted in its submission that it allows complete flexibility with respect to school bags, resulting in some students electing to use a rolling case or backpack.¹⁹⁴ The Committee also notes that schools may consider further strategies for addressing back care, such as minimising the need for students to carry heavy loads to and from school.

Recommendation 3.7: That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development publish guidelines to assist schools in making appropriate decisions about school bags when developing and reviewing their dress codes and school uniform policies. Such guidelines may also include standards relating to the weight of materials students are expected to carry to and from school.

Cords and Chin Straps

While there is no doubt about the value of hats in protecting students from the sun, the Committee heard a concern that sun hats and other items of clothing with long cords may sometimes put student safety at risk. Kidsafe, the child accident prevention foundation of Australia, reports that 82 children died in the United States in 1999 from accidental strangulation due to items such as chinstraps,

¹⁸⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ Education and Training Committee analysis of 60 school uniform policies and price lists, October 2007.

¹⁹¹ J. Cafarella, 'Bags a health burden for students', *The Age*, 21 May 2007.

¹⁹² Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September, 2007.

¹⁹³ Victorian Government Better Health Channel website, <http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Back_pain_schoolbags?Open>, viewed on 22 November 2007.

¹⁹⁴ Galvin Park Secondary College, Written Submission, June 2007, p.2.

bicycle helmets and drawstrings on clothing (eg. hats, coats, sweatshirts) being caught on playground equipment.¹⁹⁵

Mr Anthony Sterpin, Managing Director, PSW Pty Ltd, told the Committee that chinstraps on hats can be especially dangerous to primary school children who are the most likely to wear hats during active outdoor play:

Over the years, we have seen children suffer significant injuries to their chins, due to rope burns when their approved SunSmart slouch hats get caught on things like playground equipment, fences, trees et cetera.¹⁹⁶

One primary student also noted that chinstraps can present a safety risk when 'other children pull the cord tight' during active play.¹⁹⁷ Recognising such risks, Kidsafe recommends that parents consider strategies to shorten or remove cords and chinstraps from their children's hats. However, PSW Pty Ltd sees problems with this solution:

By cutting off straps, the hat may not sit properly or parents may be faced with having to purchase multiple hats if it falls off the child and is lost... This also creates scenarios where hats may fly off in the wind, for example, and children chase them onto the road...¹⁹⁸

PSW Pty Ltd's response has been the development of a 'safety slouch hat,' which releases the chinstrap when two kilos or more of pressure is applied.¹⁹⁹ The Committee welcomes such initiatives and encourages schools and parents to consider the various options for ensuring the safe wearing of sun hats, while also remaining vigilant in their supervision of young children, particularly in the playground where such accidents are likely to occur.

Recommendation 3.8: That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development incorporate information regarding cords and chinstraps on sun hats and other articles of clothing in their safety guidelines for schools, especially at a primary level.

Conclusion

The Committee notes that most, if not all, Victorian schools address a range of health and safety issues in their dress codes and school uniform policies. Even schools that do not have uniforms typically place some restrictions on student clothing for health and safety reasons, such as suitable footwear or sun-protective clothing. The issue of student health and safety therefore transcends the school uniform debate in many areas, with schools both with and without uniforms agreeing on the importance of implementing standards for safe clothing.

As demonstrated in evidence to this inquiry, numerous opportunities exist for well thought-out school uniform policies to contribute to student health and wellbeing at school. While some health and safety issues, including sun protection, are widely recognised in Victorian schools, the Committee notes that some schools may not be familiar with additional measures they may take to support student health and safety. In the Committee's view, the enhancements to departmental guidelines recommended in this chapter could assist schools to understand a greater range of possibilities available for supporting student health and safety through their dress codes and school uniform policies.

¹⁹⁵ Kidsafe ACT Inc n.d., 'Sunhat Cords and Playground Equipment', *Fact Sheet*. Copy supplied by PSW Pty Ltd, 16 July 2007.

¹⁹⁶ Mr A. Sterpin, Managing Director, PSW Pty Ltd, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 25 June 2007, p.3.

¹⁹⁷ Ms D. Neal, Year 6 Student, Surfside Primary School, Legislative Council Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.12.

¹⁹⁸ PSW Pty Ltd 'Aussie first hat innovation designed for child safety' n.d., *Media Release*. Copy supplied by PSW Pty Ltd, 16 July 2007.

¹⁹⁹ Mr A. Sterpin, Managing Director, PSW Pty Ltd, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 25 June 2007, p.3.