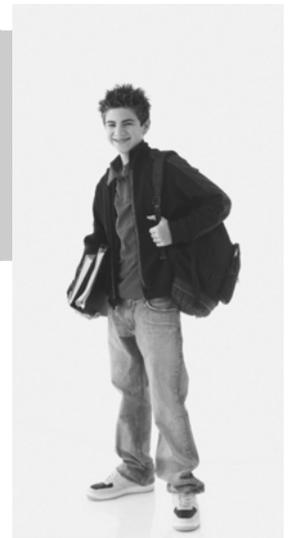


# Chapter 6:

## Costs



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### Introduction

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If the wearing of school uniform is to be compulsory they need to be affordable and easily accessible for all.<sup>373</sup>

Today's education environment is often described as competitive, with schools competing for enrolments and associated funding. The Committee is aware that the external image of the school has become a significant factor in this competition, and that student appearance is often an important aspect of how a school presents itself to the community. The Committee heard that some schools feel under pressure to adopt more 'traditional' and expensive school uniform items, to put them on equal footing with their more 'prestigious' competitors. Others face pressure to reduce school uniform costs to a level that will be attractive to parents from their target communities. With these considerations in mind, the Committee investigated the issues faced by schools in ensuring that the costs of complying with their dress codes or school uniform policies are appropriate to their students and communities.

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### Are School Uniforms the Cheapest Option?

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The Committee found that a key argument around the advantages and disadvantages of dress codes and school uniforms is whether or not it is more cost-effective to have a school uniform. Schools with a uniform typically argue that it eases financial pressure on parents, by removing the need to buy expensive fashion clothing for their children for everyday wear. Ms Indira Narain, Year 6 Student, Surfside Primary School, told the Committee that students with uniforms require fewer clothes, as they do not have to worry about variety for the sake of fashion:

I think it is cheaper to wear school uniform because you only have to buy about two of them, but you have to buy heaps of casual clothes and students worry about different trends.<sup>374</sup>

In his recent publication on school uniforms in US schools, Dr David Brunnsma, Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Missouri, explained the importance that today's students attach to clothing:

The pressure placed on students by their peers to wear expensive clothing has escalated dramatically. Clothes have become the pre-eminent status symbol. To some students, expensive and designer clothing is more important than good grades, success in athletics, or other extracurricular activities.<sup>375</sup>

As noted in previous chapters, the Committee recognises that growing fashion consciousness among young people is placing significant pressure on parents to spend more on clothing for their children. It was argued throughout this inquiry that school uniforms are one means by which this pressure may be alleviated.

School uniform garments were also often described as better quality than fashion garments of comparable cost, and better suited to the wear and tear placed on

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<sup>373</sup> The Salvation Army, Melbourne Central Division, Written Submission, April 2007, p.1.

<sup>374</sup> Ms I. Narain, Year 6 Student, Surfside Primary School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Council Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.19.

<sup>375</sup> D.L. Brunnsma (ed) c2006, *Evaluating Public School Uniforms: A Decade of Research and Debate*, Rowman & Littlefield Education, Lanham, MD, p.52.

'The real designer clothes now, like pairs of jeans that you see in the paper, can be over \$200. So over five days you need five days worth of brand-new fashionable clothes in order to fit in, whereas with a uniform you only need to buy one and it can last you a whole year.'

Dean Williams, Year 9 Student, Melbourne High School

them by school activities. A number of submissions also noted that although the initial costs of a school uniform may be high, they may be offset over time by the uniform's durability.<sup>376</sup> Several contributors to the inquiry contended that the cost-effectiveness of school uniforms makes them especially beneficial to students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds. Mrs Evelyn Sayers, Board Member, Association of Independent Schools in Victoria, described this as the prevailing view in her school community:

My school is in the city of Casey, so we are a low socioeconomic group out there, and my parents are the ones, about 97 per cent who say, 'We are pleased that you have got a school uniform'. They believe in the end that it is cheaper for them than providing the casual clothes that students would otherwise wear.<sup>377</sup>

The Committee's survey found that schools with less affluent communities are less likely to have full compulsory uniforms than schools with more affluent communities.<sup>378</sup> However, they are also by far the most likely to have optional school uniforms, suggesting that such schools prefer to leave it to individual families to decide which is the most cost-effective option for them.

On the other hand, submissions from schools without uniforms also claimed that their approach is the most cost-effective.<sup>379</sup> A common argument was that casual clothing must be purchased for weekend and holiday wear anyway, and that wearing this to school as well maximises its use, especially for young children who often outgrow garments before they are worn out.<sup>380</sup> Another point frequently made by schools without uniforms was that choice of clothing lessens students' interest in expensive brands and competitive dressing.<sup>381</sup> Mr Dylan Leach, Year 12 Student, Princes Hill Secondary College, explained that the perception that students without uniforms are preoccupied with fashions is incorrect:

...they all have this impression that it is a one-stop fashion contest when it is absolutely not the case, because we are just so used to seeing everyone in casual clothes that we do not make the observation; we do not rank them by the clothing that they wear.<sup>382</sup>

Submissions from parents in the Princes Hill Secondary College community noted that the opportunity for students to experiment with different clothing and overcome marketing pressure is something they especially value about the uniform-free culture in the school.<sup>383</sup> Assistant Principal John Goodman further noted that the student culture at Princes Hill has developed its own distinctive 'style', which leans towards lower-cost, experimental, 'op-shop' garments:

Cheap and interesting is more the preferred approach to dressing, and certainly expensive clothing tends not to be *de rigueur* with students...Students have a remarkably sharp 'anti corporate' sensibility.<sup>384</sup>

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<sup>376</sup> For example, Mr A. Leschen, Regional Programs Manager, The Smith Family, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 May 2007, p.5; PSW Pty Ltd, Written Submission, May 2007, p.7; Mr A. Van Krieken, Executive Director, Council of Textile and Fashion Industries of Australia Ltd and Mr D. Powers, Managing Director, Powers Textiles, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 4 June 2007, pp.10-12; Mr A. Kenos, Written Submission, May 2007, p.2.

<sup>377</sup> Mrs E. Sayers, Board Member, Association of Independent Schools of Victoria, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 May 2007, p.35.

<sup>378</sup> Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September 2007.

<sup>379</sup> For example, Eltham High School Council, Written Submission, May 2007, p.2; Mr C. Croker, Year 5 Student, Spensley Street Primary School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Council Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.12; Miss A. Kron, Year 6 Student, Princes Hill Primary School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Carlton North, 31 July 2007, p.8.

<sup>380</sup> For example, Ms M. Pledger, Representative, Parent Association, Princes Hill Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Carlton North, 31 July 2007, p.4.

<sup>381</sup> For example, Princes Hill Secondary College, Written Submission, May 2007, p.6; Merri Creek Primary School, Written Submission, June 2007, p.1; Eltham High School Council, Written Submission, May 2007, p.2.

<sup>382</sup> Mr D. Leach, Year 12 Student, Princes Hill Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, North Carlton, 31 July 2007, p.17.

<sup>383</sup> Princes Hill Secondary College, Written Submission, May 2007.

<sup>384</sup> *ibid.*, p.3.

Even in the absence of a uniform then, the Committee found that a school may develop a common standard of dress appropriate to its school community's culture and purchasing power.

The Committee therefore believes that the question of whether uniforms are cheaper than casual clothes cannot be answered without addressing the question of *which* uniform and *which* casual clothes. A basic school uniform is clearly less costly than expensive fashion clothing; on the other hand, an exclusive uniform complete with blazer and school logo will be significantly more expensive than a set of plain casual clothes from a department store. As will be shown in the discussion below, school uniforms in Victoria span a wide range of styles and associated costs, reflecting the preferences and priorities of each individual school community.

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## The Cost of School Uniforms

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The Committee felt that it was important that the inquiry gain some indication of the actual costs of school uniforms across different sectors and year levels. To this end, the Committee examined the costs of 60 girls and 60 boys uniforms in a random sample of Victorian primary and secondary schools, across all sectors and metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. The tables in the following sections show the average, lowest and highest costs of uniforms for boys and girls at primary and secondary levels for the sampled schools. While the relatively small sample size means that these figures are indicative only, they give useful insights into the vast range of costs involved in purchasing school uniforms in Victoria.

The Committee found that school uniforms in Victoria combine an incredibly wide variety of optional and compulsory garments, which may be available from a range of outlets at different prices, or specific to the school. The Committee acknowledges the limitations involved in making comparisons between such a diverse range of uniform policies and items. To assist with comparability across the sample, only a single set of basic, compulsory items were included in the analysis. However, it should be noted that the actual set of garments required by even the most basic school uniform is likely to be far more complex.

In the first place, few students would manage with only one of certain uniform items, including shirts or blouses, trousers, shorts, dresses and tights. The Committee is aware that the need to make multiple purchases can increase the cost of outfitting a student considerably. The Committee has also not factored in the cost of footwear (school socks, school shoes and sports footwear), which can be substantial, especially in schools where 'polishable' shoes are required. Most schools also have additional, optional uniform items from which students may choose. While students may not need each of these items, it is likely they will require at least some. Furthermore, schools may make additional items compulsory for certain year levels or groups, such as specific clothing for sports or cultural teams representing the school. The Committee therefore notes that while the costs of uniform items outlined below are substantial, the real cost of school clothing is likely to be significantly greater for most students and their families.

### The Cost of Basic School Uniforms for Girls

For the purposes of the analysis, the Committee defined a girls basic summer uniform as a dress and a sun protective hat, as this constituted the girls summer uniform in the majority of schools in the sample. In schools where girls are not required to wear dresses, the Committee calculated an equivalent cost based on a girls basic top, shorts or skirt and a sun protective hat. A girls basic winter uniform was defined as a skirt, long-sleeve polo shirt or blouse, jumper and tights, with equivalent replacements used for schools in which the basic uniform differed from this model. Many secondary schools in the sample also require girls to wear a blazer and tie, so these have been included in the cost of the winter uniform, where they are compulsory.

Table 6.1 shows the lowest, highest and average costs of girls summer and winter uniforms in the sampled primary schools.

**Table 6.1: Cost of basic school uniforms for primary school girls, by sector (2007)**

	<i>Basic summer uniform</i>			<i>Basic winter uniform</i>		
	Lowest	Highest	Average	Lowest	Highest	Average
<b>Catholic</b>	\$29.45	\$57.75	\$43.19	\$71.00	\$162.40	\$123.17
<b>Government</b>	\$21.00	\$61.00	\$42.12	\$54.55	\$118.00	\$85.05
<b>Independent</b>	\$49.75	\$123.61	\$76.39	\$115.62	\$256.00	\$189.45
<b>All schools</b>	<b>\$21.00</b>	<b>\$123.61</b>	<b>\$53.90</b>	<b>\$54.55</b>	<b>\$256.00</b>	<b>\$132.56</b>

Note: Basic summer uniform includes dress and sun protective hat. Basic winter uniform includes skirt, long-sleeve shirt or blouse, jumper and tights.

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

Based on the sample data, the average cost of a girls basic summer uniform for primary students in Victorian schools is \$53.90. Costs vary considerably between schools, from \$21.00 at one government school to \$123.61 at an independent school. A basic primary girls winter uniform was significantly more expensive, costing an average of \$132.56, with costs ranging from \$54.55 at a government school to \$256.00 at an independent school. The average cost of a combined girls primary school uniform was therefore found to be \$186.46 for a single set of garments for the school year.

Table 6.2 shows the lowest, highest and average costs of girls summer and winter uniforms in secondary schools.

**Table 6.2: Cost of basic school uniforms for secondary school girls, by sector (2007)**

	<i>Basic summer uniform</i>			<i>Basic winter uniform</i>		
	Lowest	Highest	Average	Lowest	Highest	Average
<b>Catholic</b>	\$60.00	\$132.50	\$80.94	\$120.00	\$411.90	\$328.71
<b>Government</b>	\$54.66	\$86.00	\$72.20	\$141.68	\$430.00	\$245.24
<b>Independent</b>	\$59.42	\$110.33	\$86.49	\$199.50	\$447.00	\$379.08
<b>All schools</b>	<b>\$54.66</b>	<b>\$132.50</b>	<b>\$79.88</b>	<b>\$120.00</b>	<b>\$447.00</b>	<b>\$317.68</b>

Note: Basic summer uniform includes dress and sun protective hat. Basic winter uniform includes skirt, long-sleeve shirt or blouse, jumper and tights, and blazer and/or tie where compulsory.

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

The average cost of a basic summer uniform for secondary girls was higher (\$79.88), with prices ranging from \$54.66 at one government school to \$132.50 at a Catholic school. The cost of a secondary school girls basic winter uniform ranges from \$120.00 at a Catholic school without a compulsory blazer or tie, to \$447.00 at an independent school with compulsory blazer and tie.

## The Cost of Basic School Uniforms for Boys

For boys, the Committee defined a basic summer uniform as shorts, a short-sleeve shirt and sun protective hat. A boys basic winter uniform was defined as trousers, a

long-sleeve shirt and jumper and, for secondary students, a blazer and/or tie where these items are compulsory. While the basic composition of a boys uniform was more consistent across schools in the sample than for girls, (ie a shirt of some kind, and trousers or shorts), the specific nature of such items varied considerably, from button-up dress shirts to simple polo or t-shirt styles.

Table 6.3 shows the lowest, highest and average costs for boys uniforms in the primary schools in the sample.

**Table 6.3: Cost of basic school uniforms for primary school boys, by sector (2007)**

	<i>Basic summer uniform</i>			<i>Basic winter uniform</i>		
	Lowest	Highest	Average	Lowest	Highest	Average
<b>Catholic</b>	\$38.00	\$53.75	\$45.53	\$52.00	\$131.28	\$92.81
<b>Government</b>	\$33.00	\$53.50	\$46.30	\$44.55	\$88.50	\$64.23
<b>Independent</b>	\$32.00	\$116.69	\$63.70	\$92.50	\$151.86	\$127.03
<b>All schools</b>	\$32.00	\$116.69	\$51.85	\$44.55	\$151.86	\$94.69

Note: Basic summer uniform includes shorts, short-sleeve shirt and sun protective hat. Basic winter uniform includes trousers, long-sleeve shirt, and jumper.

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

A boys basic summer uniform in primary schools cost an average of \$51.85 across the Committee's sample. The Committee found that the costs of primary boys summer uniforms are similar in the government and Catholic sectors. In the independent sector, the cost varied substantially, with the most expensive uniform (\$116.69) costing more than three times as much as the cheapest uniform in the sector (\$32.00). The inclusion of a hat costing \$50.00 in the more expensive school (compared with a \$6.00 hat in the cheaper school), demonstrates the significant effect that a single item of uniform can have on its total cost. As was the case for girls, winter uniforms for boys at primary schools were more expensive, with the average cost across the sample ranging from \$64.23 for a basic winter uniform in the government sector, to \$127.03 in the independent sector.

Table 6.4 shows the lowest, highest and average costs for boys uniforms in the secondary schools in the sample.

**Table 6.4: Cost of basic school uniforms for secondary school boys, by sector (2007)**

	<i>Basic summer uniform</i>			<i>Basic winter uniform</i>		
	Lowest	Highest	Average	Lowest	Highest	Average
<b>Catholic</b>	\$55.00	\$97.00	\$74.92	\$122.00	\$361.33	\$261.50
<b>Government</b>	\$35.00	\$76.23	\$59.02	\$98.50	\$342.19	\$177.28
<b>Independent</b>	\$63.00	\$119.00	\$82.82	\$126.00	\$432.50	\$327.11
<b>All schools</b>	\$35.00	\$119.00	\$72.25	\$98.50	\$432.50	\$255.30

Note: Basic summer uniform includes shorts, short-sleeve shirt and sun protective hat. Basic winter uniform includes trousers, long-sleeve shirt, jumper, and blazer and/or tie where compulsory.

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

A secondary boys basic summer uniform cost an average of \$72.25 across all secondary schools in the sample. The cheapest example occurred in a government

'Uniform is expensive and because it has a single purpose is a drain on some family's finances particularly when they enrol first at year 7. Our uniform is sensibly priced and it will cost a minimum of \$500 to get started.'

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school (\$35.00) and the most expensive in an independent school (\$119.00). A basic winter uniform cost an average of \$255.30. The average cost was significantly lower in the government sector (\$177.28), where schools are least likely to include costly additional items such as blazers and ties as a compulsory part of the uniform.

### The Cost of Additional School Uniform Items

The above figures take into account basic uniform items only, including any compulsory blazers and/or ties for secondary students. Schools may include a number of additional compulsory items, which add to the total cost of school uniforms. For example, the Committee found that many schools in the sample (including all but three secondary schools) have separate sports uniforms which students are required to purchase, typically comprising a t-shirt or polo shirt, shorts and a tracksuit. The total cost of these items ranged in price from \$64.50 in a government primary school to \$257.80 in an independent secondary school. The average cost of a basic sports uniform (excluding footwear) in the sampled schools was \$106.72 for primary schools and \$162.58 for secondary schools.

Again, these prices reflect the cost of a basic sports uniform only. A number of schools, especially at secondary level, also specify additional items of clothing that are compulsory for physical education, such as sports caps, sports jumpers or rugby tops, netball skirts for girls, football shorts for boys, sports bags or swimwear. These items could increase the cost of clothing a child for school sports significantly, with one independent secondary school reaching a maximum cost of \$355.00 just for the compulsory items for its sports uniform. The Committee found that the average cost of a complete set of secondary sports clothing including all compulsory items (except footwear) was \$180.58. Costs for a basic sports uniform in secondary schools, and a full sports uniform incorporating additional compulsory items, are shown in Table 6.5.

Table 6.5: Cost of basic and full sports uniforms for secondary students, by sector (2007)

	<i>Basic sports uniform</i>			<i>Full compulsory sports uniform</i>		
	Lowest	Highest	Average	Lowest	Highest	Average
<b>Catholic</b>	\$123.00	\$220.50	\$162.58	\$123.00	\$257.50	\$172.01
<b>Government</b>	\$126.90	\$222.00	\$142.04	\$126.90	\$287.00	\$154.76
<b>Independent</b>	\$123.00	\$257.80	\$183.12	\$123.00	\$355.00	\$216.52
<b>All schools</b>	\$123.00	\$257.80	\$162.58	\$123.00	\$355.00	\$180.58

Note: Basic sports uniform includes shorts, t-shirt or polo shirt and tracksuit. Full compulsory sports uniform includes complete set of sports clothing required by schools in the sample (various items).

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

Many schools also include further essential items in their school uniforms, especially school bags and rain coats, spray jackets or other outer garments for winter. Bags at primary schools ranged in price from \$20.00 to \$82.66, with an average cost of \$38.29. Bags at secondary schools ranged from \$15.00 to \$71.00, with a greater proportion at the higher end of the cost range, bringing the average cost to \$55.83.

In primary schools, winter jackets (raincoat, spray jacket or other winter jacket) ranged from \$20.90 to \$39.95, averaging \$33.25. In secondary schools, winter jackets cost from \$25.00 to \$99.00, averaging \$60.50. While such items are not necessarily compulsory in all schools, they are typically the only such garments permitted should students need to wear a jacket during winter. They may therefore

reasonably be expected to be purchased for most students. The cost of a school bag and coat could therefore increase the cost of a school uniform by up to \$170.00 in some independent secondary schools. The range of costs for these essential items at primary and secondary level is shown in Tables 6.6 and 6.7 below.

**Table 6.6: Cost of additional school uniform items for primary students, by sector (2007)**

	<i>School bag</i>			<i>Raincoat/Spray jacket/Other</i>		
	Lowest	Highest	Average	Lowest	Highest	Average
<b>Catholic</b>	\$23.00	\$44.00	\$34.13	\$28.00	\$36.00	\$33.60
<b>Government</b>	\$20.00	\$40.00	\$33.14	\$20.90	\$39.95	\$32.04
<b>Independent</b>	\$35.00	\$82.66	\$47.90	\$28.00	\$38.00	\$34.10
<b>All schools</b>	\$20.00	\$82.66	\$38.39	\$20.90	\$39.95	\$33.25

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

**Table 6.7: Cost of additional school uniform items for secondary students, by sector (2007)**

	<i>School bag</i>			<i>Raincoat/Spray jacket/Other</i>		
	Lowest	Highest	Average	Lowest	Highest	Average
<b>Catholic</b>	\$35.00	\$71.00	\$56.25	\$45.00	\$85.00	\$67.25
<b>Government</b>	\$53.60	\$67.00	\$55.56	\$25.00	\$95.00	\$56.86
<b>Independent</b>	\$15.00	\$70.00	\$55.61	\$37.50	\$99.00	\$64.83
<b>All schools</b>	\$15.00	\$71.00	\$55.83	\$25.00	\$99.00	\$60.50

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

## The Total Cost of School Uniforms

Tables 6.8 and 6.9 summarise the total indicative costs for a single set of compulsory or essential uniform items for summer and winter, for Victorian primary and secondary school students. The costs take account of

- one basic summer uniform;
- one basic winter uniform;
- one basic PE uniform;
- a blazer and/or tie if compulsory (for secondary students);
- one school bag; and
- either a raincoat, spray jacket or other winter jacket.

As shown in Table 6.8, the average total cost for a single set of compulsory school uniform items for primary students in the government sector is \$277.59 for girls and \$260.95 for boys. Table 6.9 shows that for secondary students in the government sector, the average cost of a full school uniform is \$586.62 for girls and \$491.31 for boys.

**Table 6.8: Total cost for a single set of compulsory school uniform items for primary school students, by sector (2007)**

	<i>Girls</i>			<i>Boys</i>		
	Lowest	Highest	Average	Lowest	Highest	Average
<b>Catholic</b>	\$239.00	\$405.25	\$322.78	\$233.00	\$358.81	\$294.76
<b>Government</b>	\$192.00	\$346.45	\$277.59	\$199.84	\$306.75	\$260.95
<b>Independent</b>	\$343.74	\$893.25	\$556.15	\$302.50	\$782.27	\$474.09
<b>All schools</b>	\$192.00	\$893.25	\$379.62	\$199.84	\$782.27	\$338.75

Note: Basic compulsory uniform for girls includes dress, sun protective hat, winter skirt, long-sleeve shirt or blouse, jumper, tights, winter jacket, PE uniform and school bag. Basic compulsory uniform for boys includes shorts, short-sleeve shirt, sun protective hat, trousers, long-sleeve shirt, jumper, winter jacket, PE uniform and school bag.

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

**Table 6.9: Total cost for a single set of compulsory school uniform items for secondary school students, by sector (2007)**

	<i>Girls</i>			<i>Boys</i>		
	Lowest	Highest	Average	Lowest	Highest	Average
<b>Catholic</b>	\$397.75	\$792.92	\$667.36	\$400.70	\$708.20	\$576.78
<b>Government</b>	\$454.06	\$905.00	\$586.62	\$345.06	\$674.23	\$491.31
<b>Independent</b>	\$448.75	\$1010.80	\$740.16	\$364.50	\$936.58	\$691.35
<b>All schools</b>	\$454.06	\$1010.80	\$664.72	\$345.06	\$936.58	\$586.48

Note: Basic compulsory uniform for girls includes dress, sun protective hat, winter skirt, long-sleeve shirt or blouse, jumper, tights, blazer and/or tie where compulsory, winter jacket, PE uniform and school bag. Basic compulsory uniform for boys includes shorts, short-sleeve shirt, sun protective hat, trousers, long-sleeve shirt, jumper, blazer and/or tie where compulsory, winter jacket, PE uniform and school bag.

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

## Cost Differences for Girls and Boys School Uniforms

As shown in the analysis above, the Committee found that overall, the cost of school uniforms is higher for girls than for boys. In all sectors at both primary and secondary level, the average cost of a girls basic uniform was higher than that of a boys basic uniform. The greatest gender differential in the cost of school uniforms was seen in independent primary schools, where girls pay on average \$75.93 (32.0%) more than boys at the same school, for basic summer and winter uniform items. In the government sector, the greatest difference occurred at secondary level, with girls uniforms costing an average of \$58.80 (29.0%) more than boys. Table 6.10 show the differences between uniform prices for primary and secondary girls and boys across all sectors.

Table 6.10: Gender differences in total cost of school uniforms, by sector (2007)

	Primary		Secondary	
	Average additional cost for girls uniform (\$)	Average additional cost for girls uniform (%)	Average additional cost for girls uniform (\$)	Average additional cost for girls uniform (%)
<b>Catholic</b>	\$28.02	20.0%	\$34.40	9.1%
<b>Government</b>	\$16.64	14.6%	\$58.80	29.0%
<b>Independent</b>	\$75.93	32.0%	\$62.84	18.8%
<b>All schools</b>	\$40.20	22.2%	\$53.42	19.7%

Notes: Calculation based on the average cost of girls and boys basic uniforms, as defined in previous tables. Percentages reflect the additional cost of a girls uniform as a proportion of the cost of a boys uniform.

Composition of the sample for secondary schools in this table differs slightly from that in previous tables, as single sex schools have been excluded. Above figures are based on a comparison of the cost of a girls and boys basic school uniform in a total of 25 secondary schools.

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

The Committee found that the gender differences in uniform costs typically arose from more expensive items such as skirts, kilts, pinafores or dresses. These garments are often designed in school colours or tartans and are therefore unique to the school. In comparison, boys are more likely to be required to wear more generic garments such as shirts and trousers. Even if badged with the school logo, the Committee notes that these garments will typically be more readily accessible than custom-made designs that are unique to the school.

As discussed in Chapter 4, the Committee notes that a significant price differential between girls and boys school uniforms could constitute discrimination on the grounds of gender, as it disadvantages one group—female students and their families—over another. At the same time, the Committee notes that in some cases, apparent price differentials in uniform costs may be offset by other considerations such as the purchase of duplicate garments. For example, a boy may require two pairs of school trousers, increasing the cost of his uniform, whereas a girl may require only a single school kilt. The Committee therefore recommends that co-educational schools undertake to make realistic comparisons between the costs of complete sets of school uniform items for girls and boys, and ensure that costs are as similar as practicable.

## Impact of School Uniform Design on Costs

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's guidelines for schools currently recommend that schools select a uniform at an affordable price:

The range and choice of specified garments, their cost and availability must reflect the capacity of parents/guardians to provide them.<sup>385</sup>

As shown in the analysis above, the cost of a uniform is a substantial expense for the parents of school-aged children, even at schools where prices are kept at a minimum. At the top end of the price range, a single full set of compulsory school uniform items may cost over \$1000.00, even excluding footwear and the necessary purchase of duplicate items. While government and Catholic schools often provide

<sup>385</sup> Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2007, 'Student dress code', section 4.8 (updated May 2006), *Victorian Government Schools Reference Guide*, DEECD, Melbourne.

'At times, I feel that the emphasis is all about the appearance rather than the functionality, and damn the expense!'

Susanne McCracken,  
Parent

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cheaper options than schools in the independent sector, they still typically require families to spend hundreds of dollars to outfit their children for school.

The Committee notes the goodwill shown by most parents and carers in their willingness to pay for a school uniform, as an important part of school life and a means of expressing their membership of the school community. The Committee believes it is the responsibility of schools to reciprocate this goodwill by choosing a uniform that does not impose an unnecessary or unreasonable financial burden on parents. As the Victorian Parents Council noted in its written submission, the price of a school uniform should reflect the socioeconomic make-up of the community:

It is very much an issue for each school community to decide what best reflects that particular school's culture and monetary demographic.<sup>386</sup>

Melton Primary School Council's written submission suggested that most schools succeed in finding a uniform that suits their community's expectations and purchasing capacity:

...we believe that most schools are able to set realistic expectations with regards to the purchase of their uniform items, specific to the financial circumstances of their community.<sup>387</sup>

While it may be desirable for the cost of a school uniform to be determined by the school community, the Committee believes that a school community should not be shaped by the cost of its uniform. Ms Leanne McCurdy, the parent of a child at a government school, argued in her written submission that government education should be available equally to all:

...no parent should be told by their local [government] school, that they should perhaps look at a different school because they cannot afford the uniform at that local school.<sup>388</sup>

The Committee notes that in the United Kingdom, the Office of Fair Trading has recently been called on to investigate the practice by some government schools of using expensive uniforms as a 'back-door selection process', to deter students from low-income backgrounds from enrolling.<sup>389</sup>

The Committee believes that all schools have a responsibility to ensure that the cost of a school uniform is set at a level which is affordable to the members of its school community. It could be argued that this is especially true for government schools, which are charged with providing education that is accessible to all Victorian students, irrespective of their socioeconomic background.

The Committee found that two key aspects of a school uniform can significantly affect its cost: (1) the range of compulsory items required by the school; and (2) the design of the garments themselves.

The Committee recognises that more expensive elements of a school uniform may be sufficiently highly valued by some school communities to justify their cost. However, at the same time, the Committee heard a number of arguments against additional items or designs that increase the cost of a school uniform. The two items that attracted the most comment were school blazers and compulsory school logos.

The Committee's survey found that blazers have a strong association with the later years of schooling. Only two primary schools (both from the independent sector) reported having a blazer as a compulsory part of their uniform.<sup>390</sup> In public hearings, the vast majority of primary school students indicated that they felt that

<sup>386</sup> Victorian Parents Council Inc, Written Submission, June 2007, p.1.

<sup>387</sup> Melton Primary School Council, Written Submission June, 2007, pp.1-2.

<sup>388</sup> Ms L. McCurdy, Parent, Written Submission, April 2007, p.2.

<sup>389</sup> BBC News, 'Schools warned over uniform costs', 18 February 2007, BBC News website, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/6369213.stm>>, accessed on 18 September 2007.

<sup>390</sup> Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September 2007.

blazers are unnecessary and undesirable in a primary school uniform.<sup>391</sup> Secondary students' attitudes to blazers were mixed, ranging from a preference for a more casual uniform,<sup>392</sup> to appreciation of the school blazer's image of pride and sophistication.<sup>393</sup> The average cost of a blazer for a Victorian secondary student ranges from around \$160.00 in Catholic schools to over \$190.00 in independent schools.<sup>394</sup>

The Committee's survey also found that blazers are strongly associated with the non-government sector (refer Figure 6.1). Over half (54.5%) the non-government schools in Victoria with secondary students require some or all of their students to wear blazers, compared with only 13.2 per cent of government schools with secondary students. In the Catholic sector, 72.3 per cent of schools with secondary students require all of their students to wear a compulsory blazer.<sup>395</sup>

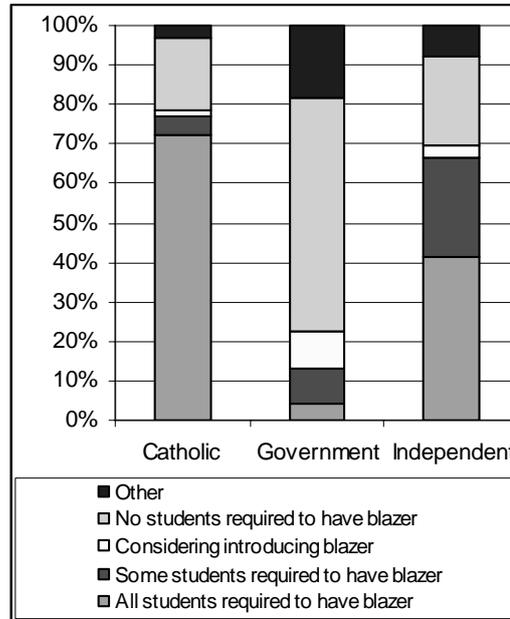
The Committee acknowledges that many schools feel that in order to improve their public image, they must adopt more formal or expensive uniform items. For example, Whittlesea Secondary College's written submission explained the pressure faced by government schools to raise their standards for student appearance:

It is becoming a trend for school uniforms in the government system to become more formal, neater and more distinctive and is often used as a marketing tool when surrounded by private schools or government schools that have upgraded their uniform. Unfortunately we live in a competitive environment where the community is quick to judge unkempt, untidy, faded and outdated fabrics and styles.<sup>396</sup>

School uniform manufacturers, including Noone Imagewear, also outlined the trend for government school uniforms to be used as a marketing strategy to attract new students:

In recent years, the Noone Group have designed new ranges for many government schools which were looking to enhance their overall image. This involved the provision of a more "private school" appearance with the use of blazers, wool jumpers and ties taking pride of place. It is evident, schools are using their image as part of their strategic marketing campaigns to attract new students.<sup>397</sup>

**Figure 6.1: Policies on school blazers in Victorian schools with secondary students, by sector (%) (2007)**



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

<sup>391</sup> Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Council Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.20.

<sup>392</sup> 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.

<sup>393</sup> Ms S. Cashin, Year 11 Student, Werribee Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Assembly Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.35.

<sup>394</sup> Education and Training Committee analysis of 60 school uniform policies and price lists, October 2007.

<sup>395</sup> Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September 2007.

<sup>396</sup> Whittlesea Secondary College, Written Submission, July 2007, pp.2-3.

<sup>397</sup> Noone Imagewear, Written Submission, May 2007, p1.

'...there are uniforms and uniforms. There are some school uniforms that are not much better than what you see if you go to Port Phillip Prison to visit people in their uniform. Then, of course, you have the private school kids getting around in designer-type things.'

Les Twentyman,  
Outreach Worker, Open  
Family Australia

## Inquiry into Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools

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Mr Anton Leschen, Regional Programs Manager, The Smith Family, also discussed the impact of increasing competitiveness among schools on the cost of school uniforms:

It seems to me that there is a shift towards private school education. Sometimes people assess those by the uniforms and grounds, and to a degree I think some [government] high schools are saying, 'We will compete in that market, and we will move from the more casual windcheaters and bomber jackets to the more expensive blazers'.<sup>398</sup>

In its written submission, Parents Victoria remarked that the trend towards more expensive uniform items in government schools may sometimes be resented by school communities:

Some public schools are including garments more traditionally associated with private schools eg blazers, ties and hats related to school image. These garments are often not supported when mandated – their cost can be prohibitive and they are more costly to maintain (laundering, dry cleaning, hand washing, etc).<sup>399</sup>

As noted in Chapter 4, the Committee received a number of written submissions from parents concerned about the introduction of a compulsory blazer at their children's school. The submissions indicated that the blazer is not only expensive, but also impractical and unnecessary.<sup>400</sup> One of the parents, Ms Karen Rolands, argued that such items should never be made compulsory in school uniform policies:

Expensive unnecessary items such as blazers should always be kept as optional items. This means that parents and students have the right to choose, [and] parents who are struggling with their financial situation are not forced to make things worse unnecessarily.<sup>401</sup>

This view was supported in a comment on Parents Victoria's online school uniform forum:

Blazers, ties, hats such as bashers (boaters) are not sensible or practical items and should not be required. These would make any uniform more expensive as well.<sup>402</sup>

One of the students participating in a public hearing confirmed the view that school blazers are often used for decorative, rather than practical purposes:

Today I am wearing a blazer but pretty much every other day of the year I will not be wearing a blazer. If you went to my school right now, you would not see one person wearing a blazer. It is more of a decorative thing than anything else.<sup>403</sup>

Another parent, Ms Carolyn Mann, added in her written submission that the expense of laundering a blazer further increases its cost:

Laundering becomes impractical because of the logistics of laundering when a student is expected to wear the item (blazer) every day. At \$170 for a blazer, which I might add can only be dry-cleaned – it is impractical to have a spare!<sup>404</sup>

The Committee acknowledges that items such as blazers are perceived by many to be non-essential items. The Committee believes that blazers should therefore not be included in a school uniform policy in which cost to parents is a primary concern. However, the Committee notes that many schools have found ways to include a blazer in their school uniforms, while minimising the associated costs or inconvenience for students and families. Twelve schools in the Committee's survey

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<sup>398</sup> Mr A. Leschen, Regional Programs Manager, The Smith Family, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 May 2007, p.6.

<sup>399</sup> Parents Victoria, Written Submission, June 2007, p.3.

<sup>400</sup> Ms M. Reith, Parent, Written Submission, April 2007; Ms C. Mann, Parent, Written Submission, April 2007; Ms L. McCurdy, Parent, Written Submission, April 2007; Ms B. Johns, Parent, Written Submission, May 2007; Ms K. Clarke & Mr L. Challis, Parents, Written Submission, June 2007; Ms K. Rolands, Parent, Written Submission, June 2007.

<sup>401</sup> Ms K. Rolands, Parent, Written Submission, June 2007, p.2.

<sup>402</sup> Mr R. Polacsek, 'Should school uniforms be compulsory?', *Parents Victoria online forum*, 10 September 2007, Parents Victoria website, <<http://www.cybertext.net.au/pv/discussion.htm>>.

<sup>403</sup> Mr R. Nyaguy, Year 10 Student, Sandringham College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Assembly Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.36.

<sup>404</sup> Ms C. Mann, Parent, Written Submission, April 2007, p.3.

indicated that their uniform includes an optional blazer, although one also noted that 'no students currently take this option'. A further nine schools reported keeping a stock of blazers on hand to loan to students representing the school.<sup>405</sup> The Committee suggests that these types of compromises can be an appropriate way for government schools to achieve their aims with respect to school image, while fulfilling their obligation to keep uniform costs accessible to all families in their communities.

Both the Smith Family and the State Schools' Relief Committee reported that another major contributing factor in rising uniform costs is the trend towards specific garments with school logos, rather than generic garments.<sup>406</sup> The impact of logos on the cost of school uniforms was also noted in a number of written submissions from parents. For example:

...the fact it has to have the school logo...makes the items very expensive for many parents. The same items without the logos can be purchased at various large retail stores for about \$5 to \$8 but through the school it is FOUR times this cost.<sup>407</sup>

Government schools should provide parents with alternate, affordably priced outlets to purchase mandatory uniforms (or at least some parts of the uniform such as, 'grey pants', socks, polo shirts)... For example – the purchase of long grey pants at our local school uniform shop vs buying the same pants (minus logo on back pocket) at Target Stores – varies by over 100 per cent (\$55 at School Uniform shop. \$25 – \$30 at local Target Store). We should not be pedantic about a logo on a back pocket which cannot be seen anyway!<sup>408</sup>

Furthermore, some schools explained that their decision not to have a logo on school uniform items was motivated by a desire to reduce costs to students and families by giving them a choice of purchasing outlets.<sup>409</sup>

Nevertheless, the Committee also heard some comments in support of school logos. One parent from the Valkstone Primary School community expressed a preference for the uniformity that a single uniform brand or supplier imparts:

I like everyone looking smart in the same uniform, rather than bits bought at different shops.<sup>410</sup>

Mr Hugh Kroker, Year 6 Student, St Kilda Park Primary School, argued that the school logo was central to the purpose of the uniform:

I think there should be a logo, because if you do not have one there is not really much point in having uniforms. If you represent your school and do not have a logo people could think you are from a different school.<sup>411</sup>

Mr Shane Colley, Year 6 Student, Belvedere Park Primary School, observed that two of the schools' uniforms at the public hearing he attended were very similar, and the logo was therefore necessary to tell them apart.<sup>412</sup>

The Committee's survey asked schools to indicate whether their school uniform included any of the following items with a school logo on them: bag, blazer, hat, jumper, PE/sports shirt or uniform, shirt/blouse, t-shirt/polo shirt or windcheater. The Committee found that schools in the Catholic and independent sectors are the most likely to include such items with school logos in their school uniforms (refer Figure 6.2). The majority of schools in these two sectors have at least four items

<sup>405</sup> Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September 2007.

<sup>406</sup> Mr A. Leschen, Regional Programs Manager, The Smith Family, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 May 2007, p.6; Mr D. Schmidt, Manager, State Schools' Relief Committee, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 4 June 2007, p.3.

<sup>407</sup> Mr P. Thompson & Ms N. Fidge, Written Submission, May 2007, p.1.

<sup>408</sup> Ms L. McCurdy, Parent, Written Submission, April 2007, p.1.

<sup>409</sup> For example, Sherbourne Primary School, Written Submission, July 2007, p.1.

<sup>410</sup> Parent Community, Valkstone Primary School, Written Submission, June 2007, p.21.

<sup>411</sup> Mr H. Kroker, Year 6 Student, St Kilda Park Primary School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Council Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.20.

<sup>412</sup> Mr S. Colley, Year 6 Student, Belvedere Park Primary School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Council Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.20.

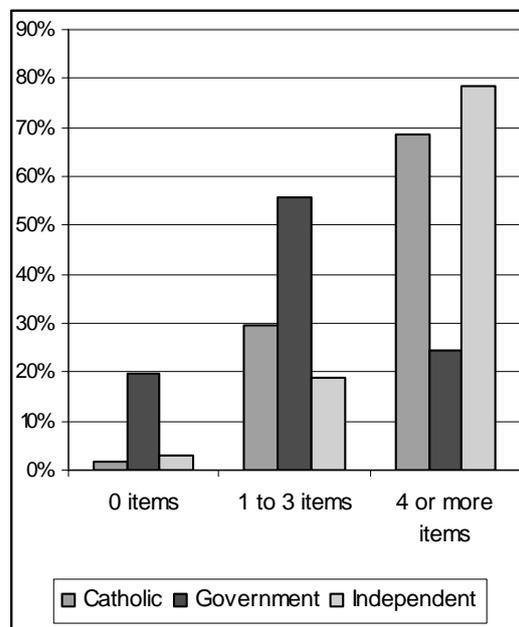
with the school logo on them. Logos are less common in government schools: 19.6 per cent of government schools have no items with a school logo, and less than one quarter require students to have four or more school uniform items with a school logo.<sup>413</sup>

The most common items to include a logo are t-shirts/polo shirts and windcheaters, which are required to have a logo in 68.8 per cent of Victorian school uniforms. The next most common items to require a school logo are jumpers (required to have a logo in 59.4% of schools), clothing for PE (55.4%), school bags (40.8%) and hats (38.7%).

The Committee heard that as with blazers, schools may adopt a variety of different approaches to ensure that the inclusion of school logos does not unduly affect the price of school uniforms. Some schools told the Committee that their uniform is comprised mostly of generic garments available in a variety of outlets, with a small number of garments with the school logo available exclusively through the school.<sup>414</sup> Others offer school logos as patches, which can be ironed or sewn on to generic garments.<sup>415</sup> The Committee supports such initiatives as appropriate means for schools to balance the advantages of having a school logo against the potential impact on the cost of the uniform.

The Committee notes the above evidence and particularly, the widespread concerns about the impact of design decisions on the overall cost of school uniforms in the government school sector. The Committee believes that government schools should be required to undertake a rigorous, transparent assessment of the appropriate cost of a school uniform for their communities. This assessment should include careful consideration of the specific items to be incorporated into a school uniform, as well as the specifications for these items.

**Figure 6.2: Number of school uniform items required to have a school logo in Victorian schools, by sector (%) (2007)**



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

**Recommendation 6.1:** That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development require schools to demonstrate to their school communities that they have evaluated the cost implications of their selected school uniform to ensure that costs fall within expectations of the school community.

<sup>413</sup> Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September 2007.

<sup>414</sup> Manangatang P-12 College Council, Written Submissions, May 2007, p.1; Footscray City Primary School, Written Submission, June 2007, p.1.

<sup>415</sup> Trafalgar Primary School, Written Submission, May 2007 p.2; Rosanna Primary School Council, Written Submission, May 2007, p.3.

## Assistance for Low Income Families

No matter how attentive schools are to the purchasing capacity of their communities when selecting a uniform, there will always be some families for whom the purchase of a school uniform presents a significant financial burden. The Committee heard from community organisations such as the Salvation Army and Open Family Australia that many families struggle to meet the costs of schooling, such as the purchase of school uniforms:

...it needs to be recognised that for many Australian families living on low incomes the provision of school uniforms is cost prohibitive...The Salvation Army currently assists many families who simply cannot afford the cost of education expenses at the beginning of each school year.<sup>416</sup>

...the mere fact that families cannot afford the very basics is a huge concern to us. And it is not just the basic uniform; now they have to have sports uniforms as well and things of that nature.<sup>417</sup>

The Committee also received written submissions from parents and families experiencing difficulties purchasing uniforms, such as the comment below from the grandparent of three school-age children:

My family find the cost of uniforms to be so astronomical and really eats into their household budget, so much so that they have to do without other essential needs.<sup>418</sup>

The Committee is concerned to hear that meeting the cost of a school uniform may be affecting the ability of some families to afford other essential educational items for their children.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development advises schools that exemptions to dress codes or school uniform policies must be provided where 'the student or the parents/guardians can demonstrate particular economic hardship that prevents them from complying with the code'.<sup>419</sup> However, the Department acknowledges that in such cases, principals should consider whether it may be preferable to provide financial assistance:

When considering whether an exemption on the grounds of economic hardship should be made, the principal will need to decide whether or not to grant financial or other assistance to the parent(s)/guardian(s) to enable the student to comply with the dress code without stigma or undue embarrassment. This may be appropriate if the school council wishes to maintain a sense of school identity rather than grant an exemption.<sup>420</sup>

The Committee's survey found that schools tend to prefer to provide support to students in financial difficulty, rather than exemptions. Only 31.2 per cent of schools indicated that an exemption on such grounds would be provided, with a number of schools explaining that such exemptions are unnecessary due to the availability of financial assistance with the cost of school uniform items.<sup>421</sup>

Students from government schools participating in this inquiry spoke passionately about the need to assist students and families struggling to purchase uniforms. As shown in the comments below, opinion was divided as to whether this support should come from the government, or from the school community:

Schools have a responsibility to help families with financial difficulties purchase uniforms for their children.<sup>422</sup>

<sup>416</sup> The Salvation Army, Melbourne Central Division, Written Submission, April 2007, p.1.

<sup>417</sup> Mr L. Twentyman, Outreach Worker, Open Family Australia, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 4 June 2007, p.30.

<sup>418</sup> Ms E. Dickin, Grandparent, Written Submission, May 2007, p.1.

<sup>419</sup> Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2007, 'Student dress code', section 4.8 (updated May 2006), *Victorian Government Schools Reference Guide*, DEECD, Melbourne.

<sup>420</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>421</sup> Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September 2007.

<sup>422</sup> Ms C. Forrester, Year 10 Student, Shepparton High School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Assembly Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.28.

'It would be wonderful to have all students in uniform, with a proportion of funding to support this. Often our government schools in lower income areas struggle to adhere to a proud look. Uniform for many of our children is a real struggle.'

Committee Survey

## Inquiry into Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools

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...If the government is making [students] go to school and they cannot afford a uniform it should be helping them buy one.<sup>423</sup>

Written submissions from the education departments in Queensland and South Australia noted that the responsibility to support students in need rests with schools, both in selecting affordable uniforms and in organising for financial support to be provided.<sup>424</sup> However, most state governments in Australia provide some form of financial assistance to students for the purchase of school uniforms, either through designated uniform funds, or through general education support. The Committee agrees that the Victorian Government has a direct role in providing financial support to help needy families meet the cost of purchasing a school uniform.

The Victorian Government provides students and their families with opportunities to access financial support for general educational purposes, which may contribute to the purchase of school uniforms. The Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) is a bi-annual payment provided by the Victorian Government to parents or carers of children under 16 who receive a Centrelink benefit, and hold a Health Care or Pensioners card. The total annual EMA payment made to parents and carers is \$210 for primary students and \$420 for secondary students. An equivalent amount is also paid to the child's school.<sup>425</sup> In addition, the Victorian Government provides the School Start bonus—a one-off payment of \$300 made to parents and carers of students beginning Prep or Year 7—to help with the costs associated with starting at a new school.<sup>426</sup> The Committee notes that a new uniform may be a significant component of such costs.

The Committee's survey found that support for families in need is also provided at a school level, with only 12.5 per cent of schools responding that no support is available for covering the cost of their uniform.<sup>427</sup> These schools, predominantly in the independent sector, have low numbers of students receiving the Educational Maintenance Allowance, suggesting that financial assistance may not be needed for their students. Other schools indicated that they use a range of approaches to provide financial assistance to students and their families, as shown in Figure 6.3.

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<sup>423</sup> Ms C. Lee, Year 6 Student, Essendon Primary School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Legislative Council Chamber, Melbourne, 6 September 2007, p.21.

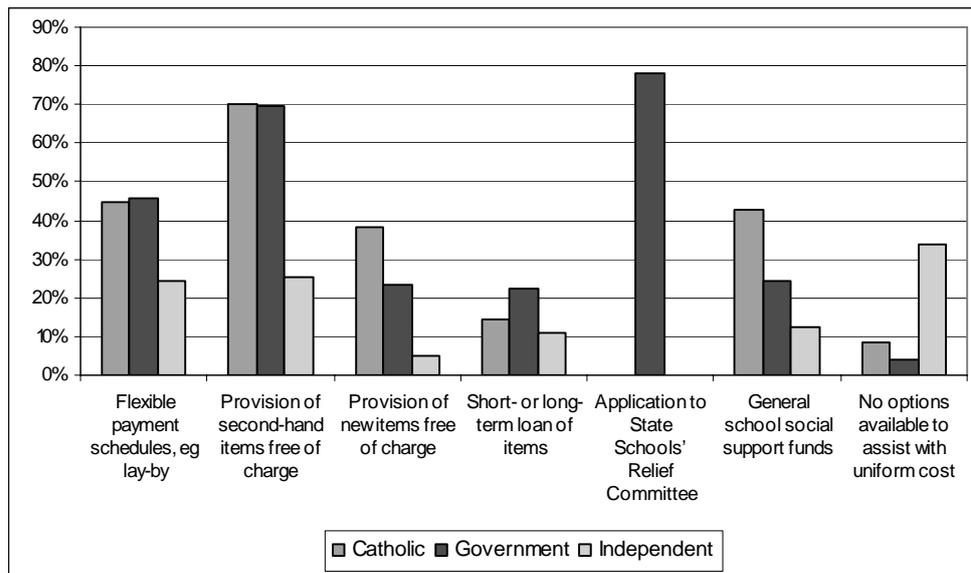
<sup>424</sup> Department of Education and Children's Services (South Australia), Written Submission, June 2007, p.1; Department of Education, Training and the Arts (Queensland), Written Submission, May 2007, p.2.

<sup>425</sup> Department of Education and Early Childhood Development website, 'Education Maintenance Allowance: Information for Schools', <<http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/ema/spayments.htm>>.

<sup>426</sup> For further information, refer to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development website, <<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/aboutschool/lifeatschool/schoolstartfaq.htm>>.

<sup>427</sup> Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September 2007.

**Figure 6.3: Types of assistance with the cost of school uniforms provided by Victorian schools, by sector (%) (2007)**



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

Written submissions from schools also revealed a range of strategies for supporting families struggling to meet the cost of a school uniform. Swan Marsh Primary School assists families receiving the EMA by giving them the portion of the EMA that the school receives on their behalf:

I have also introduced to EMA families the option of receiving back the money received for them by the school if they redeem it towards a school uniform. All parents chose to do this.<sup>428</sup>

Galvin Park Secondary College also supports students through EMA credit arrangements,<sup>429</sup> while Tallangatta Secondary College sometimes supplies uniforms free of charge to families in need:

In exceptional circumstances, our school provides students with items of uniform at a reduced or no cost to ensure all students are in uniform. This is a local exemption process that is viewed as very supportive and acknowledges individual needs.<sup>430</sup>

Rowville Secondary College has a budget to support families in disadvantaged circumstances, administered by the Student Welfare Coordinators.<sup>431</sup> Similarly, Footscray City Primary School maintains a 'social action fund' to which parents are invited to make donations, which are then used to purchase uniforms and other necessities for students in need.<sup>432</sup> Croydon Community School, which does not have a uniform, also indicated that it supports struggling students through clothing donations:

Some of our students wear the same clothes every day, every week and the school provides donated clothing items on a regular basis to make sure that students can rotate clothing for washing purposes and in response to weather conditions.<sup>433</sup>

The Committee therefore found that even schools without uniforms are sometimes called on to provide financial support for student clothing.

The Committee found that the most common method of support is the provision of second-hand items of clothing, free of charge. This option is available to students

<sup>428</sup> Ms S. Porzig, Acting Principal, Swan Marsh Primary School, Written Submission, May 2007, p.1.

<sup>429</sup> Galvin Park Secondary College, Written Submission, June 2007, p.2.

<sup>430</sup> Tallangatta Secondary College School Council, Written Submission, June 2007, p.1.

<sup>431</sup> Rowville Secondary College School Council, Written Submission, June 2007, p.2.

<sup>432</sup> Footscray City Primary School, Written Submission, June 2007, p.1.

<sup>433</sup> Croydon Community School, Written Submission, June 2007, p.2.

in need in 61.1 per cent of schools.<sup>434</sup> However, Dr Mark Rose, Committee of Management, Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc, noted that this practice can stigmatise students if not implemented sensitively:

A smart school has a supply of uniforms which it can give under the table to people — indigenous and non-indigenous — who are in real need. After someone leaves the school that uniform is superfluous, so often they are re-donated back. Sometimes they are ill-fitting, and the last thing that any school would want to do is hear, 'You're wearing the dodgy uniform — you know, the one that was given to you'.<sup>435</sup>

The Victorian guidelines for dress codes and school uniform policies advise schools to exercise confidentiality and sensitivity in processing requests for uniform exemptions, including requests made on the grounds of financial difficulty.<sup>436</sup> The Committee believes that schools should exercise the same care in providing material support such as second-hand uniforms, to ensure that students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds are not singled out in the school community.

The Committee's survey found that the second most common option for supporting financially disadvantaged families is flexible payment schedules, available at 43.6 per cent of schools.<sup>437</sup> Open Family Australia and the Salvation Army both mentioned to the Committee that the beginning of the school year is a particularly trying time for low-income families:

Unfortunately Victoria is one of the few states, if not the only state, that does not provide textbooks for secondary students. With that being the first hurdle comes the other hurdles, particularly on top of Christmas when families have already been plunged into massive financial problems and, as I said, then the schoolbooks and then the school fees and the school uniforms all hitting at the one time. It really does become a major trauma.<sup>438</sup>

Schools are to be encouraged to be pro-active and commence the assessment and dialogue process with respect to student needs with both students and their families towards the end of each school year rather than waiting until the start of the new year.<sup>439</sup>

Flexible payment options may therefore be a viable option for schools to consider, so that families can spread the cost of purchasing a school uniform over time.

## State Schools' Relief Committee

Among government schools, the most commonly provided form of assistance is an application to the State Schools' Relief Committee (SSRC).<sup>440</sup> The SSRC was established in the early 1900s to assist families affected by bushfires and drought with the costs of education. Since 1940, the Education Department has funded its administration and staffing, while the funding provided by the SSRC to purchase school clothing comes from donations from schools, businesses, philanthropic trusts and individuals. The Committee heard one such example in a public hearing, with Mr Anthony Sterpin, Managing Director, PSW Pty Ltd, noting that the company makes a 'significant donation' annually to the SSRC.<sup>441</sup>

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<sup>434</sup> Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September 2007.

<sup>435</sup> Dr M. Rose, Committee of Management, Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 May 2007.

<sup>436</sup> Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2007, 'Student dress code', section 4.8 (updated May 2006), *Victorian Government Schools Reference Guide*, DEECD, Melbourne.

<sup>437</sup> Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September 2007.

<sup>438</sup> Mr L. Twentyman, Outreach Worker, Open Family Australia, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 4 June 2007, p.30.

<sup>439</sup> The Salvation Army, Melbourne Central Division, Written Submission, April 2007, p.2.

<sup>440</sup> Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September 2007.

<sup>441</sup> Mr A. Sterpin, Managing Director, PSW Pty Ltd, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 25 June 2007, p.6.

The SSRC provides assistance either through the direct provision of generic school uniform garments from its bulk stores, or through purchase authorisations to fixed limits for school-specific garments. The number of purchase authorisations made by the SSRC rose by 10.2 per cent between 2006 and 2007, while direct stock provision declined.<sup>442</sup> This shift in activity represents a significant increase in costs, as it is cheaper for the SSRC to provide clothing directly rather than to authorise purchases. The cost of purchase authorisations has also increased significantly. The average amount provided per applicant jumped by 17.7 per cent: from \$108.25 in 2006 to \$127.74 in 2007.<sup>443</sup>

The result of these trends is that the total assistance provided by the SSRC increased by 29.7 per cent, from \$363,749 in 2006, to \$471,677 in 2007.<sup>444</sup> In its written submission, the SSRC cited the following reasons for its increase in expenditure: a movement towards more specific and expensive clothing required by schools; changes in the procurement and distribution methods chosen by schools; and greater needs among families.<sup>445</sup> The SSRC is now concerned that costs are rising at a rate that will soon become unsustainable with current funding levels.<sup>446</sup>

Mr David Schmidt, Manager, State Schools' Relief Committee, suggested a number of ways in which the SSRC might increase its funding base. He indicated that secondary schools might improve their financial commitment, as primary schools currently make the more significant contribution.<sup>447</sup> He also suggested that other government agencies might support the SSRC in areas of policy overlap; for example, assistance from the Australian immigration department to ease the pressure on the SSRC from increased refugee populations in metropolitan areas.<sup>448</sup>

The importance of the SSRC was recognised in evidence from across all key groups in the school community, including the Association of School Councils in Victoria,<sup>449</sup> the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals,<sup>450</sup> Parents Victoria,<sup>451</sup> and the Victorian Student Representative Council.<sup>452</sup>

Nevertheless, the Committee also heard the view that the current level of support provided by the SSRC is not sufficient for those families who do apply for assistance. In a written submission, Pakenham Hills Primary School Council reported that it has difficulty accessing SSRC funds because families are sometimes unwilling or unable to cover the remainder of the cost of uniform items:

We have noted as a school that parents who have come in to access State Schools' Relief Uniform support are not even willing to pay their small share of the uniform cost through this avenue. Of the 10 families who wanted to access school uniforms through state school relief, only 2 were willing to pay the small contribution required of them.<sup>453</sup>

<sup>442</sup> The State Schools' Relief Committee reported to the Education and Training Committee that the number of purchase authorisations rose from 3,354 in 2006 to 3,695 in 2007.

<sup>443</sup> State Schools' Relief Committee, Written Submission, June 2007, p3.

<sup>444</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>445</sup> *ibid.*, pp.3-4.

<sup>446</sup> *ibid.*, p.6.

<sup>447</sup> Mr D. Schmidt, Manager, State Schools' Relief Committee, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 4 June 2007, p.6.

<sup>448</sup> *ibid.*, p4.

<sup>449</sup> Mr S. Franz-Ford, Chief Executive Officer, Association of School Councils in Victoria, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 April 2007, p.12.

<sup>450</sup> Mr B. Burgess, President, Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 April 2007, p.3.

<sup>451</sup> Ms G. McHardy, Executive Officer, Parents Victoria, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 April 2007, p.40.

<sup>452</sup> Victorian Student Representative Council, Written Submission, June 2007, p.2.

<sup>453</sup> Pakenham Hills Primary School Council, Written Submission, May 2007, p.1.

In a public hearing, Ms Gail McHardy, Executive Officer, Parents Victoria, also provided an example where SSRC funding had been insufficient to assist a family in need:

...what they can afford to resource is very difficult... I have an example of a young girl in senior high school who was in the same calliper shoes for about four, five years. It was a bit worrying but her mother couldn't afford to change them. When we made an application it was knocked back. In fact that money would have only bought part of the shoe.<sup>454</sup>

The Committee was provided with a recent newsletter from Whittlesea Secondary College, which shows how the school introduced changes to the eligibility criteria on applications to the SSRC, to cope with high demand for its services:

Due to extremely high demand on new uniform from State School's Relief, we have found it necessary to review the manner in which families apply for uniform consideration. To be eligible for assistance, you MUST be getting EMA allowance and be on either a Health Care Card or hold a Pension Card. You must also be experiencing severe financial difficulties ie have one or both family members unemployed. All families requiring assistance with uniforms from State School's Relief will be required to make an appointment to see me to discuss their financial hardships. This must be done face-to-face and cannot be done over the phone. After consultation with our Principal, a decision will be made regarding application to State School's Relief<sup>455</sup>

A key recommendation made to the Committee by the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals was that the government financially support the SSRC, so that families in financial hardship might be more directly assisted.<sup>456</sup> Wangaratta High School Council made the same recommendation in its submission.<sup>457</sup>

The current level of use of the SSRC is an area that may warrant further analysis. A submission received from Parents Victoria voiced concern that some schools are taking advantage of the SSRC, ahead of other needier families.<sup>458</sup> However, Mr Schmidt did not share this concern:

That is important for you to know, that schools have complied, they are not overusing us, and there is considerable evidence that schools underuse us...Certainly the relief committee believes many worthy cases are not being adequately attended to.<sup>459</sup>

Mr Schmidt went on to suggest that schools may be holding back from submitting SSRC applications because of concern for its sustainability:

...two principals that I spoke to just before coming here today...were saying, 'No, we do not make applications because we do not want to overuse you. We have many needy families'. I asked them, 'How do you deal with those families?'. And they said, 'We are frightened if we start with the State Schools Relief Committee, people will know it, and then there will be floodgates'.<sup>460</sup>

Mr Anton Leschen from the Smith Family described a similar example:

The school has access to the Geelong Community Foundation, which offers \$50 clothing vouchers. The school uses this fund to supply Target vouchers for shoes rather than put pressure on the State School Relief Fund, which is under great stress.<sup>461</sup>

The Committee found that around 22 percent of government schools (including some with high numbers of students receiving the EMA) do not make applications to the SSRC on behalf of their communities.<sup>462</sup> It therefore appears to the

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<sup>454</sup> Ms G. McHardy, Executive Officer, Parents Victoria, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 April 2007, pp.40-41.

<sup>455</sup> Whittlesea Secondary College Newsletter, 18 October 2006. Copy supplied by Ms B. Johns, Parent, Written Submission, May 2007.

<sup>456</sup> Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, Written Submission, April 2007, p.7.

<sup>457</sup> Wangaratta High School Council, Written Submission, June 2007, p.1.

<sup>458</sup> Parents Victoria, Written Submission, June 2007, p.3.

<sup>459</sup> Mr D. Schmidt, Manager, State Schools' Relief Committee, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 4 June 2007, p.5.

<sup>460</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>461</sup> Mr A. Leschen, Regional Programs Manager, The Smith Family, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 May 2007, p.3.

<sup>462</sup> Education and Training Committee, *Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools Survey*, August – September 2007.

Committee that even the recently increased demands on SSRC services do not represent the full extent of demand for assistance with the cost of school uniforms in Victorian government schools.

The Committee joins with contributors to this inquiry in commending the efforts of the SSRC to support Victorian students experiencing financial hardship. At the same time, the Committee acknowledges that demand for support with school uniform costs in government schools exceeds what the SSRC is currently able to provide. Given the Committee's view that the Victorian Government has a responsibility to support all students in need with reasonable costs of purchasing a school uniform, the Committee recommends that the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development investigate ways in which it might further support the activities of the State Schools' Relief Committee.

The Committee also notes that as the SSRC was established to serve the government school sector, it does not provide financial assistance to Victorian students in the non-government sector. Few Catholic or independent schools report having a general school fund for offering financial support to assist with the costs of school uniforms.<sup>463</sup> These schools either employ alternative forms of support, especially the provision of second-hand items free of charge, or do not offer support to their students at all. As indicated above, many such schools have student populations from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, so may not experience demand for financial assistance. Nevertheless, the Committee is aware that many schools in both the Catholic and independent sectors do have significant populations of students in need. The Committee therefore urges the relevant non-government education authorities to investigate options for system-wide support for students needing financial assistance with the cost of school uniforms. A model similar to the SSRC, whereby schools donate to a managed fund, may be viable in other sectors as well.

**Recommendation 6.2:** That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development investigate strategies to ensure the continuation and possible expansion of the activities of the State Schools' Relief Committee, and/or alternative models for financial support for assistance with school uniforms.

**Recommendation 6.3:** That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development require schools to include in their dress codes and school uniform policies information about the options available for low-income families to access financial support, to help them meet the costs of school clothing.

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## Conclusion

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The Committee found that the design of a school uniform can play an important role in representing the culture and image of a school. For some schools, especially in the independent sector, expensive, traditional uniforms are an important demonstration of the status the school wishes to portray. For many schools, however, expensive uniform items are regarded as both unnecessary and undesirable, and uniforms are chosen with an emphasis on low cost and practical maintenance.

The Committee also notes that the cost of a school uniform has a significant financial impact on many families, especially those in disadvantaged circumstances. It is the Committee's view that because wearing a uniform constitutes an important aspect of participation in school life in the majority of Victorian schools, no student should be denied access to a school uniform because of their financial situation. Schools should therefore be required to give careful consideration to all associated costs and their likely impact on the school community, when making decisions about their dress codes and school uniform

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<sup>463</sup> *ibid.*

policies. Additionally, the Victorian Government should play a direct role in assisting needy families with reasonable costs associated with purchasing a school uniform. The Committee also believes that dress codes and school uniform policies should include advice to students and their families about how to access appropriate support with meeting the costs of school clothing.