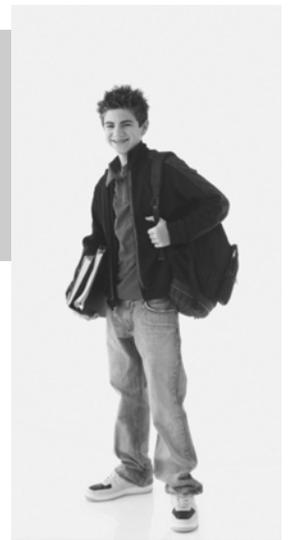


Chapter 9:

Conclusion



This report demonstrates that developing a dress code or school uniform policy requires schools to address a wide variety of important issues. The dress code or school uniform policy itself may cover matters such as student health and safety, anti-discrimination, enforcement issues and the processes of community consultation. School uniform policies also require schools to consider issues relating to pricing, purchasing and distribution arrangements for uniform items. These decisions can have significant consequences for the whole school community.

The Committee notes that the current guidelines published by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development provide a useful overview of many of the issues schools need to consider in developing and reviewing their dress codes and uniform policies. However, the Committee found that many dress codes and school uniform policies in Victorian schools currently address only some of these issues, and sometimes go no further than setting out the requisite colour or style of students' clothing. The Committee therefore believes that it is necessary to provide schools and their communities with clearer and more comprehensive guidelines, to ensure that all essential issues are considered. Most of the recommendations in this report describe the areas in which the Committee believes the current departmental guidelines should be revised or expanded.

In making these recommendations, the Committee recognises the Department's preference for providing advice and information to schools, rather than requirements and directions, as noted in its guidance for School Councils:

The directions given to schools are kept to a minimum with the preference being to issue guidelines for schools enabling them to make informed decisions.⁶⁴⁸

Nevertheless, a consistent theme throughout this inquiry has been that the issues around dress codes and school uniform policies are deceptively complex. While it may be desirable to allow schools to make decisions on each of these issues themselves, this also imposes the burden of researching each issue and assessing the merits of the different options available. In many cases, it may therefore be desirable for the Department to provide schools with recommendations or best practice examples that they may follow if they wish. The Committee believes that this will also encourage any schools that choose alternative options to give due consideration to their reasons for doing so.

The Committee further notes that many areas of school administration are currently supported by standardised templates. In addition to more extensive guidelines, the Committee therefore recommends that the Department develop a sample or pro forma dress code or school uniform policy, for schools to use as a basis for developing their own policies in consultation with their communities. The template should list all the issues that schools and communities need to address within the policy, based on departmental guidelines revised in accordance with the recommendations in this report. The Committee suggests that such a template may include, but should not be limited to, the following areas:

⁶⁴⁸ Department of Education, Employment and Training 2001, *Making the Partnership Work: Roles and Responsibilities*, Office for School Education, DEET, Melbourne, p. 14.

1. Rationale

- Purpose and objectives of the dress code or school uniform policy

2. General Information

- Nature of the uniform: compulsory, optional or no uniform
- Nature of items in the uniform
- Students to whom the policy applies
- Times and areas in which the policy applies
- Any requirements for other aspects of student appearance
- Any expectations regarding clothing or appearance for school staff

3. Health and Safety

- Sun protection policy
- Clothing options for different weather conditions
- Statement addressing student mental health and wellbeing
- Clothing options for structured and unstructured physical activity
- Statement addressing student security
- Any special safety requirements for general school activities or specific classes

4. Anti-discrimination

- Statement addressing gender equality
- Statement addressing equality between age groups
- Any special accommodations for particular physical attributes, disabilities, or health conditions
- Any special accommodations for items with religious or cultural significance
- Processes for responding to philosophical or conscientious objections
- Any additional accommodations specific to local conditions

5. Enforcement and Sanctions

- Expectations regarding enforcement
- Hierarchy of sanctions which may be applied

6. Costs

- Statement addressing pricing for uniform items
- Assistance available to families in financial difficulty

7. Procurement and Distribution

- Statement addressing procurement process
- Any standards of importance to the school community for materials or manufacturing
- Outlets available for purchasing uniform items

8. Consultation and Review

- Review cycle
- Review process
- Phasing-in time for changes
- Process for requesting and considering exemptions/variations
- Process for communicating uniform policy to the school community

The Committee acknowledges that many of the items listed above may be addressed elsewhere in a school's suite of policies, such as the Student Code of Conduct or Health and Safety policy. In such cases, a cross-reference to another school policy may be sufficient to indicate that the item has been considered by the school and its community. The Committee also acknowledges that some items may only be relevant to schools that choose to have a specific school uniform.

The Committee is not suggesting that departmental ratification be required for a dress code or school uniform policy, as is the case in the Northern Territory.⁶⁴⁹ Instead, the template and associated guidelines should be regarded as resources to assist schools and their communities to address key issues and implement best practice. Nevertheless, where a school is able to demonstrate appropriate consideration of the issues outlined in the template and guidelines, the Committee believes that they should receive the Department's full support for their policy's implementation. The Committee notes that a similar standard is set out in guidelines for dress codes and school uniform policies by the NSW Department for Education and Training:

Principals who operate within the policy framework will be supported by the Department in the implementation of this policy.⁶⁵⁰

The Committee also recommends that the Department make information available to parents and other members of school communities, clarifying the rights and responsibilities of everyone involved in the development, review and implementation of a dress code or school uniform policy.

The Committee would like to emphasise that the measures proposed above are intended to support the diversity currently evident in dress codes and school uniforms in Victorian schools. The Committee believes that improving the structural consistency of dress codes and school uniform policies will not unduly compromise the ability of schools to reflect the values and preferences of their communities in their standards for student clothing. However, as shown in the previous chapters, the development of a comprehensive dress code or school uniform policy, and the resolution of any disputes that may arise, can represent a significant investment of time and resources for schools. In the Committee's view, clearer and more consistent departmental guidelines and supporting resources will serve to reduce this burden on schools, and help staff, students and communities focus instead on the core business of teaching and learning.

Recommendation 9.1: That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development create a template for schools to use in the development and review of their dress codes and school uniform policies, covering all major issues raised in this inquiry.

Recommendation 9.2: That in the event of any disputes regarding dress codes or school uniform policies, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development give full support to any school that can demonstrate that they have given appropriate consideration to all issues contained in the Department's template for dress codes and school uniform policies and associated guidelines.

Recommendation 9.3: That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development ensure that information regarding rights, responsibilities and processes relating to the implementation of a dress code or school uniform policy is available to all members of school communities.

Adopted by the Education and Training Committee

Committee Room, Parliament House

East Melbourne 3002

27 November 2007

⁶⁴⁹ Department of Employment, Education and Training (Northern Territory) 2007, *Policy SM-01.7: Compulsory School Uniforms T-9*, July 2007, DEET, Darwin, p.1.

⁶⁵⁰ Department of Education and Training (New South Wales) 2004, *School Uniform Policy*, Policy PD/2004/0025/V001, August 2004, DET, Sydney.

