



# Education and Training Committee

## Final Report

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

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Inquiry into Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools

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# Education and Training Committee

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# Chair's Foreword

I am pleased to present the report of the Education and Training Committee on its Inquiry into Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools. As a former teacher, I am aware that issues relating to school uniforms are relatively low level when compared to the many other important issues surrounding schools' core business of teaching and learning. This inquiry has nevertheless attracted an unprecedented level of interest, enabling the Committee to develop its relationship with a broad range of school communities and other education stakeholders. The inquiry received the highest number of written submissions ever made to an inquiry conducted by this Committee, as well as having a very high number of participants in public hearings. The significant level of interest in this inquiry was supported by the innovative research methods employed by the Committee. These included a survey of over 600 Victorian schools and a public hearing specifically for school students, at which 125 primary and secondary students from around Victoria discussed a mock 'School Uniform Bill' in the parliamentary chambers.

This inquiry has also differed from previous inquiries undertaken by the Committee in so far as its focus has largely been away from the classroom. Instead, the inquiry has focused more on day-to-day aspects of school life not directly relating to student learning. Among the important issues raised in the inquiry were health and safety considerations, the prevention of discrimination and the building of positive relationships between schools and their communities. Perhaps it is for this reason that the inquiry has attracted evidence from such a diverse range of stakeholders, including schools, parents, students, industry representatives and government and non-government organisations. Their valuable input has clearly demonstrated that while the core business of education may centre on teachers and students, many other stakeholders who are not directly involved in the education process also have interests in schools.

The Committee found that dress codes and school uniform policies can have a significant impact on the relationship between schools and their communities. Discussions regarding dress codes or school uniforms provide a readily accessible forum for cooperation between stakeholders, which may also help establish a foundation for schools and communities to work together on more complex educational issues. On the other hand, the Committee found that dress codes and school uniforms can sometimes become the subject of bitter disputes. The Committee believes that the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has a key role to play in providing both guidance and mediation, to ensure that dress codes and school uniforms engender cooperation rather than conflict between schools and their communities.

The key finding to emerge in the Committee's investigations was that one size definitely does not fit all when it comes to dress codes and school uniforms. Parents, students, teachers and others often have passionate views about dress codes and school uniforms, which also reflect deeper perspectives on schooling and education. The Committee heard, for example, that requiring students to wear a school uniform can help promote school pride and encourage students to be disciplined, responsible members of the school community. On the other hand, the Committee heard that some schools believe that the absence of a uniform fosters the creativity and self-expression that they regard as essential to success in education. Whatever their values and preferences, the Committee found that Victorian school communities typically hold strong views on student dress and appearance and the Committee therefore supports their right to choose the most appropriate dress codes or school uniform policies.

The Committee would like to extend its sincere gratitude to the many contributors who made written submissions and appeared before the Committee during public

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hearings. In particular, the Committee recognises the remarkable contributions of the students from the 32 schools who participated in public hearings for this inquiry. The Committee acknowledges that their participation involved significant time and effort both from students and teachers, and commends all participants on the high quality of their evidence.

In addition, I would like to personally thank the members of the Committee for their time, energy and interest throughout this inquiry. Members of the Committee would also like to extend their thanks to the Committee staff for their invaluable assistance. Their dedication, skills and hard work are reflected in the success of the Committee's evidence-gathering processes and the quality of the final report.

I trust that the recommendations made in this report will provide schools with the sense of direction they need to address a range of contemporary issues, and ensure that their dress codes and school uniform policies meet the needs of their communities.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Geoff Howard". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'G'.

**Geoff Howard MP**  
**Chair**

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# Executive Summary

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

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The environment in which today's schools are developing their dress codes and school uniform policies is complex and changing. A growing emphasis on diversity in the classroom and student-centred learning approaches has challenged the traditional notions of conformity that school uniforms are often seen to embody. At the same time, education is becoming more competitive, placing pressure on schools to demonstrate high standards and develop a brand or image that will distinguish them in the educational market. In this context, the Education and Training Committee was charged with conducting an inquiry into dress codes and school uniforms in Victorian schools.

Evidence to this inquiry was received over the period March 2007 to October 2007, using a variety of methods. Oral evidence was received in public hearings from primary and secondary students; teachers; parents; educational bodies in the government and non-government sectors; clothing and textile industry and union representatives; social welfare organisations; and organisations representing Victoria's culturally and linguistically diverse communities. The Committee heard evidence from 181 witnesses in total, including 125 primary and secondary school students who gathered at Parliament House to debate the mock 'School Uniform Bill 2007', prepared by the Committee specifically for the event.

In addition, the Committee received a substantial body of written evidence from schools and other members of the stakeholder groups listed above, including 125 written submissions and a significant amount of supplementary written material. Further evidence was collected through an online survey completed by nearly 600 Victorian school principals from the Catholic, government and independent sectors. Additionally, the Committee conducted an in-depth analysis of 60 current Victorian school uniform policies and price lists, from across the three school sectors.

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## Chapter 2: Current Policies and Practices

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A key question raised in this inquiry was whether it is desirable for Victorian schools to have uniforms. It became clear early in the inquiry that there is widespread agreement that choices about school uniforms should continue to be made by individual schools and their communities. The Committee found that the views of school communities both for and against the wearing of school uniforms are equally strong. For this reason, the Committee does not believe it is appropriate to introduce a general requirement that school uniforms should be worn in Victorian schools.

Although various jurisdictions in Australia have considered making school uniforms compulsory over recent years, only the Northern Territory has so far introduced such a policy. However, most education departments in Australia do provide some guidelines to assist schools when developing and implementing their dress codes and school uniform policies. Following consultation in relation to the *Education Act* 2006, Queensland is the only jurisdiction in which detailed guidelines around school uniforms have been legislated. The Committee does not view such legislation as necessary in Victoria at this point in time, but does believe there is the need for more detailed guidance to schools on a range of matters associated with dress codes and school uniforms.

The Committee found that 72.8 per cent of Victorian schools have a 'full' compulsory school uniform, which requires students to wear summer and winter uniforms specified by the school. A further 12.4 per cent of schools have a 'basic'

compulsory uniform (limited specifications for clothing such as wearing school colours or some items with a school logo), while 7.2 per cent of schools have an optional uniform and 0.5 per cent have an 'occasional' uniform. General dress codes, which specify only broad requirements about student clothing, are in place in 2.9 per cent of schools, while 2.8 per cent have no uniform and 1.4 per cent describe their policy as 'other'. Government schools are the least likely to have a full compulsory uniform (55.3%), but most likely to have either a 'basic' compulsory uniform (23.8%) or optional uniform (14.7%).

Schools typically include a range of general requirements in their dress codes or school uniform policies. The Committee found that these include: the items to be included in the uniform (if any); when the uniform should be worn; how the uniform should be worn; and to which students it applies. The Committee found significant variations across all of these elements within Victorian school uniform policies. In addition, most schools make rules about other aspects of student appearance, including hair styles, facial hair, jewellery, body and facial piercings and make-up. Facial and body piercings proved to be the most controversial aspect of student appearance, as they are increasingly commonplace in Australian society but often incompatible with the values that schools wish to reflect in their uniform policies.

Another contentious issue raised in the inquiry was whether dress codes and school uniform policies should also apply to teachers and other school staff. The Committee found that 43.8 per cent of Victorian schools (including 27.1% of government schools) have some form of written dress code for their staff, either setting out general or specific standards of dress. Although the Committee did not consider staff dress codes in detail, it notes that the appearance of school staff may have an influence on students, and believes that many of the issues covered by the inquiry are relevant to dress codes or uniforms for both students and staff. The Committee therefore recommends that schools consider staff dress and appearance when developing and reviewing their dress codes and uniform policies.

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### **Chapter 3: Health and Safety**

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The issue of how student health, safety and wellbeing can and should be reflected in dress codes and school uniform policies was an important consideration during this inquiry. 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.

The Committee found that both schools with and without uniforms have a range of rules relating to general health and safety standards for school clothing, footwear and other aspects of student appearance such as hair and jewellery. Many schools also report additional health and safety standards for specific classes, including science and technology-related classes and physical education.

The Committee found that one of the most direct ways in which dress codes and school uniforms can support student health and wellbeing is through sun protection. The Committee believes sun protection is of such importance that all Victorian schools should be required to include a statement addressing sun protection in their dress codes or school uniform policies. This should include providing all students with an option or requirement to wear a sun protective hat, as well as appropriate standards relating to sun protective clothing and sunglasses.

On the other hand, the Committee was surprised to hear that some school uniform policies do not incorporate items of clothing that offer sufficient warmth or other protection from the elements during winter. The Committee therefore suggests that schools be flexible in their enforcement of dress codes and uniform policies in times of extreme weather, and provide sufficient options to ensure that students can be comfortable in all weather conditions.

Given current community concern about growing levels of childhood obesity, the potential for school uniforms to either encourage or inhibit physical activity was of

particular interest to the Committee. The Committee believes that all schools should carefully consider how their school uniform policies can contribute to increased physical activity among students, both during school hours and while travelling to and from school. In particular, the Committee believes that schools should include non-restrictive clothing options in their uniforms, or allow students to change into appropriate clothing and footwear for breaks or active travel between home and school.

The Committee heard a range of views regarding the potential influence of school uniforms on student mental health and wellbeing. Some of the most frequently cited benefits of having a school uniform were the sense of belonging it engenders in the school community; student pride; and higher self-esteem. Many submissions also suggested that school uniforms can remove peer pressure to follow the latest fashion trends and reduce teasing or bullying among students. On the other hand, school communities without uniforms argued that students build confidence and a positive self-image by being challenged to make choices about their personal presentation. They also dismissed any concerns that their students are at increased risk of competitive dressing or bullying.

Other issues considered by the Committee with respect to health and safety included: broader issues associated with student security; health and safety issues associated with body and facial piercings; risks posed by cords and chin straps on hats and other items of clothing; and the promotion of spinal health through the use of appropriate school bags. Given the importance of student health and safety, the Committee makes a number of recommendations relating to further guidelines that may be given to schools to help them consider these issues.

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## **Chapter 4: Anti-discrimination Issues**

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One of the most complex issues considered by the Committee during this inquiry was that of anti-discrimination. Although schools have a legal obligation to avoid discrimination, the *Equal Opportunity Act 1995* provides a specific exception to enable educational authorities to set 'reasonable' standards of dress, appearance and behaviour for students. In relation to a school, a standard is taken to be 'reasonable' if the school has taken into account the views of the school community in setting the standard.

Furthermore, all Victorian government schools are also now required to comply with the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*. The Charter provides for a number of rights relating to freedom of thought, expression, religion and culture. Again, however, these rights may be subject to 'such reasonable limits as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society'. The Committee heard from the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission that considerable uncertainty still exists about how such laws may be applied in practice.

The Committee believes that all Victorian schools should seek to ensure that their dress codes and school uniform policies are free from direct and indirect discrimination. This is to both mitigate any legal risk and to promote values of diversity, equity and respect in their communities. Given the legal complexities, however, the Committee recognises that some schools may need additional guidance to ensure they meet the requirements of current anti-discrimination legislation. This is evidenced by various complaints regarding discrimination in dress codes and uniform policies that have been referred to education and legal authorities throughout Australia. Specific areas to be covered by improved guidelines should include: gender and gender identity; age; physical attributes; religion, ethnicity and culture; and philosophical or conscientious objections.

The Committee received a substantial body of evidence addressing the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse communities, particularly with respect to clothing and other items with religious significance for the wearer. The two items most frequently mentioned throughout the inquiry were the hijab (Islamic headscarf) and the kirpan (Sikh ceremonial sword). The Committee found the prevailing view to be

that Victorian schools should accommodate clothing and other items with religious significance. The Committee therefore supports the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's current advice to schools, that exemptions to dress codes and school uniform policies on religious grounds should be permitted, but recommends that the Department's advice be supplemented by more detailed guidelines and examples of best practice.

Another issue arising during the inquiry was the potential for a dress code or school uniform policy to give rise to a philosophical or conscientious objection. The Committee found that most Victorian school principals are unlikely to consider philosophical objections as legitimate grounds for exemption from a dress code or school uniform policy. Nevertheless, the Committee found evidence to suggest that schools may have a legal obligation to give consideration to such objections.

In essence, the Committee recognises the rights of students and their families to pursue genuine philosophical or conscientious objections to a dress code or school uniform policy. At the same time, parents need to consider the potential negative impacts on their children's relationship with the school and their peers when pursuing exemptions from a school uniform policy based on a philosophical objection. The Committee also believes that clearer departmental guidelines may help to minimise the negative effects for parties involved in such disputes in the future.

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## **Chapter 5: Enforcement and Sanctions**

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The enforcement of dress codes and school uniform policies in Victorian schools proved to be another contentious issue during this inquiry. Many government schools reported that they do not currently have sufficient power to enforce their dress codes and school uniform policies. On the other hand, the Committee also heard arguments that strict enforcement is inappropriate for dress codes and school uniform policies, and that enforcement should be the subject of ongoing negotiation between schools, students and their communities.

The Committee's survey found that enforcement of the school dress code or uniform policy is described as 'strict' in 62.3 per cent of Victorian schools, 'variable' in 25.1 per cent of schools and 'lenient' in 4.9 per cent of schools. Schools in the Catholic and independent sectors are more likely to describe the enforcement of their school uniform policies as 'strict', while government schools are more likely to describe their level of enforcement as 'variable' or 'lenient'. Enforcement is likely to be more strict in secondary schools than in primary schools. The Committee accepts that attitudes to enforcement may vary among schools, but believes that schools and communities should establish shared standards for the enforcement of a dress code or uniform policy, to ensure that expectations regarding compliance within a school are as consistent as possible.

The Committee received conflicting evidence about how the enforcement of a dress code or school uniform policy may affect the school environment. Some witnesses and submissions suggested that enforcement of a dress code is time-consuming, particularly for minor infringements, and can have a negative effect on teacher-student relationships. On the other hand, other schools suggested that their school uniforms create a more disciplined learning environment, thereby reducing the time spent on other behavioural issues.

The Committee found that schools apply a wide range of sanctions in the enforcement of their dress codes and school uniform policies. For minor infringements, 89.5 per cent of schools use 'gentle reminders or encouragement' to help get students into correct uniform. They may also ask the student to remove the non-compliant item and, sometimes, replace it with a compliant item supplied by the school. For serious infringements of a dress code or school uniform policy, the most commonly applied sanctions are sending a letter to parents (64.6%) and holding a meeting with parents and the student (60.5%). One of the challenges faced by schools is how to enforce compliance where the breach is caused, either deliberately or inadvertently, by parents rather than students themselves.

An even more contentious issue is whether students should be excluded from learning opportunities, or even suspended, for failing to comply with a school uniform policy. While the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development currently advises against such practices, the Committee found that 33.6 per cent of schools with secondary students are prepared to suspend students for serious breaches of the dress code or school uniform policy. This includes 26.4 per cent of Victorian government schools with secondary students. Furthermore, 74.9 per cent of schools with secondary students would send students who breach the dress code or uniform policy home to change. The Committee found that 59.4 per cent of schools would ask a student not return to school until they are wearing the correct uniform.

Most education departments in Australia advise schools against excluding students from classes for breaches of their dress codes or school uniform policies. However, the Committee notes that the UK Department for Children, Schools and Families allows student exclusion and suspension where breaches of the school uniform policy are persistent and defiant. The Committee recommends that the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development update its policies to reflect the sanctions that may be imposed on students for infringements of the school uniform policy and the circumstances in which they may apply, including various forms of exclusion as a last resort.

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## **Chapter 6: Costs**

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As the education environment has become more competitive, student dress and appearance has become an important aspect of how schools present themselves to the community. The Committee heard that some schools have felt increasing pressure to adopt more 'traditional' and expensive school uniforms, to put them on equal footing with their more 'prestigious' competitors. Other schools reported pressure to reduce the cost of their school uniforms to a level that is attractive to parents from their local communities.

Both schools with and without uniforms argued that there are cost benefits associated with their approach to student clothing. Schools with a uniform typically argued that it eases financial pressure on parents, by removing the need to buy expensive fashion clothing for their children. School uniforms were also often described as better quality and more durable than fashion garments of comparable cost. On the other hand, schools without uniforms argue that casual clothing must be purchased for weekend and holiday wear anyway, and that wearing this clothing to school maximises its use. Such schools also argued that their uniform-free policy lessens students' interest in expensive brands and competitive dressing. The Committee therefore concludes that neither a school uniform nor casual clothing is necessarily cheaper, but that it depends on the nature of the garments purchased.

The Committee undertook an in-depth analysis of the costs of 60 girls and boys uniforms in a random sample of Victorian primary and secondary schools, across all sectors and metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. Taking into account only a single set of basic, compulsory school uniform items (excluding footwear), the Committee found that the total average cost of outfitting a primary school student for the year is around \$380 for girls and \$340 for boys. For secondary students, the average minimum cost of a school uniform for the year is around \$665 for girls and \$590 for boys. The Committee notes, however, that the addition of footwear, duplicate purchases, and additional optional or compulsory items will mean that the real costs of outfitting Victorian students is usually much higher. The Committee found that school uniform costs vary significantly across school sectors, with schools in the independent sector typically having the most expensive school uniforms.

Given the significant costs of purchasing school clothing, the Committee believes that all Victorian schools, particularly those in the government sector, have a responsibility to ensure that the cost of a school uniform is set at a level that is

affordable to the members of their school communities. In particular, schools should take care in selecting the items to be included in their uniforms, as well as any design decisions that will add to the cost. Two of the items that attracted substantial comment throughout the inquiry were school blazers and compulsory school logos. The Committee found that government schools are increasingly incorporating these items into their school uniform designs in order to improve their public image.

In addition to the obligation on government schools to keep the costs of school uniforms reasonable, the Committee heard that both schools and the Victorian Government have a responsibility to provide financial support to help needy families meet the cost of a school uniform. The Committee notes current mechanisms for assisting families with the cost of uniforms, including the Educational Maintenance Allowance, School Start bonus and, for government school students, support through the State Schools' Relief Committee. The Committee recommends that the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development review these mechanisms and investigate strategies to support the activities of the State Schools' Relief Committee, as well as potential alternative models for financial support for the purchase of school uniforms.

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## **Chapter 7: Purchasing and Distribution**

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If schools choose to adopt a uniform policy that includes specific garments or other items, they must make arrangements for the supply and distribution of those items. This requires schools to make potentially complex business decisions that may affect all members of their school community.

Industry trends over the last decade have resulted in an increasing number of school uniforms being manufactured overseas. The Committee notes the importance of local or Australian materials and manufacturing to many schools and school uniform suppliers. However, the Committee also notes that some schools will prefer to access overseas alternatives due to cost considerations. The Committee therefore believes that the choice of Australian made school uniforms should remain at a school community level, but that information should be made readily available about the origin of school uniform materials and products.

The Committee found that a number of schools in all sectors currently set standards for the procurement of their school uniforms relating to FairWear (ethical manufacturing) and sustainable or environmentally friendly manufacturing. Organisations representing the interests of workers in the industry called for schools to require manufacturers to demonstrate that they provide ethical wages and conditions, in accordance with relevant legislation and industry awards. The Committee acknowledges the significant interest in these issues among Victorian schools, and notes that relevant information is available through industry and community organisations to support schools in discussions with their communities and uniform suppliers.

The Committee heard that schools must give consideration to a wide range of complex business issues when making arrangements for school uniform procurement. These include tendering processes, licensing agreements, legal requirements and the advantages or disadvantages of using single and multiple suppliers. The Committee therefore supports the recommendation of the Council of Textile and Fashion Industries of Australia, in suggesting that government and industry bodies work together to develop resources for schools on effective school uniform purchasing processes.

Schools with uniforms must also determine the most cost-effective method for distributing their uniform items to students and families. Common arrangements include an on-site school uniform shop staffed by volunteers, or an off-site commercial retail outlet. A growing number of schools now also outsource the management of their on-site school uniform shops to third-party suppliers. The Committee heard that each model may have certain advantages, either through allowing schools to maintain control of the distribution process or through utilising

industry-specific knowledge and skills from external sources. At the same time, each model can have certain disadvantages. The Committee heard that selling school uniforms through off-site outlets may be more expensive due to 'commercial realities', whereas school-run uniform shops can also be expensive due to inefficiencies in stock management. The Committee therefore recommends that the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development work with industry to provide advice about the various school uniform distribution models available, including detailed advice on managing a school uniform shop.

The Committee found that some Victorian schools make a profit on the sale of their uniform items. The Committee heard various arguments both for and against schools using uniform sales as a fundraising opportunity, and recognises that profit on school uniform sales is a multifaceted issue. The issue proved particularly complex for government schools, which are subject to certain obligations under Victorian policy and legislation, including a requirement to keep the price of 'essential education items' to a minimum. The Committee therefore recommends that the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development investigate the issues around profit on school uniform sales, and publish a clear policy statement on its position.

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## **Chapter 8: Consultation and Review**

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Like other school policies, dress codes and school uniform policies should be subject to review, to ensure that they remain responsive to the needs of the community. The Committee heard of a range of circumstances in which school communities might initiate a review of a dress code or school uniform policy, including changing demographics, commercial considerations, or direct requests from students or parents.

The Committee supports the view of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development that reviews of dress codes and school uniform policies should respond to any significant emerging needs or concerns. The Committee nevertheless notes that regular, formal reviews are also an important way of maintaining consistency and clarity in school uniform policies. In the Committee's view, dress codes and school uniform policies should be reviewed every three to five years.

While the Committee recognises the authority of the School Council to make final decisions relating to dress codes and school uniform policies, it notes that such decisions should involve substantial consideration of the views of the school community. The Committee found compelling reasons why community consultation may be especially important for dress codes and school uniform policies. First, the successful implementation of a dress code or school uniform policy requires cooperation not only from students, but also from their parents and carers. Dress codes and school uniform policies also provide a particularly valuable opportunity for schools to engage their communities on an accessible and universally relevant issue.

The Committee supports the view that consultation around dress codes and school uniforms should involve a wide range of stakeholders within the school community. A number of submissions emphasised that consultation regarding school dress codes and uniform policies should actively involve staff, students and parents. Additional groups identified as key stakeholders in school uniform consultations include local indigenous networks, minority ethnic and religious groups, and groups representing students with special needs or disabilities. A number of cases came to light where schools made significant efforts to consult and communicate widely with their communities in developing and reviewing their dress codes and uniform policies. The Committee recommends that such examples of best practice be incorporated into departmental guidelines.

The Committee notes that schools may sometimes be faced with instances where an individual parent or student has a special need relating to a dress code or school uniform that differs from the community consensus. In many such cases, it

may be appropriate for an exemption or variation to be negotiated. The Committee also notes, however, that there will be some circumstances in which an objection to a dress code or school uniform policy cannot be resolved at the local level, and may be referred to a system representative. The Committee found that while many such complaints are investigated when referred to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's regional offices, it is also common for complaints to be referred back to the school. The Committee therefore recommends that the Department review the services available for the mediation of school uniform-related disputes at a regional level.

The Committee also heard the view that any parents or students who disagree with a dress code or school uniform policy developed by the school community should seek another school. The Committee believes that for many parents and students joining a new school, a commitment to the dress code or school uniform policy may provide a way to demonstrate their willingness to support and participate in the school community. At the same time, the Committee believes that students and families have an obligation to comply with the rules and policies of the school in which they enrol. The Committee therefore accepts that schools may refer any families not willing to comply with the dress codes or uniform policies at the time of enrolment, to the Department for mediation.

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## **Chapter 9: Conclusion**

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This report demonstrates that developing a dress code or school uniform policy requires schools to address a wide variety of important issues. 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 student clothing. Most of the recommendations in this report describe the areas in which the Committee believes the current departmental guidelines should be revised or expanded, to ensure that all essential issues are considered. The Committee also 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.

Where a school is able to demonstrate appropriate consideration of the issues outlined in the template and guidelines, the Committee believes that it should receive full departmental support for the implementation of its dress code or school uniform policy. 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 and implementation of a dress code or school uniform policy. In the Committee's view, clearer and more consistent guidelines will facilitate the development of dress codes and school uniform policies and resolution of related disputes, and help schools, students and communities focus instead on the core business of teaching and learning.

# Recommendations

## Chapter 2: Current Policies and Practices

### RECOMMENDATION 2.1 (PAGE 16)

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

### RECOMMENDATION 2.2 (PAGE 23)

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

## Chapter 3: Health and Safety

### RECOMMENDATION 3.1 (PAGE 29)

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 (PAGE 29)

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.

### RECOMMENDATION 3.3 (PAGE 33)

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.

### RECOMMENDATION 3.4 (PAGE 35)

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.

### RECOMMENDATION 3.5 (PAGE 40)

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.

### RECOMMENDATION 3.6 (PAGE 41)

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.

### RECOMMENDATION 3.7 (PAGE 43)

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.

**RECOMMENDATION 3.8 (PAGE 44)**

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.

## **Chapter 4: Anti-discrimination Issues**

**RECOMMENDATION 4.1 (PAGE 48)**

That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, in partnership with the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, publish guidelines to clarify schools' legal obligations under the *Equal Opportunity Act 1995* and the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*. Such guidelines should include:

- detailed advice on legal requirements and how these are best implemented in practice;
- greater clarity regarding the legal rights and responsibilities of all members of the school community with respect to dress codes and school uniform policies; and
- specific examples of relevant case law to support general legal advice.

**RECOMMENDATION 4.2 (PAGE 51)**

That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development publish detailed guidelines relating to the prevention of gender discrimination in dress codes and school uniform policies, including guidelines for student appearance, and clothing choices for female students.

**RECOMMENDATION 4.3 (PAGE 59)**

That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development require all Victorian schools to accommodate clothing and other items with religious significance where appropriate, within a framework developed by the Department.

**RECOMMENDATION 4.4 (PAGE 61)**

That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development publish guidelines to assist schools with appropriate responses to conscientious or philosophical objections to their dress code or school uniform policy raised by members of their school community.

## **Chapter 5: Enforcement and Sanctions**

**RECOMMENDATION 5.1 (PAGE 66)**

That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development require schools to establish, in consultation with their communities, clear expectations regarding compliance with their dress codes and school uniform policies, to ensure that a consistent approach to enforcement is applied throughout the school.

**RECOMMENDATION 5.2 (PAGE 77)**

That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development publish detailed guidelines regarding acceptable sanctions for infringements of dress codes or school uniform policies. This should involve discussion of specific sanctions, including various forms of exclusion, and the circumstances in which they may be applied.

## Chapter 6: Costs

### RECOMMENDATION 6.1 (PAGE 92)

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.

### RECOMMENDATION 6.2 (PAGE 99)

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 (PAGE 99)

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.

## Chapter 7: Purchasing and Distribution

### RECOMMENDATION 7.1 (PAGE 110)

That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, in consultation with schools and industry representatives, assess the resources currently available to assist schools in their school uniform procurement arrangements, and publish additional guidelines as necessary.

### RECOMMENDATION 7.2 (PAGE 114)

That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, in consultation with relevant industry representatives, publish improved guidelines regarding distribution models for school uniform items, including detailed advice regarding the management of school uniform shops.

### RECOMMENDATION 7.3 (PAGE 116)

That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development publish guidelines stating its position on profit margins on the sale of school uniform items by government schools.

### RECOMMENDATION 7.4 (PAGE 11)

That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development require schools to publish profit and loss statements relating to the sales of school uniform items in their annual financial reporting.

## Chapter 8: Consultation and Review

### RECOMMENDATION 8.1 (PAGE 121)

That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development advise schools to review their dress codes and school uniform policies every three to five years in consultation with their communities, addressing all the issues covered in departmental guidelines.

### RECOMMENDATION 8.2 (PAGE 128)

That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development incorporate into its guidelines for dress codes and school uniform policies examples of best practice in consultation and communication between schools and their communities.

### RECOMMENDATION 8.3 (PAGE 129)

That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development publish further guidelines regarding best practice processes for considering exemptions to dress codes and school uniform policies, including a requirement that reasons for the refusal of an application for exemption be provided to the student and/or parent involved.

**RECOMMENDATION 8.4 (PAGE 132)**

That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development review the recent changes to complaints handling within the Department to ensure that they address concerns about the resolution of disputes relating to dress codes and school uniform policies.

## **Chapter 9: Conclusion**

**RECOMMENDATION 9.1 (PAGE 137)**

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 (PAGE 137)**

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 (PAGE 137)**

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.

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