

THE BENEFITS AND COSTS OF MANDATORY SCHOOL UNIFORMS

The benefits often touted for school uniforms are:

- it stops rich kids picking on poor kids
- it's cheaper than expensive clothes
- it engenders school spirit

I think these are all weak arguments:

- if a school has problems with bullies and peer pressure, these should be addressed as behavioural problems, rather than by trying to hide the differences between people
- uniform may be cheaper than expensive clothes but, in my experience, it's a lot more expensive than cheap clothes
- if you can only engender school spirit by forcing everyone into the same clothes, I don't think you're going to get a school spirit worth bottling anyway.

In my observation, those three reasons are only rationalisations for the real, emotional reasons that many parents have:

- they want the school to enforce dress standards so that they don't have to do it themselves
- if they can see teenagers visibly conforming to a set of arbitrary uniform rules, they feel confident that the teenagers are also conforming to important rules about education, drugs and sex.

Arguments against school uniform are:

- we should be treating students as individuals, we should respect their differences and we should give them the message that it's what they do that we care about, not what they wear. (Could it ever be a good idea to punish a child for wearing the wrong color socks?)
- if we want students to obey rules, we should give them sensible rules based on real-world consequences (eg: You have to wear solid shoes in woodwork classes to protect your feet. You have to complete your homework to prove that you know enough to pass.)
- teachers should be teaching, not wasting their time measuring hems and checking shoes.

I believe we should outlaw compulsory uniform in all state schools, and we should back this up with education for parents on how to say "No, I can't afford to buy you those jeans, and I won't let you wear a spaghetti strap top on a day with a high UV rating".

I like teenagers. I want them to express their individuality and develop their own dress sense. We should *expect* them to kick against rules so we should only give them rules we can defend. And I want us demonstrate that our respect for them is not conditional on the clothes they wear. Let's free Victoria's young people from the tyranny of compulsory school uniforms!