

Submission to Inquiry into Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools

Submitted by:

Jacinta Ann Covington
Brunswick VIC 3056

Date: 01/05/2007

1 Background and Qualifications

I am writing this submission in my capacity as a parent. I am the mother of two children, both attending government schools in Victoria. The elder is in Year 8 and the younger is in Grade 5. My professional training was in the field of Mathematical Logic.

I have not undertaken any research on topics related to school uniforms. I do not claim to present any rigorous scientific, statistical, sociological or psychological evidence on the benefits or harm of school uniforms. I am not aware of the existence of any such rigorous evidence for any benefits of school uniforms.

I would regard myself as a fairly well-informed member of our community, but not extraordinarily well-informed. I am too busy being involved with my children, their schools, their friends and my voluntary work all on top of full-time paid work, to be as well-informed as I otherwise would like to be. I do, however, manage to read the newspapers and listen to snatches on the radio. Therefore, I would expect that if there was evidence of benefits to school uniforms, then I would have heard of it.

I have strong personal beliefs on the topic of the wearing of uniform. I believe that it is morally harmful to wear a uniform. My views on the topic are based on personal experience, first- and second-hand experience of education systems in various parts of Australia and overseas, media reports and my personal system of ethics.

However, in this submission, I will not address the moral harm I believe is done by wearing a uniform. Moral effects, while just as important as physical, social and psychological issues, are much harder to quantify. I am always happy to discuss those over dinner with anyone who is interested. Here, I will concentrate on lack proof for any benefits and the “mandatory” aspect of “mandatory school uniform”.

2 Terms of Reference

The Terms of Reference of the Inquiry are:

- a. the benefits and costs of mandatory school uniforms
- b. the views of school communities about dress codes and school uniforms
- c. the most cost efficient and practical uniform procurement arrangements
- d. matters which need to be considered to ensure dress codes and uniform policies are consistent with anti-discrimination legislation and health promotion policies
- e. appropriate enforcement and sanctions
- f. appropriate exemption criteria and processes
- g. national and international trends

I will address each of these terms of reference separately.

2.1 Benefits and Costs

In this section, I will argue that there are no proven benefits to school uniforms, and that even if benefits were to be discovered in the future, that is not sufficient reason to have mandatory uniforms.

2.1.1 Existence of Benefits

In this section, I will argue that there are no proven benefits to school uniforms.

I start by briefly addressing the following questions:

- What types of benefits might there be for school uniforms?
- What proof might be considered adequate for any claimed benefits?

2.1.1.1 Types of Benefits

Some possible types of benefits are:

- Health and physical, including safety issues
- Psychological and developmental
- Emotional well-being
- Social harmony, reduced crime, etc.

Benefits might be to students, teachers, parents, Education Department managers, etc.

2.1.1.2 Types of Proof

Some possible types of proof are:

- Logical proof (utterly useless outside mathematics!)
- Controlled experiments
- Statistical correlation, backed by plausible causal hypothesis
- Statistical correlation, not backed by causal hypothesis
- Proof by counterexample

2.1.1.3 Proof that there are no Proven Benefits

I will offer a proof by counterexample that there are no benefits to school uniforms:

Proof: Denmark.

(There are lots of other places I could have chosen, but Denmark is the one I have most recently had contact with.)

If there is a provable benefit to school uniforms, then that benefit can be measured. Countries without school uniforms would be demonstrably disadvantaged. They are not. Q.E.D.

Of course, this argument is not completely rigorous. I have not provided proof that Danish society is no less well-adjusted than any other. That is left as an exercise for the reader.

2.1.2 Mandatory-ness

Consider the following propositions:

P: There are clear provable benefits to school uniform

Q: School uniform is mandatory

There are four cases to consider: $P \& Q$, $P \& \sim Q$, $\sim P \& Q$, $\sim P \& \sim Q$.

Note that I have not included “perceived benefits” as well as “provable benefits” in this analysis. Doing that would take even more of my time away from my children than I have already done this week. Sorry. They are the first priority.

2.1.2.1 Uniform Beneficial, Uniform Mandatory

This is analogous to all sorts of rules and laws that our society happily abides by. Generally, children and adults alike do not mind obeying rules when we know there is a reason for them.

If any benefits are discovered, here are some questions:

- How widely do the benefits apply? Only to particular age groups? All age groups?
- Do these benefits apply only to schoolchildren? Perhaps teachers should wear the uniform too. Or maybe all workplaces should have uniforms.
- Why have the uniform applying at the level of the school? Perhaps it would be better for each class to have its own uniform? Or perhaps all schools should have the same uniform? Perhaps we could apply uniform at the level of state or country – all Australians wearing exactly the same clothes.

2.1.2.2 Uniform Beneficial, Uniform not Mandatory

This is analogous to the situation with childhood immunisation. There is overwhelming scientific evidence that immunisation saves children’s lives. Some people do not accept this evidence, yet we do not force them to immunise their children. We use community education to convince people of the benefits.

2.1.2.3 Uniform not Beneficial, Uniform Mandatory

This is the worst of the scenarios.

Possible (I would claim probable) detrimental effects include:

- Young people lose trust in institutions.
- Young people become alienated.
- Young people see science, logic and reason as irrelevant, so will be discouraged from pursuing careers in maths, science and medicine. Evidence-based practice should start in the schools.

2.1.2.4 Uniform not Beneficial, Uniform not Mandatory

This situation is not harmful.

2.2 Views of School Communities

Question: What does it mean for a community to have a view?

Members of communities have views. A community may reach a broad consensus on an issue. Rarely does a community have a unanimous view.

My Opinion: A community is only justified in enforcing a majority view in cases where the actions of an individual or group adversely affect the rest of the community.

2.2.1 Dress Codes

- Health and Safety should inform dress codes.
- Dress codes do not need to be a list of compulsory and forbidden items. As child-care workers know, it is far better to have consequences. It is OK for a child to occasionally forget their hat, just they have to stay in the shelter shed all lunchtime. It's OK to wear silly clothes occasionally, but you shouldn't do cooking in a feather boa or play soccer in stilettos.

2.3 *Uniform Procurement Arrangements*

I don't have anything to say on this issue.

2.4 Anti-Discrimination Legislation and Health Promotion Policies

2.4.1 Health Issues in Dress

Some issues to address:

- Fire hazards
- Choking hazards
- Sperm Counts. Tight underwear.
- Thrush. Synthetic underwear, pantyhose.
- Sun exposure
- Footwear

Who should these rules apply to?

- Students?
- Teachers and other staff?
- Anyone entering school premises?

Maybe these issues are better addressed by community education campaigns rather than legislated rules.

2.5 Enforcement and Sanctions

Our son started Year 7 in 2006. We planned to enrol him in our local secondary college. When I enquired what I needed to do to register as a conscientious objector to providing my child with a uniform, I was informed by the school and the Education Department that:

- The school would not refuse to enrol my child.
- It was not illegal for me to refuse to provide him with a uniform.
- If he did not wear a uniform, he would be punished in various ways and eventually expelled.

This means that a 12-year-old child in Victoria can be punished by a school for the beliefs and actions or inactions of their parents. (Would that stand up to a legal challenge? Pity I don't have the time, money and energy to find out.)

Please:

- If you really want to enforce the wearing of school uniforms, pass a law that will punish parents if they don't comply. Don't punish a child for something over which they have no control.
- Better still, let teachers and parents save their energy for issues that really matter.

Note: I am happy to provide access to the correspondence between myself, the school and the Education Department to anyone who is interested. I have only hard copies of the letters sent by the school and the Ed. Dept., so am not enclosing them in this submission.

2.6 Exemption Criteria and Processes

I sincerely believe, on the basis of the knowledge and experience I have at this point in time, that it is wrong to wear a school uniform and that it is wrong for me to assist someone else to do something which I believe to be wrong. (I do not expect everyone else to share this belief, and I respect the rights of others to hold opposing views. I am also prepared to re-examine and amend these beliefs in the light of any new evidence I might be presented with.)

However, according to the Education Department, parents can dispute school rules on uniform on the basis of religious beliefs, but not on the basis of logic and reason. That is, I could have appealed the school's rejection of our family if my beliefs were based on "my imaginary friend in the sky says so", but that I could not make an appeal based on fact, reason and logic. (Are there any laws forbidding discrimination against atheists? I don't know of any.)

I request that:

- If schools are to be allowed to make school uniforms mandatory, then applications for exemption should consider the sincerity and/or reasonableness of the belief.

2.7 National and International Trends

- Please consider data and evidence, rather than trends and fashions.
- If, perchance, strong evidence is found that school uniforms are beneficial, we need to alert all those other misguided countries.