

3 May 2007

To the Right Honorable Member of Parliament
Mr Geoff Howard,
Chair, Education and Training Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
Melbourne East 3002

Dear Mr Howard,

I have recorded some of my and other council member's views below in response to your request for comment on the inquiry into school uniforms and dress codes for Victorian schools being conducted by the Standing committee on Education and Training.

I am informed by one of our senior school students and fellow council member, Nick Hudson, that Eltham High School (EHS) has been without a mandatory uniform since the 1960's, so I believe the school council is in quite an authoritative position to comment on the committee's inquiry as we represent a school with no day-to-day uniform.

The School Council firmly believes that the dress code for the school should be determined by through a collaborative approach involving students, staff, School Council, parents and other interested members of our learning community. This process should be a dynamic one, with the incorporation of new elements as appropriate, i.e. the relatively recent understanding of the need for 'Sun smart' dress, clarification on appropriate style tops, etc.

The code must adhere to the basic premise of the school being a workplace environment with all that entails in occupational health and safety terms and clearly must not allow clothing to be in any way offensive.

Having no uniform generally allows the teachers to concentrate on other more important issues rather than whether a particular student is wearing the correct colour socks or shirt. This means the day's first conversation between student and teacher can be on a positive note as opposed to an enforcement of an arbitrary rule.

The School Council strongly believes that uniforms should not be compulsory for all schools. Uniforms have their place in some instances, such as sporting teams, musical ensembles, debating groups and at other times, when it is to the benefit of all that participants be easily identifiable as a group associated with a particular team. Indeed EHS students wear uniforms during the activities listed above.

One of the most common reasons that we hear on why school uniforms are preferable is

based on cost. I know from my own experience that school uniforms in primary school are usually more expensive than a similar item bought without a school logo; you tend to go through a number of tops and pants, particularly with boys, as they tend to be destroyed fairly quickly. Those that aren't, are grown out of just as fast. Furthermore, without a set uniform the hassle of ensuring that uniforms are clean and ready, first thing in the morning, in the midst of making lunches, while trying to get the children to school on time and being on time for work yourself, is greatly reduced.

Members of the Eltham High School Council see no need for a compulsory school uniform across the State.

Young people, especially in their teens, are striving to come to terms with their place in the world. Enabling them to develop a responsibility for their own clothing and allowing them a relatively harmless outlet to express their own individuality, can only be positive for their growth and self esteem.

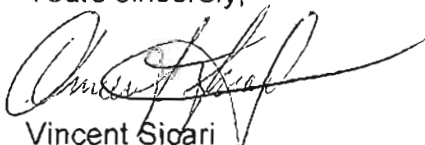
Another situation often put forward is; if there is no uniform, students would try to outdo one another with the latest fashion. The reality, again according to our school's experiences, confirmed by my own children and the observation of nearly forty years of students and teachers at EHS, is that this fashion competition quickly disappears and within a couple of weeks of starting Year 7, is forgotten.

With no set uniform, a lot of the other concerns raised in your letter simply do not apply; there is no need for exemption, no requirement for potentially upsetting sanctions, no need to have the burden (for parents and other volunteers) of running a school uniform shop and indeed little danger of running foul of anti-discrimination legislation as long as the initial dress code is logical, clearly explained and followed.

It is relevant as to what is in fact occurring in the workplace particularly in traditional areas where uniforms have been historically in place. Uniforms are now not as prevalent as they once were. Indeed, and by way of example, you would be hard pressed to find any standard uniform for nurses or other health workers in our biggest public hospitals, they have just about disappeared in the last ten years.

So while uniforms have their place in some team activities, we feel they should not be mandatory.

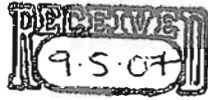
Yours sincerely,



Vincent Sioari
Principal

on behalf of

Guy Metcalfe,
School Council President,
Eltham High School



To the Right Honourable Member of Parliament Mr Geoff Howard
Chair
Education and Training Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
East Melbourne 3002

Re: Inquiry into Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools

1st of May 2007

Dear Mr Howard,

As three senior students at Eltham High School, a school that is highly relevant to your inquiry, we feel that our experiences and opinions are of value in this matter.

Before going into our experiences and opinions, a brief history of the uniform at Eltham High School seems appropriate. The school has been without a mandatory school uniform since the mid 1960's- in 1984 an optional uniform was introduced and adopted by about 10% of students. By 1989, however, it had already faded out and things have not changed since then. Eltham High School students instead enjoy relative freedom in their dress, in accordance with a dress code based logically on health and safety considerations. This code does not infringe upon a student's right to self expression, but does ensure a safe and practical working environment. This includes the requirement of appropriate footwear and sun-safety.

The school is not opposed to uniforms as a whole; indeed, uniforms serve a distinct purpose in areas such as sport, debating teams and public performance in the music department.

It is pertinent to note that in recent decades, a need for uniform has not been on the agenda. The school operates excellently and – as we will venture to suggest – enjoys numerous benefits from this mode of operation.

Firstly, there is the strong notion of individualism that this relative freedom of dress invites. Eltham High School is renowned for its visual arts program, a field with strong ties to self expression and creativity. It is not a great leap to understand that something which can foster and encourage self-expression directly contributes to this. Many students are attracted to the school for this very reason, saying it's a place where they can "be themselves".

Complimentary to these notions of self-expression are ideas of trusting a student's own judgement. The policy naturally encourages students to make their own decisions as to what is appropriate to wear. Such judgement in relation to self presentation, is conducive to good habits for entering the workforce, and general social interaction. It also allows students to be used to the absence of uniform, preparing them for university, TAFE, or college. If students are going to face a "brand power crisis" they can have it and be done with it in year 7, rather than when society is regarding them as adults.

Furthermore, EHS enjoys a great sense of community. Although resulting from a number of factors and policies, the lack of uniform greatly contributes to a positive rapport between the staff and students. There is a sense of cooperation and equality, rather than a dichotomous system of 'teacher and the taught'.

We will now consider some of the concerns that many seem to hold in regards to schools without uniform; and discuss this in light of our own personal experience and understanding. The argument that a school without a uniform isolates children from underprivileged families is unsubstantiated. In reality, the combined cost of uniforms, plus casual clothes for weekends is often far more expensive than basic costs of buying normal clothes. Also, students are just as likely to be teased at a uniform school for any small difference in their appearance, be it older shoes or a stained t-shirt. Furthermore, the pressure to wear expensive clothes is much more apparent at uniform schools on "free dress days," where students feel a heightened obligation to impress their peers with their "brand" clothes.

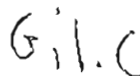
In conclusion, we feel that Eltham High School's policy on uniform is an intrinsic part of our ethos and values. We feel that by going to a school where we are able to express ourselves freely we have been able to mature in a way that is not available to students from other schools. Our experiences at a uniform free school have been only positive and we feel it would be a great shame if students in years to come were forced into a constricting dress code. Furthermore, we feel that dress code policy should be left to the school's discretion. Eltham High School has been without a uniform for nearly fifty years and there has been no reason to make amendments to a working system.

Yours sincerely,

Shamira Armstrong

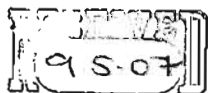


Gilchrist Clendenin



Nick Hudson



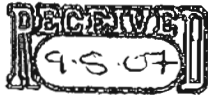


I was formally a student at Eltham High School (a school without a compulsory school uniform) for just under two years, and I still very much feel apart of it. Those two years were the most rewarding of my whole schooling career; I partly contribute this to the fact that I and other students were not required to wear a school uniform. Certainly, non-school uniform was not the direct cause of my enjoyment, but the environment that not having a uniform created at my school was profoundly influential on my time there. The school fostered individuality and creativity (portrayed by the yearly output of paintings, photography, theatre and short films) among all students and encouraged greater acceptance of those that were 'different'. This ultimately made Eltham High School the most inclusive school I have ever been to (and I have been to several). This meant students were more aware and ultimately accepting of social issues affecting many young people, such as depression, poorer economic backgrounds, religious differences, sexual and racial diversity and the nature of human individualism (manifested in the many different ways people dressed), this will prove invaluable to all students when dealing with real world situations. From personal experience I found that because of this there were very few issues of bullying and all most no violence between students. Furthermore, students were required to make on a daily basis decisions about what clothes they should wear to school, decisions that would have to be made in any other situation be it work or spending time with friends. Thus, the schools policy taught us valuable lessons about the real world and how one should present them self. Adding to that, no uniform meant that students and teachers could interact on the same level, especially important in VCE subjects. I truly felt I could approach all of my teachers as an equal. In my eyes this contributed not only to my academic success but also to my ongoing friendships with some of my teachers.

I moved to Melbourne from overseas and deciding which school I would go to was extremely important as it would have tremendous affects on my VCE outcome. Thus when deciding on schools, Eltham High and non-uniform was attractive to me. All other schools I looked at going to had uniform and I perceived them as being less hospitable environments, places I would not enjoy my finals years of school and thus would be detrimental to my final academic result.

When deciding on enacting legislation that would ban non-school uniform I urge you to consider my experiences and those of 1300 other students at Eltham High School. I certainly understand if parents and students do want to be go to schools without uniform. However, ultimately I view it as parents (and hopefully students) decision and not legislators as to which schooling environment they participate in. I feel that if compulsory uniform legislation was enacted it would be a great disservice to current and future students of Eltham High School (and other schools with similar rules), but Also the Eltham community at large which benefits greatly from our students, who have a greater understanding of the outside world, participation in social and environments activities. I disagree strongly that having compulsory uniform improves behavioural management, academic outcomes or helps to create perceptions of equality among students of different socio-economic backgrounds. I can positively say that when comparing my previous schools (which all had compulsory uniform) with Eltham High, Eltham was the school I flourished most in, and certainly enjoyed my time more.

Jarrod Sutton Yr 12 (2006)



My name is Ruby Franklin, I am in Year Seven and I attend Eltham High School.. I am writing to inform you that I, and many more people who attend Eltham High School prefer not to have a uniform.

I enjoy being able to choose what types of clothes I wear in the morning, and coming to school to see my friends expressing the type of people they are through what they wear to school.

There may be advantages in school uniform, but I see real disadvantages. For example uniforms that make girls and boys dress differently, There is also something disheartening about being told off for wearing the wrong coloured socks. The colour of my socks has got nothing to do with who I am or what I am capable of.

Teenagers enjoy being different and making their own choices. There will be a lot of upset people if you chose to make the students of Eltham High School wear uniforms. Uniforms may be good for most schools but not Eltham High. We enjoy being our own individual people too much.

From Ruby Franklin

Eltham High school

Mandatory School Uniforms –response from a recent ex-student

I graduated from Eltham High School in 2001, and am strongly opposed to the proposed implementation of mandatory school uniforms in all Victorian secondary schools.

High school is about developing the individual, and positioning that person in society with their own beliefs and opinions, and while their personal experience of social constructionism is an important factor in placing that individual in their subsequent situation, what evidence is there to suggest that assimilation during impressionable formative years is the right way of teaching these young people how to go about living as an individual in a world after secondary school? Moreover, they cannot hope to obtain true individuality if this attempt at assimilation is enforced.

It has been argued that school uniforms may reduce teasing in the schoolyard due to certain types of clothing because of economic strains and religious traditions. But the uniform does not alter the child's economic or religious situation, it merely robs them of their individuality during a significantly integral part of their youth. A part that will shape them into the people who will govern Australia in various capacities in years to come, and is nothing more than a concerted attempt at assimilation from traditional, international and religious dress codes. Anti-discrimination policies suggest that school uniforms reduce difference. Rather, it is merely the appearance of an individual that is stripped and not their circumstance. So in this sense the pro-school uniform debate itself is flawed.

Besides, the chief concern in this situation should be education and not appearance.

As a student I never once donned a uniform, and am an advocate of those whose children, for whatever reason, choose to go to a high school that has no uniform (I know it was one concern of mine that determined where I would go after primary school). I understand that there will be people who prefer to have an assigned dress code, but that should be their *choice*, it is wrong to be a mandatory code in all Victorian secondary schools.

In addition to this, the cost of school uniforms can become quite extensive, and in all actuality would place those with economic concerns in further hardship, seeing as the young person would ultimately have to have a larger amount of clothing than otherwise: a school uniform in addition to casual clothes. Thus the expenditure rises where it cannot always afford to do so.

I strongly believe that school institutions need to support the growth and individuality of its students, and in addition to their intrinsic right to free speech, should be their right to free dress if they so choose it.

--Ms Emma Hall

