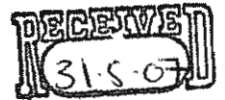


# Little Yarra Steiner School

## School Uniform Inquiry Submission 58

25 May, 2007

Ms Karen Ellingford  
Executive Officer  
Education and Training Committee  
Parliament House  
Spring Street  
Melbourne 3002



Dear Ms Ellingford

Thank you for the invitation to make a submission to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Dress Codes and School Uniforms.

Little Yarra Steiner School does have specific requirements for student dress as specified in the school's dress code. The main principles of the code relate to what is considered suitable for children – light, bright colours (not black), natural fibres are preferred and designs or logos larger than what can be covered by a hand are not allowed. Other factors in the dress code relate to health and safety – suitable footwear at all times (unless a teacher specifically allows an activity in bare feet) and sunhats (which the school provides) to be worn whenever outside in Terms 1 and 4.

The Steiner program influences the dress code in a number of ways. The principles of truth, beauty and goodness are touchstones in what is brought to the children.

As far as dress is concerned the principle of truth would inform the preference for natural fibres. This is because the process of producing woolen fibre from the fleece and cotton by spinning the natural plant fibre is overt and can be demonstrated to the child. Natural fibres are in this sense true to the natural world the child can understand.

There is a well developed aesthetic in the Steiner movement in which may be discerned a strong predilection for the rhythms of natural form. Many commercially derived designs on clothes manufactured for children are not beautiful in this way. Many mass produced children's clothes contain images from characters promoted through mass entertainment. These images are often ugly and confronting to other young children. They are also highly

finished by adults and leave little for the imagination. This is in contrast to the dolls used in Steiner pre-schools and lower primary which have no faces. This is so the child can engage imaginatively with the doll and exercise their own capacity for fantasy and play. For this reason plain clothes (though colourful) are preferred.

There is an emphasis on learning through observation in Steiner education. It is for this reason that a story will be told to the whole class as an example of desirable social behaviour when dealing with an instance of naughtiness. It is a moral tale but the teacher will refrain from drawing a moral at the end of the story. It is the child's work to interpret the tale in a way that is meaningful to them and to make the moral their own. A world saturated with the calculated messages of adult advertisers and merchandisers is inimical to an approach which seeks to leave the child enough space to interpret and build meaning as a child.

The principle of goodness would inform the dress code by reinforcing the preference for natural fibres. Woolen clothes are more wholesome for warmth in winter as opposed to many synthetic fibres. Natural fibres 'breathe' and are more comfortable to wear than many synthetic fibres. Clothing made from natural fibre usually smells and feels better than clothing made from most synthetic fibres.

It is also easier to tell a story involving positive human warmth about the manufacture of clothing from wool. This might be done in a Pre-School class by having an adult spin woollen thread as part of bringing to the children a world where adults are engaged wholesome work with natural materials. There is an assumption that the production of clothing from natural fibres involves more ethical processes. We have not, but perhaps should, examine the ethics and sustainability of producing cotton clothing in Australia.

The link with natural fibre, especially wool, is reinforced by the craft program. Handwork has an important place in Steiner pedagogy. Children work with wool in the Kindergarten and are taught to knit before they are taught to read. As cross-curricular integration is one of the strengths of Steiner education the craft program lends its influence to the promotion, not only of natural fibres, but also of hand-made clothes, particularly with the younger children. As many of our students become expert knitters it is not unknown for them to wear clothes they have made themselves, as early as the middle primary years.

What are the advantages of not having a uniform?

It is essential to us that the student is met and held by their teacher as an individual. Typically they have the same class teacher from Class 1 to Class 8. There is no doubt that the teacher would know each child quite as deeply even if they were to wear uniforms. However, the wearing of uniforms would be incongruent with this basic orientation. Symbolically a uniform would signal to the child that they were valued for their conformity to a norm rather than for their individuality.

What is important here is the gesture with which the child is received into the school. Each child should be received with warmth and be accorded recognition. In giving encouragement the teacher will acknowledge the child rather than the quality of their finished work. "I can see you really enjoyed doing that drawing", rather than, "That is an excellent drawing". It is consistent with this that the child should come to the school in their own clothes, rather than the school's.

Clearly working together as a class requires cooperative behaviour. This is wholesome when the goal is a community of individuals working together with mutual recognition. This we would see as consistent with having a dress code (rules of engagement) but no uniform. It is less wholesome where the cooperative behaviour is achieved by the conformity of individuals in relation to class rules or the will of the teacher. This we would see as consistent with wearing a uniform. None of this is to assume that the goal is easily achieved or to ignore the fact that class teachers are often working with difficult and sometimes quite dysfunctional children.

What are the disadvantages of not having a uniform?

The dress code does curb the more extravagant expressions of teenage fashion. Nevertheless, dress is one of the theatres through which the battle towards adulthood is waged, for boys as well as girls.

I can offer some observations of what happens at Little Yarra.

Some children do wear clothes that can perhaps be described as “fashion statements” in the conventional context of what is on the racks in the shops and featured in the media. In upper primary levels such children also tend to exhibit behaviour designed to manipulate “in group” and “out group” activity. This behaviour is usually minority behaviour within the class, and often the leaders in such behaviour eventually leave the school. This may be because the child is dissatisfied, and dressing to distinguish themselves from their classmates is symptomatic of that dissatisfaction. In such cases the child may persuade reluctant parents to allow them to try another school. Sometimes the child’s dress may be symptomatic of family values which are divergent from the core values of the school.

When such behaviour is manifested among secondary students it is often, though not always, exhibited by students who have recently transferred into the school. This represents a failure to integrate the child into the group and is most acute as a problem where several new students are enrolled at the same time, which is something we now try to avoid.

All of this begs the question of the majority of students. These students are part of a generally cohesive class group with a shared history and a shared teacher over a number of years. Unacceptable behaviour that surges out of the maelstrom of puberty is met with that same amalgam of love, brutality and indifference as between siblings. But it is also in a context where self-expression through dress is worked out within the group, and is likely to take advantage of using what is to hand or in conformity with an aesthetic that has been developed within the limits of the dress code. The prohibition against large logos, images or writing is a powerful constraint when so much commercially available children’s clothing is like that.

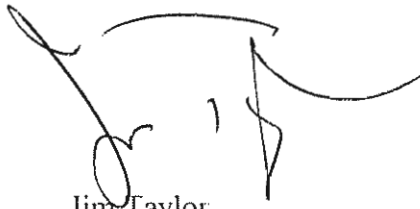
Certainly, by the time students reach upper school they generally have both an individual style and at the same time a Steiner look. Perhaps they are, in appearance, more like premature tertiary students but I don’t think so. Most of our students leave school with a well developed personal style. This view is supported by the evidence for their equally well developed, discriminating and personal taste in music. This aim is much more consciously pursued through our music program than the dress sense which results from a general immersion in the ethos of the school.

As to the attitude of parents to our absence of a uniform I can say that only once in the past ten years has the topic arisen. A group of parents were going to meet and talk about it but nothing eventuated.

In conclusion we would not see the issue of uniform as isolated. Our dress code is consistent with our pedagogy. It may well be easier to enforce wearing a uniform than adherence to a dress code, but too much would be lost if we resorted only to considerations of expediency.

I trust this has been of some help and wish you well with your deliberations.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jim Taylor". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping initial "J" and a long, horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jim Taylor  
Business Manager

