

EDU AND TRAINING COMMITTEE – INQUIRY INTO DRESS CODES AND SCHOOL UNIFORMS IN VIC SCHOOLS

Input: L McCurdy,
Kingslake West

Background: Some of the following input relates to specific matters experienced by my family and Year 7 daughter who attends our local government school. We believe it highlights some of the inconsistencies which can occur with the introduction of mandatory uniforms. We do not oppose mandatory uniforms, but believe their introduction needs to be properly managed and communicated to it's community.

Specifically: Compulsory uniforms are required on a whole school basis at our school. It is the introduction of 2007 Year 7 (only) compulsory blazers which has raised some issues of concern (Some of our more 'personal' and specific comments included below, are noted in *italics*.)

*** The benefits and costs of mandatory school uniforms**

The definition 'mandatory uniforms' leaves it open to interpretation of what that specifically means at various schools.

For example: A school may either decide that:

1. The entire uniform must be purchased through the school uniform shop (because of specific logos on pants or polo shirts etc.)

OR

2. Some pieces of the uniform (such as polo shirts, long pants, socks) may be purchased at local retail outlets.

The price difference between example 1. and example 2 can be very significant.

Government schools should provide parents with alternate, affordably priced outlets to purchase mandatory uniforms (or at least some parts of the uniform such as, "grey pants", socks, polo shirts). School uniform shops can be extremely costly and out of reach to many parents. *For example – the purchase of long grey pants at our local school uniform shop vs buying the same pants (minus logo on back pocket) at Target Stores - varies by over 100% (\$55 at School Uniform shop. \$25-\$30 at local Target Store).*

We should not be pedantic about a logo on a back pocket which cannot be seen anyway! Schools could perhaps provide 'sew on' patches so that parents can purchase shirts etc from local affordable outlets and attach the appropriate school label. Are our government schools about educating our children or about logos (often unseen) on uniform articles?

Mandatory school uniforms should be affordable for all students/families. Families should not be asked to “look for an alternate school” because they cannot afford the mandatory uniform at their local school. There needs to be compromise.

*** The views of school communities about dress codes and school uniforms**

Schools must be sincere, open and transparent when surveying their school communities on uniform decisions / changes. They must be honest and genuine when seeking opinions / feedback about important issues such as mandatory school uniforms.

Our recent experience has shown that our local government school surveyed their current (2006) local school community in regards to the introduction of several mandatory school uniform items, for the incoming Year 7 students only. The surveyed community consisted of parents/students who were already at the school and who were not going to be affected by the introduction of the mandatory uniform items. Therefore they generally did not have much interest in the issue and were probably generally disinterested in the outcome. The potential incoming Year 7 students/parents were not surveyed, did not have the opportunity to contribute feedback and consequently the issue of compulsory blazers and PE uniforms at this particular school has turned very ugly.

*** The most cost efficient and practical uniform procurement arrangements**

See Benefits and costs of mandatory school uniforms. Alternative options / suppliers should be sought so that costs are reasonable for ALL families and choices can be made. Families should not have to feel that “they are incapable of providing uniforms for their children” due to high costs. Nor should they feel they have to “put off paying the electricity bill” so that they can provide expensive uniforms for their children instead. Parents should not have to bypass their local government school because of the prohibitive cost of the uniform at that school. And, definitely, no parent should be told by their local school, that they should perhaps look at a different school because they cannot afford the uniform at that local school.

*** Matters which need to be considered to ensure dress codes and uniform policies are consistent with anti-discrimination legislation and health promotion policies:**

Uniforms need to be practical and suit the environment in which the students live (geographically). This should be achieved with consultation from the whole school community – parents/students/teachers/principal/school council.

Some schools have students attending from a geographically wide area and weather conditions can vary. *Our example is a school which has students travelling from 15km higher up a mountain than where the school is located. These students can*

experience temperature variations of more than + or – 5 degrees from where the school is located and it is also acknowledged as a high rainfall area.

- 1. A recent experience has shown that our government school has introduced a compulsory blazer to be worn to and from school – regardless of the weather conditions. This is totally unsuitable when students are required to wear a blazer on a hot day, on a hot bus. It has the potential to be a health risk. It is also impractical for a student to have to carry a blazer home in an already overloaded schoolbag. Some students also have to walk home after being dropped off at a local bus stop.*

In addition, this same blazer is useless on a day where students are standing in the rain at a bus stop, in the freezing cold weather with only a wet blazer on. They need waterproof/warm coats and not a blazer which the school decides “looks good”! Wet blazers which are stored rolled up in a locker or school bag all day – do not come out looking (or smelling) good at the other end of the day. Laundering becomes impractical because of the logistics of laundering when a student is expected to wear the item (blazer) every day. At \$170 for a blazer – it is impractical to have a spare!

- 2. Uniforms definitely need to be considered in light of possible discrimination. Our school is attempting to “phase in” compulsory blazers (uniforms are already compulsory) for the whole school, by introducing it as compulsory only for 2007 Year 7 students. Each year thereafter it will be compulsory for Year 7’s – resulting in a whole school compulsory blazer by approximately Year 2012.*

The 2007 Year 7 students are “picked on” at school for being “blazer dorks”. It is viewed as discriminatory as it is only compulsory for Year 7’s and house captains. The remaining 80+% of the school do not have to wear a blazer (it is optional).

Consultation with the entire school community would have raised most of the issues / objections which are now surfacing at this particular school.

*** Appropriate enforcement and sanctions**

Parents need to be communicated with and clear rules set out and documented in regards to wearing of mandatory uniforms (when, where, any exceptions etc). Rules should not be communicated verbally to students who are then expected to advise their parents. If the initial consultation is done well, agreements are reached and policies are well communicated to all families, there will be support for the policy’s enforcement.

The punishment for not wearing the compulsory blazer at this particular school is inconsistent. The level of enforcement varies between each of the Year 7 classes and the expectations of the specific homegroup teacher. The rules have changed each week throughout Term 1 of 2007 and one class is being bribed to wear their blazer each day – with a fortnightly reward of “hot chips” for lunch. Any student who does not wear their blazer is identified as “the one” who let the class down and caused them to lose their hot chip reward.

This is unacceptable.

*** Appropriate exemption criteria and processes**

There would be a range of issues which would need to be considered here - including equity, skin allergies, alternatives, affordability. Proper consultation will identify and expose the possible issues here so that they can be considered at the outset.

Again it comes back to the initial consultation. If the school community is consulted and compromises/agreements are reached at the outset, then people will be supportive of the policy and the enforcement of the policy. DoE guidelines need to be clearly communicated to schools / students / parents. Schools need to adhere to these guidelines.

Do we really want our children being given detention and sitting outside the principal's office because they did not wear a blazer on a 30+ degree day! I think that the students need to be in class and learning.

*** National and international trends**

Cannot comment here.