



School Uniform Inquiry Submission 103

PARLIAMENT OF VICTORIA
EDUCATION & TRAINING COMMITTEE
INQUIRY INTO DRESS CODES AND SCHOOL UNIFORMS
IN VICTORIAN SCHOOLS
June 2007

Attention: Karen Ellingford
Executive Officer
Education & Training Committee
Parliament of Victoria
Level 3, 157 Spring Street
Melbourne 3000
T: 9651 8307
E: karen.ellingford@parliament.vic.gov.au
<http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/etc/>

Dear ETC members,

Please accept the following written submission to supplement the evidence provided by witness Gail McHardy, Executive Officer, Parents Victoria at the Public Hearing conducted at 3:30pm on 30 April 2007 at K Room, 2nd Floor, Parliament House.

Parents Victoria is a not for profit organisation which has been supporting parents and parents clubs in Victorian Government schools since 1925. Parents Victoria's policy has been developed over 82 years by the majority vote of members at its Annual Conferences. In regard to School Uniforms, our policy does not mandate compulsory uniforms rather it states that individual school councils in consultation with the parents and students representative groups should be able to determine the composition of the school uniform. This may result in a formal school uniform or a free dress code or something in between but it should represent the decision and needs of the individual school community.

As such we are quite happy with the existing policy set out in the Victorian Government Schools Reference Guide 4.8 and would recommend to the Education and Training Committee that the status quo remains.

(a) the benefits and costs of mandatory school uniforms

- 'mandatory uniforms' - by definition can vary from one school to the next
- being too strict about uniforms can impact greatly on low income earners as uniform items marked with a specific logo available from a sole supplier can be much more expensive than a generic item from a retail store. It also places greater demands on charitable organisations which provide uniforms and the State School Relief Committee as instead of providing a generic polo shirt costing maybe \$8 they have to supply a specific school polo including a logo which can cost as much as three times the price.
- Any mandatory uniform must be affordable for all school families. While we know that most school uniforms usually last longer than 'non-uniform' items

of clothing and are not subject to fashion trends. Articles of school uniform are often much more expensive than street clothes

- sole uniform suppliers - some schools don't try other suppliers and it is unclear how often suppliers are reviewed
- accessibility & affordability are often the key areas of concern to families
- ability to purchase generic uniform items from large retail outlets ie Target, Big W, Kmart, etc
- variation between schools on the choice of uniform items for both males & females
- some parents will argue having a mandatory uniform is cheaper and others will rebut that by saying it's cheaper to clothe their children in free dress by purchasing garments second hand
- some parents (especially of boys) find uniform a financial burden as their students grow too quickly & the uniform has to be frequently replaced
- some parents believe having specific summer & winter garments is too prescriptive especially in warmer climates or areas where Victorian weather is no longer the regular seasonal weather type
- some schools penalise students for coming to school in an incorrect season uniform garment e.g. winter skirt in summer
- some schools object to girls wanting to wear shorts in summer instead of dresses
- some parents find it terribly frustrating when schools do not communicate uniform dress code and expect secondary age adolescents will keep their parents well informed
- mandatory uniforms could totally change the culture of a school that has had a free dress code. While some would argue that a uniform could improve discipline and school pride for some students, compulsory uniform could result in disengagement.
- Appropriate clothing is required in many subject areas such as technology and sport to ensure students' safety and wellbeing

(b) the views of school communities about dress codes and school uniforms

- Community consultation must be sincere, open and transparent when conducting surveys on uniform decisions / changes.
- Schools must be honest and genuine when seeking opinions / feedback about important issues such as mandatory school uniforms and/or free dress code
- Schools must advise the dress code and teachers as well as students should adhere to it too
- Consultation challenges or concerns should not be ignored or feared but seen as an opportunity to draw information from the current school community members
- Accommodate the wide range of cultural influences so all students feel comfortable & can still respect their own culture where possible
- All DoE employees, volunteers and students share the same dress code expectations to demonstrate consistency & fairness

(c) the most cost efficient and practical uniform procurement arrangements

- Review uniform suppliers more regularly and seek feedback from students, families, Parent Association (2nd Hand Uniform Coordinator), etc
- The provision of a school uniform should not be exclusive to one supplier to allow competition in pricing.
- Research costs when purchasing from local retailers and other potential suppliers
- Consider some affordable options so all families can benefit on cost savings e.g. offer a woollen jumper and a windcheater
- School logo patches should be made available so that families can buy generic uniform items and still meet school uniform requirements. This would also be very cost effective for support organisations that provide school uniforms.
- Uniform fabric and patterns should be available. This can be cost effective and also useful when the student is 'harder to fit'
- Some public schools are including garments more traditionally associated with private schools e.g. blazers, ties & hats related to school image These garments are often not supported when mandated - their cost can be prohibitive and they are more costly to maintain (laundering, dry cleaning, hand washing, etc)
- There has been increased demand on support organisations related to books & uniform costs so introducing more expensive uniform items applies more pressure on students from lower socio economic situations
- Hidden cost factors exist when families have a number of children across a number of campuses with different uniform requirements.
- Some students sizing is not easily accommodated and when there is a prescriptive uniform with no flexibility some students feel really uncomfortable (both large & very small students) and in some cases can become a target for bullying
- Back to School Bonus was welcomed by families who had students starting school in Prep or Year 7 but when there is a uniform changover or upgrade to a new style there is no assistance with the additional expense.
- SSRC (State School Relief Committee) are struggling to meet demands on their services and some schools tend to take liberty of the funding when there other more needy recipients
- State Government needs to appreciate that SSRC support monies is well under the overall cost of a garment / shoes that may need to be purchased
- Some Principals do or don't access this support fairly or consistently

(d) matters which need to be considered to ensure dress codes and uniform policies are consistent with anti-discrimination legislation and health promotion policies

- Uniform items for both gender need to be practical and comfortable to suit the school & surrounding climate for students (geographically)
- Schools need to consider heating & cooling factors in relation to uniform when students are in the classroom
- Many students have allergic reactions to synthetic fabrics. The special needs of these students must be addressed as uniforms are rarely available in 100% natural fibres. Also when and if a supplier is found the cost of garments is

much higher than normal as they are not standard items. This additional cost can also apply for students who can not buy regular sized garments.

- Students need to be encouraged to wear sunsmart protective clothing and these items need to be affordable and well considered to make sure students will happily wear them without fuss. Getting students in secondary schools to wear hats is a constant chore – the battle could be lessened if students had a say in the type of hat required.
- Transition from Primary to Secondary school in relation to wearing hats is often not discussed with the year 7s as they assume the practice continues. Secondary Schools should actively support the Year 7s to continue their safe practices so in years to come this will change the culture altogether and it will be accepted that hats are to be worn irrespective of age/year level in order to be sun smart . Secondary school students when playing sport in unshaded areas tend to wear hats but this is not encouraged in general so the “uncool” image remains
- In consultation other health promotion strategies/policies should be encouraged & practised e.g. in Ballarat most girls wear long winter skirts for warmth, uniform item fabrics and designs can always be more practical & popular if students have input too
- Often schools will upgrade sport uniform garments but don’t apply the same enthusiasm to regular uniform items

(e) appropriate enforcement and sanctions

- communication needs to be clear & consistent
- grievance procedures & process needs to be fair/transparent so students/families if necessary can follow and seek a solution
- rules should not just be communicated verbally to students who are then expected to advise their parents
- schools & home to work in partnership, rules/consequences need to be advised to everyone
- if the initial consultation/communication is done well when changes or proposals are drafted, agreements will be reached easily and policies will be well supported/easily enforced
- consequences/punishments need to be consistent & not in conflict/breaching other DoE rules or regulations
- detentions, time outs and other punitive measures for not wearing uniform is counter productive and does not assist in learning
- some parents support or are coerced to sign permission slips to allow “out of uniform” clothing or shoes
- It is frustrating for teachers to have to enforce uniform standards & wastes valuable learning time
- School Councils and school staff understanding their roles & responsibilities to ensure consistency /fairness is paramount
- Schools without a mandated uniform must still provide a dress code in the interest of their students’ safety and wellbeing
- Victorian families are concerned that there is often more attention to punitive measures related to uniform non compliance than to other more serious issues such as bullying incidents or even worse drug dealing at schools

(f) appropriate exemption criteria and processes

- This will be focused on the individual needs ie skin allergies, alternative options, socio economic factors
- If schools know their current student/family cohort this will then identify or alert the school to the possible issues which can be addressed from the beginning
- DoE guidelines need to be clearly communicated to schools / students / parents. Schools need to adhere to these guidelines & communicate them at the local level.

(g) national and international trends No comment.

Recommendations for all schools

- 1: A well planned communication strategy to provide uniform information to students, parents & staff
- 2: Uniform Policy & process regularly reviewed and promoted by school council in consultation with Parent Association & Student Council bodies as a whole school approach
- 3: Request student feedback on uniform garments to determine trends, likes and dislikes for future improvements
- 4: Appropriate training for School Councils and relevant school staff to understand how to conduct a Uniform review and implementation plan
- 5: Discretionary funding for those students who can't afford uniform. This could be done via an application process
- 6: Opportunities for the Parent Association to have a hand over session with new parents before uniform purchasing (prep or year 7 information evenings) so families know which things to buy or not
- 7: If school uniform is mandated encourage the setting up of a second hand uniform facility to assist families to obtain cheaper garments
- 8: Schools should be reminded that whether or not they have a mandated uniform, clothing must be comfortable, equitable, accessible, appropriate for climate/activities and not distracting from the main goal of schooling which is to learn.

**Lodged on behalf of Parents Victoria
Elaine Crowle
President
Our Children, Our Concern
www.parentsvictoria.asn.au**

Parents Victoria Policy references:

1.8 Handling individual difference p.33

E.4 Diversity & Choice p.35

H.5 Women & Girls

7.1 School Bags p.70

K1 Education Allowances p76

P.1 School Uniforms p.92

I.18 Skin Cancer Prevention p.73

DoE References:

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/aboutschool/lifeatschool/uniforms.htm>

http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/referenceguide/enviro/4_8.htm