



PRINCES HILL SECONDARY COLLEGE

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

Dear Ms Ellingford

Please find enclosed the responses of Princes Hill Secondary College when asked to reflect on our uniform free policy. I have summarised the issues under the headings suggested by the submission, and have included the responses of our parents at the end of the submission.

I hope this report assists with your deliberations. I am happy to appear before the committee if you believe that this submission warrants it.

Regards


John Goodman

Assistant Principal

*Despite protestations, warnings and punishments, and financial help for those who could not afford uniforms, students still broke the rules. At one Monday morning assembly, Headmaster Gibson sent all students not in correct uniform home with instructions not to return until properly attired. The **Truth** got wind of the story, and dubbed Princes Hill the "go home school"*
Extract from "Prinny Hill" by Nicholas Vlahogiannins (circa 1962-67)

Princes Hill Secondary College has been free from uniforms since the early 70's, with the first break from uniforms taking place in 1971 with the Form 6 cohort. Since that time the uniform free culture of the school has become both a celebratory and illustrative demonstration of the schools commitment to respecting student diversity.

What requirements (if any) do you specify for student clothing or appearance?

The college dress code specifies that students make responsible choices with regard to personal appearance, and that dress chosen by students must be appropriate for normal school activities, must constitute a health and safety risk, must not be potentially offensive to other members of the school community. The policy also asserts that a change of clothing may be required for specific classes or programs.

The perceived advantages and disadvantages of not having a school uniform.

The advantages of not having a school uniform at Princes Hill Secondary College (PHSC) are many. Staff, students and parents at the college have all asserted the value of students being able to explore their individuality and creativity through their choice of school uniform. This is consistent with the school values of *creativity: nurturing a spirit of creative expression and inquiry*, and *diversity: respecting and valuing individual and cultural difference*. The distinctive "op shop" approach of many students mingles well with the more conventional approach to dress displayed by other members of the school community. In general students clearly value the opportunity to express themselves through the uniform free policy.

A small portion of the community have reported that the absence of a uniform at PHSC places pressure on students to conform to an image or spend excessive amounts of time fussing over image and personal appearance. While this must be acknowledged as an issue, it also apparent that students generally grow out of this phase as they move into the senior years of the College. Balanced against this concern also is that our uniform free policy allows a degree of experimentation with regard to dress and appearance, and this is clearly an aspect of adolescent development that is very important.

Any challenges faced by the school in allowing students to wear casual clothes

I would have to report very few challenges. Apart from a couple of isolated instances:

- One student becoming so focussed on his image and dress as a student that I believe it had an impact in him role playing highly rebellious behaviours. While there are no doubt other issues to be considered here, I believe this was one factor in his behaviour.
- Isolated instances of students worrying about image and perception by others.

Whether your school has received any feedback or concerns from students and/or parents regarding the absence of a school uniform policy

To respond meaningfully to this inquiry I asked for responses from parents, staff and students through our college newsletter. Responses from all three areas of our community were *overwhelmingly* in support of our uniform free policy.

The area of common agreement in the community was the sense of allowing for individuality afforded by the uniform free policy. Students particularly spoke of “expressing themselves” and the “freedom’ allowed by the uniform free policy. Students also highlighted the colour and vibrancy created by the uniform free policy.

Parents gave a rich variety of views in support of the uniform free policy. Some saw the policy as preventing a push for government schools to “ape private schools”. Certainly other parents and staff noted the uniform free culture in US government (or public) schools, and many parents made the link between freedom of expression and the opportunity for students to express their identity through their dress. The notion of the policy supporting a democratic culture at the school was very strong; *“Everyone is equal, precisely because everybody is different”* is how one parent articulated this.

Adolescent health and a holistic approach to student identity also emerged as a theme in parent responses. One voice asserted that students were able to break from the clutches of marketing and advertising by experimenting with different dress styles as adolescents, and that has a positive effect in terms of students exploring body image on their own terms. Parents also mentioned the value in avoiding negative relationships with staff and school leadership with the constant policing required with school uniform observance. One parent with research experience in this area asserted “ young people have cited disagreements over uniform at a range of schools as one of the factors that led to them leaving school early”.

Many staff commented from the perspective of having worked in non uniform and uniform schools, and they also commented on the value of not having to police uniforms as an aspect of building positive relationships with students. That the uniform free approach of the school was a positive and “identifying feature of Princes Hill” was also noted by staff.

Such is the nature of playful experimentation engendered by the uniform free policy at PHSC, that it is not uncommon for students to wear elements of other school uniforms (one student had the entire Orbost Secondary College ensemble recently!), or full suits with a tie, and in one instance a student regularly wears a bowler hat. One needs really to witness the uniform free culture of PHSC to understand it. Self parody and playfulness are a significant part of the picture.

Whether the ‘no uniform’ policy is a factor in students/parents decisions to enrol in your school

Parent responses in this area have all been favourable to the notion of students not wearing uniforms with a number of parents stating that this was a major consideration in selecting PHSC as a school for their children. One parent stated the matter thus:

Our family put PHSC first on our list as desired schools partly because the dress code does not impinge on a student's free expression of themselves.

This view certainly captures the spirit of many responses from parents. Parents also expressed a view that the uniform free policy encouraged students to *be the best that you can be*. It is interesting to note that parents regard the uniform free culture at Princes Hill as an emblematic

expression of school values in much the same way that a private school might regard their uniform as giving expression to their values.

Whether there are any health or safety considerations associated with not having a formal school uniform

The college policy clearly emphasises the importance of appropriate dress for the purpose of school. The main areas that need to be supervised and with regard to health and safety is with regard to wearing thongs and slip ons in the warmer parts of the year. This is prohibited, mainly to ensure that the hazard of tripping while moving on the stairs is avoided. Appropriate footwear in science and technology rooms is also mandated.

The extent of any bullying or peer pressure to conform to expensive fashion/fads

The school culture in this respect is quite distinctive, with opportunity shop styles very prevalent. Cheap and interesting is more the preferred approach to dressing, and certainly expensive clothing tends not to be de rigueur with students. Jeans, t-shirts and hooded tops are common items; expensive designer items are uncommon, and are not really a part of the culture of the school. Students have a remarkably sharp "anti corporate" sensibility.

The school deals with few bullying issues, and peer pressure to conform to dress standards is rare. Labelling due to a dress style is sometimes a concern, with students designated a part of the "emo" sub culture often resistant to this label. These students would still be enormously protective of their right to choose. Indeed, these issues can be viewed within the wider culture of making choices to refine your identity mentioned earlier in the submission.

Appropriate sanctions for a student that does not comply with a school's dress code or school uniform policy

Students wearing thongs are sent home immediately to exchange them for appropriate footwear. A constant refusal to adhere to this policy would require a parent interview and possible follow up suspension. This has not happened in the past year.

Students wearing material of an inappropriate nature (eg promoting drug use or depicting a naked human form) are instructed to desist from wearing clothing of this nature. Similar consequences would follow as with the infraction outlined above. In general, the college approach is to reason and negotiate with students to reach an acceptable outcome to the issue. Students not adhering to reasonable and responsible dress is not an ongoing issue at the college.

Any other issues you believe of interest or relevance to the committee's inquiry

I would encourage committee members to come and visit the college to gain an understanding of the way that our uniform free policy shapes and reflects our school culture. Students, staff and parents spoke passionately about the importance of the policy, and its retention at our school is as much about the preservation of our distinctive culture as would apply with the retention a uniform policy at other schools that elect to have that option.

The spirit of individuality outlined in the quote at the beginning of this paper is still very much in evidence!

Student feedback:

(1)

Year 8: I think it is good to not have uniforms because it lets people express themselves and if I had to wear a uniform I would feel like I have no right to express how I want. Especially if the uniforms are bad.

(2)

Year 12: The good things about not wearing a uniform is that you get to express your individuality which you wouldn't be able to do with one. You are not automatically categorised when seen wearing one.

(3)

Year 11: Not having a uniform was always appealing for me, not because I want to strut around in designer clothes, but because it shows individuality. I hate the idea of trying to make everyone look the same, because to me it gives off a very military vibe. Why would anyone want everyone to match? It just seems like a very creepy concept. I don't believe in uniforms and I am extremely happy about the fact that our school doesn't enforce a uniform.

(4)

Year 7: I think that it is fantastic that Princes Hill doesn't have a uniform. It allows me and allows others to have freedom in a sense, and it lets us express intuition(sic). In my old school, I had to wear a uniform and it was awful.

(5)

Year 10: I think having a uniform is why Princes Hill is such an excellent school. It allows students such great freedom in expressing themselves. I think that if we had a uniform, that sense of student individuality would be lost.

(6)

Year 9: I think the no uniform policy is really good. It gives us more choice, and more creativity. It lets people express themselves and people have a chance to wear and look the way they want. It also makes the corridors more colourful and more interesting. It makes the ppl around here more interested about clothes and everyone looks more happy.

Parent feedback:

(1)

In reference to your submission to DET on uniform policy I would hope schools such as Princes Hill, Eltham, Uni High etc. would definitely not have to be forced into a compulsory uniform wearing policy. The culture and history of these schools is reflected in an atmosphere that encourages individuality and choice of student attire is one aspect of this. I would hate to see valuable school time and resources being wasted on policing a uniform. Overall this push seems to be part of a larger one that sees the way forward for govt schools to be pushed to ape private schools, uniforms being an overt expression of supposed discipline, supposedly parent driven, etc. This reversion to traditionalism seems reflective of a suburban aspirational need for obvious conformity that does not have any connectedness to a school such as Princes Hill whose students' achievement is evident in academic results, art, music and sport(and they don't wear a uniform!!!). The obsession with senior students wearing uniforms seems to be very much an Australian and British one. In most parts of the Western World including the US, most of Europe, etc. senior school uniforms are rare.

(2)

It improves relationships between students and teachers because the first interaction of the day does not have to be a negative one with a teacher disciplining a student about the wrong uniform.

In many of our research projects when we have talked with young people who have been expelled from school or left school early, the young people have cited disagreements over uniform as one of the factors that led to them leaving school.

(3)

Our family put PHSC first on our list as desired schools partly because the dress code does not impinge on a student's free expression of themselves.

Other parents may wish to choose schools with uniform policies but it is important that there is some choice for parents and children who do not wish to wear uniforms.

(4)

We have two children at PHSC - one currently in yr 12, the other in yr 9. One of the things that attracted us & our children - now young adults - to PHSC was the principles that the school holds regarding young people's responsibility to themselves & in turn to society - i.e you are what you are - be the best that you can be & be true to your individuality for it is precious.

Having a school uniform "enforced" by Govt rhetoric would be a backward step in so many ways & act against one of the most important underlying principles that guide & shape the excellent school that PHSC is.

Arguments about fashion competitions in non-uniformed schools are rubbish. Suggestions that young adults out of uniform look messy are ridiculous - look beneath the cloth & you find absolute gold (sometimes tarnished - but gold none the less.) Never have I seen nor my children reported on "group wars" based on outside appearance & PHSC is a truly wonderful mix of appearances!

Happy to provide more comment if need be.

my vote - no uniforms!

(5)

I just wanted to add my response that I feel that having no uniform helps young people to develop a sense of personal identity. It is not necessary for every school but there should be at least some schools where children can be creative in their fashion as well as their thoughts and ideas - we need a creative nation to compete in the global market of the future - sameness and conformity is unlikely to foster inventiveness and entrepreneurial endeavours.

(6)

Firstly, and perhaps simplistically, the students' outward appearance - however radical - does not compromise behaviour. On multiple occasions at school events I have often paused to admire the atmosphere and spirit of co-operation and respect clearly evident among and between the students, as well as an apparent lack of exclusivity. At first, it may seem a tenuous argument - to suggest free dress promotes this agreeable, nurturing atmosphere - but I assert it does precisely that.

It is no secret a huge problem amongst teens is body image and their susceptibility to marketing. Brand labels and acquiring the latest in fashion are central in the hearts and minds of many in this age group and following from that is the divisions created between the haves and have nots. Should we not then, as parents, be fighting to break this hold, to be wholeheartedly encouraging, embracing, celebrating any sign that our youth is managing to sidestep its insidious grip on them?

Let's face it. The high ideal of our 'mainstream culture and values' are, after all, largely shaped by American television and created by marketers' for their own financial gain, in response to global trends. The universal pursuit of image with the singlemindedness our marketers thrive on, results in casualties; individualism and spiritualism give way to conformity and materialism.

Wherever style of dress is so heavily proscribed and where failures to follow the code are so mercilessly punished through social death and ostracism as in our modern society, isn't it refreshing to encounter an environment where those shallow, pernicious dynamics are banished? Princes' Hill appears to be just such a place. Diversity, rather than fitting in, is key. Where anything goes, nothing can be deemed below par or to not measure up. Individual thinking dismantles a mindless pack mentality. Op shop chic, street-wear, punk, goth, surf-wear, (dare I say it? 'dag') (or individual interpretations thereof) - is all there and, it seems, to happily co-exist.

Apparently, at Princes' Hill a fitting motto might be: *Everyone is equal, precisely because everybody is different*

(7)

An argument that's sometimes offered in defence of school uniforms is that somehow they're a levelling influence, i.e. that if everyone wears the same, then differences of income, class and even fashion awareness disappear. I very much doubt that these factors do become invisible when students all wear the same thing, because of course it's never quite the same thing: you can adapt a uniform in subtle but very clear ways to signal your affluence or the fact that you're not a dag etc.

I haven't heard about students at PHSC or NFPS being picked on for what they wear. I've been on the NFPS Council for a few years and the uniform policy has not been questioned in that time for any reason. Perhaps it's in the nature of both schools and their communities to be generally tolerant of differences of background and personal style - that's pretty much the impression I have from my boys' experience.

(8) We recognise the flexibility and opportunity for developing maturity of judgement that few dress rules bring. PHSC's requirements we perceive as being the minimum for safety and minimising offence to others. I expect it would provide a good learning base for subsequent university and other casual wear. Not so sure about employment requirements where these are more formal, but I daresay employers with these requirements make them clear.

Jacqueline has generally dealt pretty well with the PHSC regime.

We cannot say the same for our other student however. It has provided enormous opportunity for dress and personal image competition, seemingly never ending pestering for expensive, inappropriate and (to us) unnecessary clothes purchases. It also leads to disruptive panics in the morning when some key item cannot be found or is in the wash. It also leads to Clare normally requiring at least 90 mins from getting up to being ready to get out the door, which seems crazy.

(9)thought I'd take this opportunity to congratulate the school community on such a successful dress code. It allows individuality of expression without any of the label competition so feared by parents! In our household clothes choices and responsibility belongs to each individual...you choose it, you wear it, you bring it home.

I've always felt uniforms are about control, if you can get them to look the same they'll all think the same, and power, power of older adults to choose what young adults wear and then enforce it with punishments. The sense of belonging and respect for the institution whose uniform you wear is a very tired line trotted out by schools and parents reinforcing the sameness and group mentality and, I think ,stifling individualism. It's interesting to note the school children/adults in the USA don't wear uniforms yet maintain strong collegiate links throughout their lives. Finally I think uniforms are boring old links with mother England, silly public schoolboy images from Enid Blyton's era!

I think our school is filled with bright, colourful, imaginative young things and some of them express their personalities with an amazing dress sense but you know most of them wear sensible , comfortable clothes and shoes because what you wear is not who you are or make you love your school.

Finally I would only ever support the status quo regarding the dress code at our school. It works fine.

Staff feedback

(1)

Having worked in a school where we were expected to check under students trouser edges to see if they were wearing Doc martin boots or shoes (only shoes were permitted), I LOVE our no uniform policy: I also love the creativity that students express in their choice of clothes. Checking uniform is such a waste of time, especially for coordinators: our coordinators can concentrate on important issues like learning and welfare. Having said that, if a school does have a uniform policy, it needs to be enforced, and the school needs the backing of the department to do so: otherwise, confusing and divisive for all concerned, including parents.

(2)

I think our tolerance of various student hair styles and original clothing is part of the school ethos. The students are creative and original in their appearance and this a form of self expression that adds to the character and diversity of the school. The students feel they can be individuals and can dare to be different within acceptable boundaries of good taste. There is a long history at PHSC of students expressing themselves by thinking creatively about their appearance.

(3)

Reckon the emphasis should be on safe, functional and non provocative/inoffensive clothing, not on uniform as such, along lines of existing policy.

(4)

I'm sure everyone has said this, but after working in schools with uniforms i am very greatfull to be in a school where the large investment in time and energy required to enforce uniform policy is not needed. we can spend our time teaching rather than policing.

(5)

Having no uniform is an important identifying feature of Princes Hill which also supports our values - acceptance of the individual and individual expression. It has a downside at times but mostly I think it contributes to the positive atmosphere in the school.

(6)

no uniform takes away one of the biggest reasons students have to hate school. It removes the need to rebel (often) and one of the biggest most common reasons for students to argue with teachers.