

**PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO DRESS CODES AND
SCHOOL UNIFORMS IN VICTORIAN SCHOOLS**

Submission by:



Quality Apparel

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Primary Schoolwear

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04 May 2007

Mr. Geoff Howard
Chair
Education and Training Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
Melbourne VIC 3002

(disc attached)

Via email
etc@parliament.vic.gov.au

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Anthony Charles Sterpin'.

Anthony Charles Sterpin
Managing Director
PSW Pty. Ltd.

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ABOUT THE SUBMITTING ENTITY

PSW Pty Ltd, located in Cheltenham, Victoria is a manufacturer and distributor of quality clothing, specialising in the School Uniform Market. We are the largest direct-to-school supplier in Australia and have established our reputation and market strength through innovative designs and quality customer service. Our philosophy on quality has never changed.

Established in 1990, over 80% of our revenue is derived in Victoria and we employ 136 people; 125 in this state.

PSW has prided itself on being a major player in the School uniform market, servicing all facets of schools – Primary, Secondary and P-12 across all school types – Government, Catholic and private schools. With sales offices in New South Wales and South Australia to compliment our Melbourne base, PSW has built its business on 5 key principles; quality, delivery, large product range, value for money and strong relationships.

We've always worked on very simple principles - the same, the same, the same! That means absolute consistency in everything we do including quality, colouration, sizing, service levels, delivery patterns and careful consideration to styling and design.

All PSW garments are shipped out of our 32,000 square foot factory and offices in Cheltenham, Victoria. Our head office encompasses our sales team, retail shop, screen printing facilities, local production offices, quality control, warehouse and distribution. In addition to over 70 on-campus uniform shops operated by our Retail Department we also have ... retail stores located in Cheltenham and Glen Waverley servicing schools in the local area.

Each delivery of stock we receive is extensively reviewed by our Quality Control team to ensure all garments are of the highest quality and adhere to all specifications and quality control guidelines. In addition, approximately 10% of all products are manufactured locally, requiring us to purchase from a large number of local suppliers.

We maintain the highest quality standards for all our garments. As our company runs on a Stockline basis, our warehouse always holds a large amount of unprinted stock, ready for in-house logo application and dispatch at short notice. This allows us to deliver our Stockline goods within 7-14 days. Our colour and stock range is large enough to ensure we have the garment that is perfect for your uniform.

All screen printing production and logo application of hats, bags and garments is done in-house by our trained print operators.

The quality of our garments is what we are known for and we are insistent on keeping up-to-date with children's needs. All PSW garments are made with children in mind so that uniforms are hard-wearing and long lasting while being comfortable

and fashionable. This is evidenced through things like double-stitched seams, reinforced knees on pants and the heaviest fleece available.

Our range has been designed and improved over many years explicitly for Australian Schools and Australian conditions with a strong emphasis on comfort and quality. Our staff are completely service focused which means that every move we make is with the customer in mind.

We aim to be the leading supplier of School Uniforms in Australia, through quality products, innovative designs, reliable and efficient delivery and most particularly caring for our clients' individual needs, by ensuring exceptional customer service and follow up. In addition, we have a small but growing export base.

Since the company begun, PSW has made it a priority to give back to school communities throughout Australia. Through our various relationships with schools, principal associations and conference facilitators we have regularly contributed to local schools and sporting clubs.

PSW is proud to be involved with schools and see our role as uniform supplier as an important part of that relationship. We regularly sponsor school fetes, trivia nights and provide prizes for raffles and other fundraising events. We are also a regular sponsor and participator in School Principals conferences throughout Victoria and Australia and regularly contribute uniforms to many charities including World Vision. As a contributor to State Schools Relief we help families with financial difficulties purchase school uniforms where otherwise this would have been difficult.

Our vision is to be recognised by our stakeholders as the best and most successful supplier of schoolwear in Australia. We will achieve this by:

- Building superior stakeholder relationships
- Continuously evolving through innovation
- Supplying the highest quality products
- Offering the best in-full on time delivery service
- Giving the most consistent performance
- Ensuring that all form of communication with our customers leaves them fully satisfied
- Developing the highest level of overall awareness of the Company and its offering

THE PSW POSITION

PSW believes that uniforms should be compulsory in Government primary and secondary schools.

There are number of reasons for this which are outlined through this submission. These views represent a sample of research and anecdotal evidence gathered in over 17 years in the school community.

These include:

- instilling students with an important sense of school spirit and pride
- allowing students to direct relatively higher focus and direction towards academic pursuits
- allowing for identification with the school and the school community
- preparing students for work after school, where most industries have uniforms of some description

Notwithstanding, PSW believes in the current model, where School Councils are best positioned to determine:

A – whether uniforms should be compulsory; and

B – the type of uniform a school will implement (quality, style, fit)

This is in line with current Government policy (specifically Section 13 of Education Act 1958 - VIC) and is the most appropriate manner of determining what is best for the school and its students.

A key element in the discussion around uniforms is consistency and enforcement. Once a decision is made by School Council to establish a uniform, applying this policy consistently and enforcing the uniform policy is critical. This extends to non-compulsory school uniforms; PSW believes that if School Councils decide to have a school uniform, they must have the same ability to ensure this uniform be mandatory and enforceable under school policy.

Ultimately School Councils reflect the values and beliefs of the school community and stakeholders, having been elected democratically by those same stakeholders.

A *poorly enforced* uniform negates many of the benefits of having a uniform. At the same time it does not allow for any of the presumed benefits of *not* having a uniform.

Whilst school uniforms represent an expense to the parents, this is merely the replacement of other clothing a student would wear. In many cases, uniforms can be seen as reducing financial hardship on parents by removing competition amongst students and thereby reducing the overall dollar amount a parent would spend on clothing.

Notwithstanding, for those in financial hardship, there are mechanisms in place to have part of the costs associated with the uniform subsidized. These measures include:

- Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA)
- State Schools Relief (SSR)
- Various school based welfare funds and programs

Uniforms may also allow schools to raise funds, thereby reducing the reliance on fees and levies, further reducing financial hardship on parents. Depending on the commercial nature of the arrangements with suppliers, schools may even be able to direct funds from uniforms to improving the school amenities and facilities, thereby lessening the reliance on capital funding requirements from Government.

Uniforms form part of the fabric of life. Their presence extends well beyond school communities, with most industries requiring staff to wear uniforms, including: Police, Nurses, Hospitality Staff, and Emergency Services amongst others. Even office workers wear a broader uniform (suits, shirts, ties etc).

BENEFITS AND COSTS OF MANDATORY SCHOOL UNIFORMS

Most discussion around the benefits and costs of mandatory school uniforms centre on the concept of "freedom of expression" vs. "sense of belonging".

This argument extends to the flow-on benefits that a "sense of belonging" can provide. These include:

- relatively better student behaviour
- relatively lower delinquent activity
- relatively better academic progress

The argument for freedom of expression is weakened by the fact that within a uniform code there are a number of options students enjoy. For example, jumpers, jackets, hooded tops etc. The availability of various options (within reason) and degree of variety within the school enables students to individualise their schoolwear whilst still maintaining uniform integrity.

The UK has recently implemented a policy that leverages substantially from the existing Victorian Government policy. The following excerpt from the BBC quoting the Education Secretary outlines a strong position. (bbc.co.uk, 09MAY2003)

Official guidance says the decision whether to have a uniform, and if so what sort, is down to schools and local education authorities.

Where they do have one, it should suit the pockets of parents in the area. The updated guidance was issued last year in response to complaints that some parents could not afford their children's uniforms.

The Education Secretary, Charles Clarke, said: "School uniforms are good for discipline and school ethos, giving pupils a real sense of identity with their school. They can also help us tackle bad behaviour in the classroom.

"Heads who turn round failing schools tell us that uniforms play an important part in their work to raise standards.

"Parents have a crucial role to play in supporting their children in schools and getting the best possible start in life, and I welcome their support for school uniforms which clearly have a marked effect on improving behaviour and standards in our schools."

There is additional discussion around the financial costs to parents of a school uniform. However this cannot be considered in isolation from the money saved on additional clothing required by students (up to 60 hours a week worth). A high quality, durable school uniform will often provide financial relief to parents (especially when the uniform substitutes expensive, "fashion" clothing). This situation is highlighted further as students enter secondary school and the focus on appearance and resultant peer pressure increases.

This concept is explored further in this submission under the section "**Procurement Arrangements – A Parents Perspective**".

In many parts of the world, mandatory uniforms have been associated with making a material contribution to reduced discipline problems amongst students.

Whilst no-long term, formal studies have been done on the effectiveness of uniforms, some schools have kept their own statistics.

For example, the Long Beach Unified School District in California has cited a 76% reduction in school crime since uniforms were introduced in 1994, along with an increase in attendance.

In the absence of formal studies, statistics like these cannot be solely attributed to the implementation of uniforms. However there is considerable evidence to imply a strong causal relationship. Dr. Alan Hilfer, the senior psychologist in the Children's and Adolescent Unit at Maimonides Medical Center in Brooklyn has been quoted, "Uniforms do eliminate competition, pressure, and assaults perpetrated by older kids on younger kids for their sneakers and other possessions. They also allow some kids to focus better, especially in the lower grades."

<http://school.familyeducation.com>

Additional benefits of mandatory school uniforms include:

- Eliminates opportunities for the ridicule of less popular or less fortunate students based on attire
- Decreases theft and violence among students over designer clothing or expensive sneakers
- Instilling students with discipline
- Helping parents and students resist peer pressure
- Helping students concentrate on their school work
- Helping school officials recognise intruders who come to school and recognize their own students at excursions (i.e. Zoo, Scienceworks etc)

THE VIEWS OF SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

PSW views itself as an important and active member of the school communities in which it is active. Since 1990 PSW has supplied over 2,000 schools Australia-wide, the majority in Victoria.

In our experience, school communities have on the whole embraced the sense of pride that a strong uniform policy instills in students and the broader school community.

In undertaking this submission, PSW spoke with a number of stakeholders from various school communities to ascertain their views. In particular, the thoughts of Principals (with who PSW has established strong working relationships) were sought. As a result, PSW understands the general view of school communities to be:

- There is overwhelming acceptance of school uniforms in Victoria school communities
- A good uniform policy will attract students to schools
- Higher student numbers in turn will improve school viability, generating increased revenue and enabling expenditure on facilities and student needs

PROCUREMENT ARRANGEMENTS – A SCHOOL PERSPECTIVE

There are broadly two discreet procurement arrangements within school communities. These are defined as the “wholesale” and “retail” models.

Both are effective means for schools to offer uniforms to students; the most appropriate model will determine a number of specific factors that are unique to the individual school.

The two types of procurement arrangements are defined as follows:

“Wholesale”: where a school purchases inventory from a supplier, on-selling the uniforms at a margin to parents and students

“Retail”: where suppliers provide uniforms direct to students and parents, sometimes paying a commission, rebate or other form of remuneration to the school

There are pros and cons associated with each model. Neither model necessarily results in cheaper or more expensive schoolwear - this is determined by a number of factors, including the commercial efficiency of the arrangement between the school and the supplier.

WHOLESALE MODEL

Pros

- Schools control inventory and supply arrangements as they see fit
- Schools retain the margin on inventory sold as an effective means of fundraising
 - Note: PSW has noticed substantial variation on the profit margin charged by schools based on their location and demographic make up

Cons

- Inventory holdings may take valuable space at school
- Schools are responsible for slow moving and “dead” stock
- Cash impact on schools in paying for uniforms on purchase (larger schools may have to hold up to \$150,000 worth of stock at any given time to meet demand)
- Schools must “market” the uniform and make it accessible for students and parents to purchase
- Schools have to arrange either volunteer or paid staff to sell uniforms

RETAIL MODEL

Pros

- A more “hassle-free” structure – schools do not get involved in individual transactions and any subsequent follow up/service requirements
- Increased options for parents to purchase schoolwear - uniforms can be bought on-campus or, depending on arrangements with the supplier, via retail shops (either on or off campus) or website ordering

- Schools receive a passive income stream from rebates, commissions, or rental from any on-campus shops (depending on commercial arrangement with the supplier)
- No commitment to inventory (physical space and financial)
- No insurance and staffing requirements

Cons

- Schools must actively promote the uniform policy to maximise income earning potential
- Without a rigorous arrangement with the supplier, schools may not have the ability to extract minimum service levels and exit options if required
 - Note, a well defined agreement between school and supplier will give schools this ability

Both these models enable school communities to enjoy the benefits a mandatory school uniform and earn income to spend on school projects, including welfare programs if they see fit.

Importantly, both models work substantially and materially more effectively in a single supplier arrangement. Where school councils have contracted with multiple suppliers, the reduction in scale (i.e. number of potential for sales) has lead to a lower quality product (through comprising of technical specifications) and upward pressure on prices. In this case, the concept of increased competition doesn't provide the consumer and end-user (parents, students) with an advantage.

As a policy, and for the reasons outlined above, PSW rarely enters agreements where the school has a multiple supplier arrangement.

There are, however, inherent inefficiencies in each model that do not allow for the maximisation of income for schools in the most convenient and hassle-free manner. Each model has the potential to create tension between schools and suppliers that, if not resolved, may lead to sub-optimal outcomes for the school community.

LICENSE AGREEMENT

PSW believes that the most equitable and productive form of relationship between suppliers and the School Council is a **License Agreement**. PSW will be presenting a standard License Agreement to Government for discussion at a later date.

A License Agreement enables the School Council to leverage its Intellectual Property (the school name, logo, colours, uniform) for maximum benefit of the school, parents and students.

A standard License Agreement, by providing certainty and comfort for both the School Council and the supplier, will deliver the following outcomes:

- Ease of implementation (especially if endorsed/recommended by the Education Department) by way of eliminating the requirement for in-depth legal advice
- Best possible product through investment in product specifications and design
- Lower prices for school wear for parents and students

- More opportunities for parents and students to purchase uniforms
- Minimum service levels
- A guarantee of product performance, thereby delivering value for parents
- Flexibility in manufacturing special size garments and other special need requirements

PROCUREMENT ARRANGEMENTS – A PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE

PSW has undertaken substantial research to support our anecdotal views on procurement arrangements from a parent's perspective.

A sample is shown below:

- Experts believe that the use of school uniforms is more affordable to families because there is not as much pressure to buy expensive, trendy clothing. Uniforms are made to last, and can be washed easily and frequently. After the initial cost of buying uniforms, there is no need to spend as much money on clothing. Some people believe that uniforms cost less than trendy children's clothing.

Article from
<http://kids.lovetoknow.com>

- According to an official survey, People say the amount they paid for a school uniform varied from less than £25 to more than £200.

Four in 10 people thought the uniform they had to buy was too expensive - but almost 60% said that it was not.

The Department for Education stresses that where schools choose to have a uniform it should be affordable.

The survey - done by inviting people to fill in a questionnaire on the department's website - suggested most people (77%) were in favour of uniforms for school children.

More than two thirds thought a uniform could help to improve discipline and raise standards.

But uniforms did not influence their choice of school.

Eamonn O'Kane, general secretary of the NASUWT teachers' union, said the cost of school uniform could be an issue.

"Many teachers believe school uniforms are a great social leveller. Uniforms undermine competitive dressing, which can often lead to bullying," he said.

"Concerns have been raised, however, over the cost of school uniforms, especially when specific items of clothing are required, such as a blazer, in addition to simple garments such as sweaters with a school logo or shirts and tie."

- The economic argument for School Uniforms

While it is true that school uniforms cost money, it is equally true that in western society the peer group, fashion industry and other societal pressures on kids to wear the '*right*' trainers, the '*cool*' trousers or the particular style of top that is in fashion this month can lead to ostracism, bullying and emotional stress for those pupils whose parents are unable or unwilling to pay the price.

A school uniform in such circumstances can prove to be a cheaper way of dressing children, and one where the problems alluded to above do not come into play.

It should also be noted that wearing uniforms is not particularly burdensome for most students. Kids might not particularly like uniforms, but school uniforms rarely provide the catalyst for traumatic events in a pupil's life.

Article from
http://education.newarchaeology.com/against_school_uniforms.php

CONSISTENCY WITH ANTI-DISCRIMINATION LEGISLATION AND HEALTH PROMOTION POLICIES

PSW can tailor garments as required for religious and other valid reasons within the parameters of a school's uniform policy.

For example, in most cases, religious garments can be made to match existing school uniform. In this way, students can exercise religious wishes whilst maintaining uniform integrity.

There are two primary legal precedents from the United States that provide insights into Anti-Discrimination, namely:

- Castorina v Madison County School Board, 2001
-
- Tinker v Des Moines Independent School District 1969

HEALTH PROMOTION

In the specific area of Health Promotion, PSW has developed an innovative product to improve safety in Children's hats. The "Safety Slouch" has a safety release valve for all corded hats, reducing the risk of student injury.



Edition 1 SAT 24 MAR 2007, Page 010

Students, you can leave your hats on

By JASMIN AFIANOS

A NATIONAL company has donated safety hats to a Territory school after a four-year-old girl was nearly strangled.

Chelsea Yu suffered burns to her throat when she jumped off climbing equipment without realising her chinstrap had become caught on one of the struts.

Deputy principal Heidi Preston said the incident could have been much more serious and banned students from wearing hats with chinstraps.

Anthony Sterpin, Managing Director of PSW, read Chelsea's story in the Northern Territory News and has donated Safety Slouch hats to the 380 pupils at Ternant Creek Primary School.

The hats have chinstraps that detach when pulled. "Hat straps could choke or cut children when caught or pulled," Mr Sterpin said. "The Safety Slouch prevents this from happening. "By cutting off straps, hats may not sit properly and if a hat flies off in the wind and a child chases it on to the road, the consequences could be disastrous." Hats with chinstraps are already banned in many parts of Europe and America.

NEW



Primary Schoolwear

SAFETY SLOUCH



Would it compromise a child's safety?

MEDIA RELEASE

Aussie first hat innovation designed for child safety

An Australian first slouch hat, with a strap that releases under pressure to prevent injury to children, will be launched by one of the country's leading school uniform suppliers in early September.

The Safety Slouch was developed by PSW in response to concerns that hat straps could potentially choke or cut children when caught or pulled in the playground.

The cord of the new Safety Slouch hat features a quick release clip, which detaches under 2-3 kilograms of pressure to prevent playground accidents and avoid unintentional injury.

According to Mr Anthony Sterpin, Managing Director PSW, the Safety Slouch is a welcome development at a time when every Australian child must wear a hat at school under the 'no hat no play' policy, which is designed to protect against the sun.

"There had been some concern that while hats protect against the sun, inflexible hat straps could potentially harm our children in other ways. This is what we set out to address with the Safety Slouch," says Mr Sterpin. "The Safety Slouch is a great solution for protecting children against both the sun and from potential injuries that may be caused from hat straps that don't release under pressure."

Mr Sterpin says that PSW knew it was time to take action when it heard that some parents were cutting the straps from their children's hats.

"By cutting off straps, the hat may not sit properly or parents may be faced with having to purchase multiple hats if it falls off the child and is lost," says Mr Sterpin. "This also creates scenarios where hats may fly off in the wind, for example, and children chase them onto the road as they would a bouncing ball."

The Safety Slouch is the only hat in Australia to feature the special quick release clip and is available exclusively from PSW from early September.

Schools that are interested in purchasing this hat for their school uniform should contact PSW Head Office on 1300 309 164 or email promotions@psw.com.au for further information.

All hats can be printed and embroidered with School Logos to match a school's corporate image. PSW began in Melbourne 16 years ago and is one of Australia's largest suppliers of primary and secondary school uniforms. Innovative products like the Safety Slouch are designed to meet the company's philosophy of 'putting smiles on kids' faces'.

For further media information (not for publication) please contact:
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GET IT ONLY AT PSW!

Call our Promotional Hotline on: 1300 309 164

Or visit our website: www.psw.com.au



Primary Schoolwear

ENFORCEMENT AND SANCTIONS

Having made the decision to establish a school uniform, the enforcement of a consistent policy is integral to realising the benefits of a uniform policy.

Notwithstanding, there must be exemption criteria and processes to ensure that economic hardship does not impede a student's ability to wear a school uniform (*see next section*).

PSW strongly encourages rigorous adherence to manufacturing compliance from school uniform suppliers. There have been substantial advancements in the broader textile and manufacturing industries with regard to production policies and processes. Many of these are reflected in the "*Outworker Code of Conduct*" that reflects Australian views on unfair labor practices around the world.

In addition to the compliance elements outlined in the "*Outworker Code of Conduct*", PSW argues strongly for consistency in technical specification and quality.

PSW encourages regularity within a uniform set and argues that quality and durability must be "non-negotiable". Many uniforms are worn by children up to 12 hours a day, 5 days a week, 40 weeks a year; PSW believes parents and students have a right to expect a highly durable and technically superior products.

A Code of Conduct for school uniform suppliers that formalises these concepts is the natural next step for the industry.

EXEMPTION CRITERIA AND PROCESSES

Most schools offer second-hand uniform shops and as previously discussed, PSW strongly supports mechanisms such as EMA and SSR. In addition, PSW accepts lay-by and credit cards; over 70% of retail sales come from credit cards.

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL TRENDS:

INTERNATIONAL POLICIES AND TRENDS

PSW has undertaken substantial research as part of this submission, revealing a number of trends and policies from within Australian and internationally.

A summary is included below:

- ***Wearing school uniform is strongly encouraged in Tasmanian government schools.***

Wearing a uniform identifies your child with their school and places all students on the same level in terms of clothing.

Most schools have a uniform shop or clothing pool that sells new and/or second-hand items. There are also retail shops that supply uniforms. Ask your school about your options.

No state has mandatory school uniform policy, whilst there are little differences in each state the main criteria is the same that they encourage the schools to implement it they don't force them.

From the department of education for Tasmania website

- ***Love it or loathe it, school uniform is a part of growing up for countless children around the world.***

But a suggestion that it should be made compulsory in German schools has sparked fierce debate.

Justice Minister Brigitte Zypries put forward the idea after two Muslim girls were expelled from a school in Bonn for wearing burkas.

A national school uniform was a "simple solution" to prevent such problems in the future and mask the differences between rich and poor, she said.

For many, however, school uniform in Germany is irretrievably tainted by its association with the Nazi era and Hitler Youth.

So what do school uniforms represent in other parts of the world?

Prussian model

In Japan, boys in secondary school wear an outfit modelled on 19th Century Prussian army uniforms. Called the gakuran, it consists of a dark jacket with stand-up collar and buttons down the front, worn with trousers.

Girls, on the other hand, wear a dress called the sailor fuku, based on European naval uniforms.

But as Christopher Hood, director of Cardiff University's Japanese Studies Centre, points out, the designs have nothing to do with Japan's own military past.

Rather, they date from the establishment of the formal education system in the 1870s, when Japan looked to Germany, France and Britain for ideas.

Interest in school uniform is strong in Japan, he adds, with fashion parades to show off different schools' latest twist on the designs. Even characters in manga, or cartoons, are often dressed in gakuran.

And, as in many countries, uniform policy is strictly adhered to.

"There's a set length for skirts and teachers would take out tape measures to check," Dr Hood told the BBC News website. "Of course kids in Japan, like everywhere, look for ways to bend the rules."

Religious issue

Within Europe, Britain has long been viewed as the country of school uniform.

Generations of parents have marshaled children into shirts and ties, blazers and oddly-shaped hats.

A recent legal case took the issue of school uniform into different territory, with student Shabina Begum fighting a school in Luton for the right to wear a jilbab, a traditional Muslim gown.

Although the House of Lords eventually ruled in favour of the school, there is little doubt the issue of how to accommodate religious beliefs with school uniform policy will flare up again.

Meanwhile in France, a law passed in 2004 banning Muslim headscarves and other "conspicuous" religious symbols in French state schools remains contentious.

Unifying uniform

For children in many African countries, school uniform can be a source of pride, a reminder of a colonial past - or a huge financial burden.

UNESCO education adviser Susan Nkingyangi, based in Kenya, says the introduction of free primary education in some African countries has been a mixed blessing to the poorest families.

"The idea behind uniform was that it unifies students so rich and poor look alike. But in reality, they cost parents often what they cannot afford," she said.

Many children have only one uniform, she says, and that may be all the clothes they have. By the end of a year, the uniform is often "pretty shabby" and the child often subject to bullying.

'Incredibly naive'

Josef Kraus, president of the German teachers' union, called Ms Zypries "incredibly naive" to think introducing school uniform would resolve problems of religious integration and social discrimination in schools.

Speaking to Netzeitung website, he also warned that Germany had a "problematic tradition" as regards school uniforms.

A spokesman for the German justice ministry stressed Ms Zypries had made only a suggestion - and it was down to individual federal states to decide.

What she had in mind was not the British-style school uniform, he added, but rather a kind of standardised clothing "to strengthen school identity".

A violent history lies behind the recent emergence of school uniform in the US, says David Brunnsma, assistant professor of sociology at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

School uniform began to appear in the 1980s, he says, when it was introduced in some urban areas to tackle the problem of "kids shooting each other over designer sneakers".

But it only really took off in 1996, when the then President Bill Clinton endorsed school uniforms in his annual State of the Union address as a way to stop what he called the "gang problem".

In less than a decade, school uniform has been adopted in about a quarter of all US primary schools and perhaps 12% of secondary schools, Prof Brunnsma says.

"People were arguing that it would level economic inequalities... and create an atmosphere in school where students would feel part of something bigger than themselves," he said.

However, 10 years of research have shown that "emphatically there really is no difference between students who are forced to wear uniforms and those who are not".

"In fact I've found some very small but significant negative findings on academic achievement," he concludes.

It's a school report Germany may be well advised to study.

From the BBC website <http://news.bbc.co.uk> written by Laura Smith-Spark