

Submission to the Inquiry Into Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools

1. The Need for Uniforms

There is some misunderstanding in the community that wearing a uniform somehow equates with academic achievement. This is clearly not the case. My eldest daughter recently completed VCE at a secondary college that has no uniform but does have a dress code. Students are expected to wear clothing appropriate for a work place with specific rules for specific curricula activities. The school has an outstanding record of academic achievement.

Why do adults want to dress children the same? That question has puzzled me for years. When I talk with other parents most indicate that they want their children to grow strong and independent. Yet there is this push to put children in uniforms so they can be the same. Children are not the same. People are not the same. Are we teaching children that above all *conformity* is the goal?

Let children wear what they want to wear. If they want to promote their religious beliefs through clothing, or promote the latest local pop sensation, let them. It is about letting children develop as individuals, about children learning that not everyone dresses the same, that not everyone thinks the same. They need to express themselves in many ways, through hairstyles & colour, body piercing & body art, music and clothes.

What do uniforms add to the learning experience? Nothing.

2. Dress Codes and uniforms should be a local school council decision.

The decision to have uniforms, mandatory or otherwise is best left to the local school council. It is the school council that reflects the values and needs of the school community. It is each school that can best determine what its local community can afford to pay for uniforms, and how strict the uniform policy needs to be enforced. There are primary schools that have guidelines on what socks to wear, not something I think is essential for learning but nevertheless this is something those schools feel is necessary. Personally I chose a primary school that was not so strict on uniform because I don't think a uniform has anything to do with learning. However I had a choice to find a school that suited my beliefs. (I would have preferred a primary school without a uniform but there were none in the local area.)

3. Costs of mandatory uniforms

The only way mandatory uniforms would be cost effective is if every child in every school had the same uniform, not different uniforms for different schools. It costs a small fortune to refit a child when they are required to change schools. Having the same uniform for all school children could eliminate this cost.

In my experience the argument that uniforms are cheaper is not correct. Having had children at schools with and without uniforms the cost of clothing those children is the same. Uniforms are more expensive than normal clothing although I have found more clothes are required for children who attend non uniform schools.

3. Enforcement, sanctions, exemptions.

A minefield. Remember the situation in France when the authorities banned the wearing of religious symbols? What a fiasco. Who is going to enforce dress codes and mandatory uniforms? It has to be the local school. (Unless the state government is going to fund a new uniform enforcement team?) This goes back to my second point – leave the decision up to the local school.

What assistance will be given to those who can't afford the mandatory uniform or those whose parents don't make the effort to purchase the uniform? What sanctions would those children have placed on them? No education? Again leave it to the local school to make the decisions. They know the community – the families – they know when to turn a blind eye.

Where does the list of exemptions begin? Private schools? Religious needs? Economic needs? Again these decisions will be made at the local school level so it makes sense that the entire issue of dress codes and uniforms should be left to the local school community.

Summary

The decision whether or not uniforms should be worn is best left to each local school community. Let each school council determine the dress codes and uniforms that reflect the values and needs of their community.

Celebrate diversity not conformity.

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