



VASSP
Victorian Association
of State Secondary
Principals

2/13 - 21 Vale Street
North Melbourne Victoria 3051
Telephone +61 3 9326 8077
Facsimile +61 3 9326 8147
Email vassp@vpa.org.au
Website www.vassp.org.au

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

Dear Mr Howard,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on dress codes and school uniforms in Victorian schools. The Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals (VASSP) would like to comment on criteria (a) to (f).

In preparing our submission VASSP elicited responses from school communities across Victoria to the Committee's terms of reference. Our submission contains comments on each criteria based on that feedback and contains actual excerpts from school community responses. School uniform can, and does, generate passionate debate. That passion can be clearly felt in the excerpts provided in this submission. They are provided so that your Committee has the opportunity to hear directly the voices of Victorian Principals and school communities on the issue of dress codes and school uniforms.

School community comments are contained in the indented sections of the report and are not individually identified.

At the conclusion of the submission a number of VASSP recommendations are provided for your Committee's consideration.

Yours sincerely


Brian Burgess
President
Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals

Uniform and Dress Codes Submission

The vast majority of Victorian public schools have compulsory school uniform and school communities were very passionate in their support of this policy. However, whilst a smaller number, schools with no compulsory uniform were equally passionate about their school policy.

(A) The benefits and costs of mandatory school uniforms

School communities cited the benefits of compulsory school uniform as essentially the reduced cost and practicality for parents and the elimination of “fashion creep” amongst students, especially girls. This took the “what is cool” emphasis out of the equation and was a particular advantage for students from low SES backgrounds by assisting them to “fit in”.

On the negative side Principals noted that the policing of uniform is very time consuming.

“As the assistant principal of a multicultural secondary college, with a 65% EMA population, as well as parents who are quite “well off”, school uniform is an important part of ensuring that students view each other as equals. It is my opinion that the students appreciate the fact that there is no competition around the issue of clothing and the vast majority of students wear our uniform with pride.”

“Students do feel a sense of pride from “belonging to the team” and uniform is an important social symbol of belonging. One of our College values is “pride in presentation”, which relates to both schoolwork and personal presentation. Our students take this very seriously.”

“We are able to keep our costs relatively inexpensive, although this is more difficult for a small school than a large one, but it is important as our cohort of students increasingly come from less affluent families and as the drought and the local rural economy stagnates. Benefits include the visible symbolic one of belonging here, the ease with which we can identify in the yard any ‘outsiders’, the compliments our students happily accept at interschool sport (our PE uniform does look good). A subtle benefit for me is that uniform or the lack, gives me an excuse to start a conversation with a student, which often ends in my unearthing other issues in their life.”

“We have good quality fabrics and everything can be purchased from the Uniform shop, hence no variation, all students look and have the same, less opportunity for bullying. That is students looking different to others or not having same “brand”. We have compulsory school bags for this reason. (Surf shop school bags cost up to \$90).”

(B) The views of school communities about dress codes and school uniforms

School communities argued that a school uniform builds a sense of unity, pride and identity amongst students. They believe that it helps alleviate (for some) negative perceptions of student behaviour and values. They noted that codes of dress are in many industries; therefore a uniform is an aspect of learning and good discipline around workplace expectations. Many indicated that a school uniform makes it easier to identify “outsiders” and therefore there is a significant element of student safety.

Schools that have no compulsory school uniform noted that no uniform removes a source of conflict between teachers and students and the school and parents. This was especially true in senior years. They indicated that conversations with students were around learning and not “tuck your shirt in” and that students could reflect their personality and individuality in their choice of clothes and that this celebrated a respect for diversity. No compulsory uniform reinforced that the core purpose of education is to enhance the learning process not to ensure that everyone looks the same.

"Currently uniform policies are established after extensive consultation with local communities, they work generally well because of this. Removal of processes such as this that engage the community in local school decision making would be detrimental to what we have worked hard to establish over a long period of time."

"This group of parents (*in a new school*) worked a ridiculously short time frame to ensure that our new school opened with everyone in full uniform - an indication of the importance of uniform to this group of "prospective" parents and community members. Students were part of the sub committee that finalised the policy, endorsed by (*School*) Council earlier this year. Our uniform looks great and we are always receiving comments - for example at the Anzac Day service the other morning. Somehow the uniform has helped in establishing our identity and setting the tone. The cultural impact and sense of pride in one's school cannot be overlooked. Also, the kids look good and they know it!"

"The uniform policy should be left up to each school. We think no school uniform is fantastic.
- disadvantage issues less obvious
-conversations with students start with a learning focus rather than a discipline regime! (tuck your shirt in please!)
-the time saved by teachers in administration is enormous
-students get to reflect their personality
-individuality is celebrated"

"Ours is a "Non-Uniform School" with a clearly publicized dress code that is not prescriptive and which supports the school values of "Individuality" and "Respect for Diversity". We are a community where each person feels safe to be themselves and challenged to think critically, to work in teams, show leadership and achieve success along many pathways. The introduction of uniform at our school would mean a total review of the values that we hold dear. We believe that our core purpose is to consistently work towards enhancing the learning process not ensuring that everyone looks the same. If having a uniform was a value held by our community then the school would have a uniform and we would patrol it as occurs in many other schools. However, this is not a consideration of this community as we consider that the most valuable aspects of schooling are not "the uniform" but the building of positive relationships amongst all stakeholders thus supporting the most effective learning in order to achieve the very best learning outcomes possible. Some may argue that uniform makes it easy for students to be recognised, we would rather believe that our students are recognised as members of our community through their qualities and actions rather than by the clothes they wear."

(C) The most cost efficient and practical uniform procurement arrangements

VASSP strongly believes that procurement policies should be up to each school council and that there should not be a form of statewide procurement. Assistance is currently given through second-hand uniform shops for poorer families. State Schools Relief is also available but unfortunately is limited in the assistance it can offer. There needs more than State Schools Relief and VASSP suggests that in some cases families either require an up front allowance or Government needs to actively support State Schools Relief financially. However there were issues cited in some rural schools re local availability.

"Efficient and practical procurement is a major issue. I am in a small secondary school in a small country town. We cannot justify the expense of keeping large quantities of uniform in stock ourselves, and the local supplier who formerly stocked the girl's woollen jumper no longer does so, for the same reason. We now use a supplier in a larger neighbouring town, but concern has been expressed at our school council that we are seen to be using a supplier outside our town. We order PE uniform from a supplier in Melbourne, but numbers/quantities mean it's only viable to order once per year, so we have to guesstimate what we will require so we don't have stock sitting in the cupboard unsold but also so we have enough uniform for new enrolments."

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

It was argued by some schools that health promotion policies are more about educating parents and that some aspects would increase costs and could therefore be a problem for many families. It was noted that in secondary schools SunSmart policies are unbelievably hard to enforce – especially hats. These policies need to be practical for teenagers as schools will struggle to get teenagers in long sleeves in summer. Most schools indicated that they have a big push on sunscreen.

VASSP believes that uniform and dress code policies should allow religious freedom and policies should include details of cultural or religious dress. For example the hijab could be worn but in school colours.

“Anyone who has had to nag an adolescent about a bike helmet or sunscreen or a broad brimmed hat will know that detailed compliance regulations will be an untenable and unworkable burden for secondaries. We already consider the timing of activities, we include sunscreens in kits.”

“We are rural/remote, hot/dry climate, yet I question aspects of Uniform Policy that attempts to address the cancer issue. Again, how practical is it to have a Policy that states all of those very admirable terms of reference: long sleeves, hats, collars etc., if it is not enforced? And I would like to see the Secondary School that has a hat policy that would meet Cancer Council requirements! I do not include baseball or bucket hats, as they do not cover adequately. A child is at school something like 11% - 14% of their day. Of this time, an hour or an hour and a half is spent outside. Students are not that silly up here and will look for shade.”

“I read the SunSmart and the Cancer Council of Victoria suggestions in “The Age” this morning but I disagree with their logic. Students spend the majority of their day inside when they are at school on a normal day. I have yet to hear from a parent complaining about a student who has been sunburnt whilst at school during a standard school day.”

“As a PE/Sport teacher, students that are highly active need to wear clothing that allows them to remain as cool as possible. Remembering that many secondary colleges have a gym/hall where PE/Sport is taught. Are students able to wear short-sleeved shirts inside and then required to put on a long-sleeved shirt when they go outside?

I think the clear message needs to be common sense.

- o Schools have a responsibility to educate parents/students/community in health issues surrounding skin cancer and SunSmart. I don't think anyone would disagree with this. Is this achieved through mandating uniform? – NO.
- o Allow school principals and councils to work through this in a positive and effective manner. One, which allows decisions to be made that support the student and parent. Schools can (and many already do) provide long-sleeved shirts in which students **may** purchase. These could be listed by schools as **highly recommended** but not mandated.”

“Clearly health and safety issues are considerations in uniform design but the SunSmart people need to get practical. You are not going to get teenagers wearing long sleeves on a hot day (even on a cold day in some cases). The hat issue worked well in primary schools but has been a dismal failure in secondaries. The same will happen with any attempt to dictate such things as sleeve and skirt length as I read in this morning's paper.”

“I hope we're not considering going down the French route and banning the hijab. Rather than going that way it would seem more useful for schools to include details of cultural dress in

their uniform policy eg our school uniform policy requires girls of the Islamic faith to only wear white hijab i.e. it is part of the uniform."

"We have a wide range of optional items that students can wear, in any combination and this caters for the expectations of our Muslim families, (we do not stress the colour of hijab that is acceptable, but most girls choose school colours anyway, thus demonstrating their willingness to be a part of our school culture) and students who have personal preferences for what they feel is comfortable clothing. The options also support students with body image issues to be comfortable and well presented."

"Our policies are firm, but enforced with empathy, which means occasionally, we give uniform to students. We also tolerate some variations, for instance a couple of boys whose body shape is not flattered by our winter polar fleece jacket wear a black windcheater which is very similar to the uniform one, but whose shape suits them better. Policies regarding jewellery are more problematic, and the current fashionability of piercings is a real concern, from a health viewpoint."

"Piercing is more of an issue than clothing at the moment. We have a well published and researched (including reference to OH &S regarding covering the piercings etc) Piercings policy was passed in Council but this is the one that draws the most abuse from parents who regard putting holes in their children's bodies as a really nice birthday present!!"

(E) Appropriate enforcement and sanctions

VASSP believes that uniforms and dress codes should be approved by each school council and be backed by the region and the centre. Once approved the uniform should be a condition of enrolment and non-negotiable. Parents have a responsibility to see students leaving home in uniform and wearing it properly. Uniform that is not strictly enforced is very frustrating for parents who have purchased in good faith.

There is usually not a lot of entrenched opposition but it can be a real battle when it occurs.

"Last year we had a very difficult time with introducing changes to the College uniform. We were taken to the Ombudsman, The Human Rights and EO Commission. We endured threats to my Assistant Principal and I and I believe we received very little support in dealing with these people. Although the decision by Council was validated by all these authorities we were under pressure from politicians, the Regional Director and the media to respond to these parental complaints.

- Our costs were kept to a minimum
- We had run forums for interested parents
- We costed the items for our uniform shop
- We have sanctions for non compliance
- We do not have exemptions because even 'hardship' is catered for

I think we need the community to understand that Councils have rights in determining uniform and should be supported by our masters instead of running scared all the time. As you can see I am still a little angry about all the nonsense that went on last year."

"By far and away our biggest issue is support for uniform codes as passed by Council from the relevant bodies especially DET. If it's a solidly conceived policy with appropriate research, rationale and discretionary clauses, passed by a school council, that should be it and that should be the message that Regional Offices give parents when they complain."

"Enforcement and sanctions is lax according to some members of our school community, draconian according to others! We insist on either uniform or a note, and that means that at any given time perhaps 5% of students are out of uniform. While this doesn't look perfect, it does cede to families the right to make decisions and to students the responsibility for their

own actions. A little sensitivity means that occasionally we look beyond the wording in the note and suggest alternative arrangements. The sanctions therefore become sanctions for not taking responsibility, not sanctions for not wearing uniform. In theory students do a yard duty or a detention (varies according to year level) for not bringing a note, in practice we give plenty of second chances. From time to time it is necessary to confront parents about the wording of their notes, and correct the misapprehension that uniform expectations are just imposed by a mean Assistant Principal, and no one else cares. I have found that I can always convince parents of the need to conform although that sometimes means compromises, such as we'll buy the jumper and you pay us back, or we'll allow your child to continue to wear those shoes until they wear out, if you then buy black ones."

"We have a detailed school uniform re-enforced by an appropriate policy completed with public consultation, addressing all of the DoE requirements and having full council support. Two years ago the father of a boy beginning in year 7 stated that his son would not be wearing school uniform and would simply wear whatever he wanted. After a lot of work at the school level with the family we were told by the region not to bother, that we couldn't enforce the wearing of uniform and just to allow him to wear whatever he chose. What's the point?"

"Unfortunately, even though councils develop strong uniform policies for implementation in their schools, there will always be some students (and families) that will try to avoid their responsibilities and commitments to the policy. It is at these times that the media is contacted and issues sensationalised. What we need is for Government departments to support the Principal and Council re their enforcement of the "letter" of the policies in question. Too often, education departments take the side of students and parents in their attempt to avoid "negative" media (politics!). Sanctions imposed by schools are reasonable, and usually include taking off inappropriate jewellery and exchanging items of clothing to the acceptable."

"College Council expectations are very clear - they expect teachers to enforce the Uniform policy and the rewards / sanctions system set up. They expect the Principal to be able to enforce all aspects (including things like removal from excursions, etc) and they expect all families to comply."

(F) Appropriate exemptions criteria and processes

VASSP believes that within well constructed and consulted uniform and dress code policies there should be no exceptions except on health grounds. This is in the context of "common sense" implementation practices that currently operate in our schools.

"We do not have any exemption criteria but will listen to individual cases. These come up from time to time to do with footwear-letters from podiatrists etc. Muslim children have been catered for in terms of long sleeves, permission to wear head scarves and long skirts over trousers etc-but we have not had a request for full burqua yet."

"Requests to wear talismans of a religious nature have meant that we allow them provided they can't be seen. Lots of Maori students want to wear Tikas or large carvings around their necks, which we want covered up."

"We have no official exemption criteria but here in the bush there are plenty of bush lawyers seeking them! We find it works better to insist on uniform, and the time we allow them to locate and wear correct uniform is the flexibility that convinces our community we are being fair."

"I can't think of any cases where it would be useful or appropriate to exempt individual students or groups of students from wearing the school uniform. So, for example, when we reintroduced woollen jumpers lots of boys claimed to be allergic to wool. The supplier was

able to have lines put on the jumpers – the allergy to wool disappeared miraculously! There was one genuine case and the lining did the trick.”

And a final comment from one school:

“Thanks for chance to have an input. I can’t believe we are wasting time and energy on uniform discussions when there won’t be enough teachers to staff schools in the future! Talk about fiddling while Rome burns!”

VASSP Recommendations

Recommendation 1

That school uniform and dress code policies remain the responsibility of individual School Councils.

Recommendation 2

That uniform and dress code procurement arrangements remain the responsibility of each school council.

Recommendation 3

That the inclusion of health promotion policies in school uniform and dress codes be encouraged but not mandated.

Recommendation 4

That school uniform and dress code policies be encouraged to be flexible enough to cater for cultural differences and religious requirements.

Recommendation 5

That Government support financially the State Schools Relief Committee so that families in financial hardship are more directly supported.

Recommendation 6

That a condition of student enrolment be adherence to the school policy on uniform and dress code and that Principals and school councils be unreservedly supported in the implementation of the school's policy by regional officers, the central office of the DoE and Government.