

# **Whittlesea Secondary College**

## **Response to Parliamentary Enquiry into School Uniforms**

### **The benefits and costs of mandatory uniforms**

At Whittlesea Secondary College we have had a compulsory uniform since its inception in 1977 which had been endorsed by College Council. We believe the uniform is affordable, enhances a sense of belonging and assists in developing a College identity. It importantly helps staff to identify our students both at and away from the College. The uniform is neat, distinctive and easy to maintain and students are expected to wear their College uniform at all times.

While it is acknowledged that there is a cost to purchasing a school uniform it is also acknowledged by most parents that the costs of apparel bought with fashion in mind can be exorbitantly expensive and on balance a school uniform minimises this cost.

### **The views of school communities about dress codes and school uniforms**

The uniform is constantly under review to ensure the uniform continues to be relevant, comfortable and affordable. Therefore in 2004 preliminary discussion began to take place regarding aspects of the uniform. It was felt that the appearance of students was seen as not meeting community standards. The windcheaters had become faded and out of shape and they were not providing sufficient warmth in inclement weather. Senior students began to request items of uniform that distinguished them and juniors were beginning to show little pride in their appearance.

The College Council at Whittlesea Secondary College began having more serious discussions regarding the changes and upgrade of the College uniform as far back as March 2005. As a consequence the College Newsletter described the proposed changes and a number of parent and student forums were held to provide input into the changes. The student forums were well attended however the parent meetings were quite poorly attended. Despite this we continued to offer meetings throughout 2005-6 and kept parents informed about the changes.

At the end of this process College Council made the final decision regarding the new uniform.

A percentage of parents oppose specific parts of the uniform changes and continue to hold their beliefs despite consultation and mediation. In the end Council had to make the decision.

### **The most cost efficient and practical uniform procurement arrangements**

The College uses a limited number of suppliers ensuring competitive costings are maintained. Prices are monitored through the Trading Operations Committee and a quality assurance process is in place. The Uniform Shop is open every Monday morning throughout each College term and on selected days of the summer holidays, Saturdays and weekdays at the end of and at the beginning of a College year.

The College maintains a second hand uniform shop and buys back items of clothing from students who leave the College or out-grow the uniform. This in some cases halves the cost of purchasing the uniform.

State Schools Relief is available to parents receiving EMA.

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

The College ensures that the variety of options enable the uniform to be non discriminatory. The College alerts students to sun smart headwear and does provide for this at the uniform shop. However any plain navy blue hat is acceptable but not compulsory. Females have the choice of shorts, tailored pants, dress, or skirt and boys may choose between tailored pants and shorts. At this stage there is no seasonal prerequisite. Any headscarves must be dark blue and jewellery must be kept to a minimum. Facial piercing is being phased out and is currently only permissible at Years 11-12 and must be clear retainers. This will eventually be banned from the College at the end of 2008. Students with health issues are catered for.

**Appropriate enforcement and sanctions.**

Schools that currently have established compulsory dress codes must be able to place sanctions if students choose not to conform.

Detention is a suitable consequence for minor breaches

Withdrawing students from activities including classes (as long as appropriate work is provided by their class teacher) is also used.

It is disappointing that often parents want to undermine the College's policy. Even support from a parent through a note should not relieve a student from the relevant consequence if deemed appropriate.

Strong enforcement of the uniform code is necessary to establish an environment where students accept the need to conform to College rules. Schools need strong support to enforce the dress code.

**Appropriate exemption criteria and processes**

- Exemptions to the dress code are accepted on medical grounds with a medical certificate.
- Financial hardship is recognised and assistance given
- Uniform passes are for only short periods of time and closely monitored.

**Trends**

It is becoming a trend for school uniforms in the government system to become more formal, neater and more distinctive and is often used as a marketing tool when surrounded by private schools or government schools that have upgraded their

uniform. Unfortunately we live in a competitive environment where the community is quick to judge unkempt, untidy, faded and outdated fabrics and styles.

### **Rationale**

As an administration we are often confronted with the statement that a uniform does not improve or affect learning. This is true but seems to miss the point that uniforms develop a sense of belonging and creates a framework where expectations of discipline can be adhered to. A pilot who turns up to work in a t-shirt and shorts will not be flying his/her plane that day even though he/she is still a competent pilot. Disciplinary action may be necessary for the pilot to acknowledge he/she has a responsibility to adhere to the company's dress code.

The ambitious business man or woman would not turn up to a Board Meeting similarly dressed. The 'suit' has become their uniform. Uniform exists in retail, hospitality, engineering, medical, and numerous other occupations. In fact uniform in its variety of forms is part of our lives and for students and their parents to acknowledge this will enable us to do the other important things necessary to ensure that our students enter the world of work prepared.

### **Recommendations**

If this report highlights the angst some parents feel then it may be necessary to formalise the processes of developing a student dress code and the sanctions that may be necessary to enforce it.

Avril Salter  
Principal