

EN100

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Joseph J. Wunderlich

# Should American Primary Schools Require Formal Uniforms?

Public education, a system designed to give the majority of children the knowledge and skills required to move forth. Whether or not this system yields its end goal is up for debate. A perfectly arguable topic, mainly because nearly everyone has experienced primary education of some sort and considers themselves an expert as a result. Stand still in a high school library, hallway, or classroom and you can see just how much learning is happening. A lot usually, but not exactly the subject material that has primary importance. Kids are like that. Nearly all schools in the U.S. have a set hierarchy of course subjects, starting with those used most on the path to become, and as, an STEM major. Our goals are in the right place, but our schools don't reflect these goals at all. So what qualities do schools (and their students) have that preform the best in these higher level categories of math, science, and language? One often overlooked and unappreciated aspect of fancy, successful schools is the student's dress code. That's right. Let's take a look at clothing and self-image.

It's common knowledge to most people that what you wear can have an effect on other's assumptions about you, as superficial as they may be. A man in a suit is a universal sign of wealth, stability, and confidence, if men's store models have anything to prove. But what about the effects of your wardrobe on you, yourself, and no one else. Few public institutions have uniforms aside from military academies and collegiate institutes. The reason is likely in the "everyone is a special snowflake" mentality. Given, students should be allowed to wear whatever outfit they can come up with, but at school it is a different matter. School is special; it's not like other gathering places. School isn't an über formal location that should ever demand, say, suits, but it isn't comfortable enough for it to be tolerable to wear whatever. Let's call it a ultra casual-casual work space.

In this massive work space with its overwhelming variety of differing cliques and groups, one could be forgiven for assuming that all students think very differently. The majority can be classified rather quickly. The “average” student wants to invest as little effort as possible so they can get back to doing whatever they would do on their own, which is unlikely to be hard or passionate work. There are the bright few who when they start an assignment give it all they can, aim to impress and surpass their students, and can be called type A personalities, to further organize things. These students stand out in a good way because they always want to keep themselves occupied, but direct that energy to what really matters and still have enough left over to pursue their passion. Some students understand the pointlessness of public primary education and grind through the day, but have hobbies that they are invested in. These students are the middle ground and have potential to spread their energy to all facets of life to meet up with the aforementioned, type Aers. A student that works hard in general is a reliable one.

What all of these students have in common is that they probably already wear a uniform of their own. This can consist of sneakers, jeans, a t-shirt, and probably a button down or polo that isn't tucked in. This outfit, as common as it may be, is not ideal for an environment as critical as school. If adults have to conform to certain standards at their job then why not students? There's no doubt that children who are taught strict habits early in life go on to be organized and self-motivated adults. Take look at the Japanese and English schools. Excellent examples for the often positive effects of strict environments and dress codes. Perhaps the Japanese take it to a bit of an extreme, but the kind of conformity I'm talking about isn't the “Every nail that sticks out must be driven in” approach that the Japanese so rigorously exhibit.

Think of the positive effects now; students from upper-class and lower-class environments will have one less variable to worry about being judged by for one. You never have to worry about to wear, and there's always a spare article of clothing if you spill a drink on yourself for instance. The cons to a uniform are the possibility that even more emphasis will be put on bodily features: height, weight, facial appearance. Whether or not this potential funneling of judgment is for the best is uncertain.

Now to the topic of student rights. Ah, yes. The go-to card during any argument between a student or their parent with the school board. I can imagine somewhere in the US at some point a miffed parent complaining: “Everyone has a right to express themselves through what they wear. Your rules are infringing on my child’s creativity, personality, etc.” Another common complaint is that it violates the first amendment, which is not at all true. Schools are allowed to enforce any rules the school board and administration allow. Children’s rights are different from the rights of adults.

David L. Brunsma, a Professor of Sociology at Virginia Tech, writes in his publication, “School Uniform Policies in Public Schools,” that schools in poorer minority areas and ones with more significant student problems were the most likely to enforce uniforms. He explains that higher income districts tend to have parents who are more involved in their children’s education and as a result tend to take part in voting on school policies, whereas districts with less involved, concerned, or busier parents leave the school to make all the rules themselves. A similar situation can be observed with voting. Minorities tend to vote less because they view their vote as less important when this is untrue. He then goes on about how school uniforms achieve very little in the long term. Supposed problematic relationships between parents and the school, regression toward racism and classism, and an increasing role of corporate control in the American public are some of his arguments against.

Long term effects of uniforms. Are there any? No. Reducing violence and behavioral problems, fostering school unity and improving the learning environment, reducing social pressures and leveling status differentials, and increasing student self-esteem and motivation are little more than try-hard and overly embellished excuses in the policy’s favor. There has been no significant evidence from schools around the world that wearing uniforms increases academic output from the student body. Given, while wearing fancy clothes can have a positive effect on one’s ego, people quickly adapt and realize just how superficial it all is. A strict dress code is merely a package that comes along with a strict environment.

Back to the final question: Should American primary schools require formal uniforms? The answer can only be an opinion, and as such, the majority will be against. Every school in the United States has their own regulations to keep students from being a general disturbance, e.g. having hair that touches the floor, wearing a shirt that says “F\*\*\* you” on it, or wearing chains that get caught on door knobs. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, as of the 2011-2012 school year, 19.3% of all the public schools in the United States required students to wear uniforms; 54% enforce a strict dress code. On the other hand, 56.9% of private schools required a uniform; 71.3% of which obviously also enforced a strict dress code. But should all schools require uniforms? It is hard to say yes without also encroaching on the national student body’s rights. As I mentioned previously, a uniform is a sort of by-product of a strict, hierarchical environment. China has students everywhere wearing them. If some national law is enforced then people may start to get the wrong idea about the United States. Of course, this will never happen. If people are willing to fight in favor of keeping guns they’ll never use to defend themselves against cowards that will never intrude their home, then there is no doubt that a nationwide formal dress bill has little to no chance of ever even passing the desk of a busy congressman, let alone a local office.

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