

Issue Overview: Should students have to wear school uniforms?

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Phoenix Anderson, 6, of Chicago, shops for school uniforms at Kmart. Kmart has expanded online and in-store uniform offerings in response to the growing number of public schools that require students to wear uniforms. John Konstantaras /AP Images for KMART

It used to be that only private school students wore uniforms. Now public school students in the United States are increasingly wearing them as well. One in 5 public schools required students to wear uniforms during the 2013-2014 school year. During the 2003-2004 school year, that number was only 1 in 8. Public school students are more likely to wear uniforms in very poor areas than in wealthy ones.

Supporters say school uniforms make schools safer for students. They say that uniforms create a "level playing field." Students who wear uniforms are less worried about who has the nicest clothes. So they pay more attention to their schoolwork, uniform supporters say.

Opponents say that kids express themselves through their clothes. They argue that making them wear uniforms limits this freedom. They also say that uniforms don't make students behave better or do better in school. Uniforms don't hide the differences between rich and poor students, they argue. In fact, uniforms actually make them worse.

History Of School Uniforms

School uniforms began in the 1500s in England. Poor children attending the Christ's Hospital school wore yellow stockings and blue cloaks. In September 2014, students at Christ's Hospital were still wearing the same uniform. The school says it is the oldest school uniform still in use. In 2011, nearly all of the Christ's Hospital students voted to keep it.

In later years, school uniforms in England became associated with the upper class. They were only worn by students at the very richest schools.

In the United States, generally only private schools made students wear uniforms. One exception were the government schools for Native American children. The children were taken away from their families and dressed in military-style uniforms.

U.S. School Uniform Movement Begins

In 1987, students at some public schools in Maryland and Washington, D.C., began wearing uniforms. The students and their families were allowed to choose if they wore them, and most did. School officials said that these students had a better attitude. They got into less trouble. The students were also less interested in wearing expensive designer clothing for school, which saved their families money.

By the fall of 1988, 41 public schools in Washington, D.C., required uniforms. Soon the movement spread to other states, generally in city schools with poorer students. In 1988, the mayor of New York City expressed support for school uniforms. He said that they encourage "common respect."

In 1994, a school district in California became the first to require all its students to wear uniforms.

School Uniforms And The Law

In 1969, the U.S. Supreme Court decided a major case about students' freedom of expression. The court ruled that schools could not limit students' right to express themselves as long as the students were not being disruptive. The case concerned a group of students who had worn black armbands to protest the Vietnam War. Opponents of school uniforms later used this case to argue that students have a right to choose their own clothing. This right is protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, they argue.

Other courts have also made decisions about school uniforms, often in favor of them. In a 1995 case, a judge ruled that wearing "sagging pants" was not a form of freedom of expression. The judge said that "sagging pants" did not express a "message." "Sagging" was merely a teen fashion style, the judge argued. The student had said that his outfit was a part of hip-hop style worn by minorities.

In 2000, a student was suspended for refusing to wear a school uniform. His family said it was against their religion. After it was challenged by a civil rights group, the school agreed to let the student wear his own clothing.

No state law requires school uniforms. No state law forbids them either. As of 2008, 22 states allowed schools to institute dress codes or uniform rules.

U.S. Uniform Statistics

Uniforms are becoming more common in public schools. In the 2003-2004 school year, about 1 in 9 public schools had uniforms. In the 2011-2012 school year, that number was 1 in 5. More city schools required uniforms than schools in the suburbs and the country. Students were much more likely to wear uniforms in very poor schools than in richer ones.

Source: school-uniforms.procon.org