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The Issues of Biased School Dress Codes

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## **Introduction**

It's no secret that today's K-12 students are faced with a greater weight on their shoulders than ever before. There is a constant pressure on students to be enrolled in upper-track courses, involved in as many extracurricular activities as possible, maintain positive relationships, both inside of school and out, and possibly be employed in a part-time job. Oftentimes, the last thing that is on a student's mind when preparing for the day are the harsh rules that a typical public school dress code entails. To this day, there are many public schools across the United States who impose unjust dress code regulations which contain underlying sexist and racist connotations. And to add to that, what adolescent wants to be singled out in front of their peers for something as simple as what they are wearing? As long as students are dressed reasonably, who are we as teachers to outright shame students for what they are wearing, and to abide by an unjust system of rules made to tell students that they are being a 'distraction'? The purpose of this study was to examine the history and negative effects of merciless public school dress codes across the United States, conduct a survey on dress codes from students at Duquesne University, and to look at a school district who is leading by example.

## **Background**

Dress codes in public schools are often outdated. They started to gain popularity in the 1920's and they haven't changed a lot in accordance with current times. An issue that many have with dress codes is that it can be considered unconstitutional, prohibiting students' free speech. The first major United States Supreme Court case to gain attention with regards to student dress code violations of First Amendment rights was *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District* in 1969. In this case, several students were under fire for sporting black armbands in peaceful protest against the Vietnam War. The Court ruled that students do not need to "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the school gate" (Schronrock et al., 2016). Today, more than 57% of United States public schools have implemented a dress code, and there has been much debate over where the line is drawn for student expression and dress in school. According to the American Civil Liberties Union, it is legal for

schools to establish dress codes as long as they do not treat boys and girls differently, force students to conform to gender stereotypes, or censor reasonable viewpoints (“Know Your Students’ Rights, 2021). Aside from this, it’s no secret that female students are singled out and objectified for unjust dress code violations more so than their male peers, and it’s even more strict for black women. What kind of message does this send to all students? While a just form of dress regulations must be in place to create a healthy school environment, many argue for school districts to create an updated, equal set of policies regarding appropriate apparel.

### **Biases in School Dress Codes**

Schools with strict dress codes often cite that their regulations prevent in-class distractions, create an environment that is similar to a workplace, and to reduce pressures based on socioeconomic status. In today’s climate, debate is constantly stirring over whether excluding students from the classroom for dress code violations is worthwhile, and whether these guidelines are disproportionately focused on girls, especially those of color. Many students believe that girls shouldn’t have to modify their outfits to cater to their male peers. This idea of “covering up” does not teach students how to dress, but it can make girls feel self-conscious and ashamed of themselves, especially when called out in front by their teachers. A study by the American Psychological Association shows that girls who objectify themselves have a higher rate of self-image issues (Ornstein, 2014). It’s obvious that schools should be focusing more on their students' education than their appearance.

While young women are especially targeted for dress code violations, black girls are under greater scrutiny. Many girls of color wear their different hairstyles such as braids, hair extensions, and afros, are more likely to be disciplined than their white classmates (Jones, 2018). In 2017, sisters Mya and Deanna Cook decided to wear their hair in braided extensions. Feeling great about their appearance was soon diminished when they went to school and were asked to step out of class. They were given several infractions for dress code violations due to hair extensions, which were banned by the school for being deemed “distracting.” The girls rightfully refused to remove them and were then removed from

extracurricular activities, banned from going to the prom, and threatened suspension (Lattimore, 2017). It has also been proven that in recent years, girls of color would be sent home for wearing dreads, head wraps, and even wearing their natural hair (Lattimore, 2017).

Also, students who have limitations on what they can wear due to their religion possibly face greater challenges as well. Muslim student Ifrah Jama wasn't able to participate in her seventh grade physical education class, as she wasn't permitted to wear a skirt or dress for class (Drake, 2017). Due to this, Ifrah had to break Islamic dress for her class. Additionally, two muslim students, Hajah Bah and Fatmata Mansaray, were sent home from school for wearing hijabs without carrying signed notes from their parents (Canal, 2017). These are not the first instance in which muslim girls have been discriminated against for wearing hijabs in school. In a 2015 study by the Council on American-Islamic Relations, 27% of California high school students who wear a hijab reported being discriminated against (Canal, 2017). Nobody, either in school or out, should be shamed for religious clothing, and having biased dress codes against religious dress only sends a hateful message from school administrations.

Besides the humiliation of being called out in front of classmates, dress codes take girls out of class to change clothes or go home, losing valuable class time. In turn, this sends a hurtful message to all students that a boy's education is more important than their female counterparts, and that the education of girls in minority groups is even less valued. Young women in public schools must not be seen as "distractions" in their classroom, and feel the constant pressures of getting in trouble for their appearance.

### **Survey**

A personal survey was conducted of 100 Duquesne University Students who attended public school districts that had non-uniform-enforced dress codes. Students who participated in the survey were from Pennsylvania, Maryland, New Jersey, Ohio, Washington, and Texas. In this survey, 60 reported that their alma mater's dress code was unfair, 22 reported their alma mater's dress code was fair, and 18 reported that they were somewhere in between. Of the 100 surveyed, 82 reported that either them or one of their classmates were singled out for breaking the dress code, either subtly or in front of a class. This

survey included an open-ended section, in which subjects were asked to share to comment on their experience with their school's dress code. Most shared stories were along the lines of them being pulled out of class for different dress code violations and girls being held more accountable than boys for abiding to their dress code. A repeated issue amongst those who took the survey was that either they or some girl they knew of a heavier/bustier build would be singled out a lot more than their fellow female classmates. Another first-hand issue that many mentioned were the uncomfortable conversations had when a male teacher would tell them what they're wearing is inappropriate. Finally, many said they wish for schools to create policies that don't shame girls for wearing clothes they feel good in, and to stop objectifying young women and telling them their presence is a distraction.

### **Leading By Example**

Schools respond to dress code controversies in a variety of ways. Some make the switch to uniforms, some ignore their students' protests, and some fix their dress codes to be more lenient, pleasing both students and teachers. One school that is leading by example to make their dress code equal and reasonable is Evanston Township High School in Evanston, Illinois. Evanston was nationally recognized on multiple news outlets for their new dress code, which was implemented for their 2017-18 school year (Stevens, 2017). Evanston's dress code begins with the statement "Staff shall enforce the dress code consistently in a manner that does not reinforce or increase marginalization or oppression of any group based on race, sex, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, cultural observance, household income, or body type/size" (Stevens, 2017). Their rules enforce that teachers should focus on educating students and not what they're wearing, allowing students to be responsible for their own "distractions." The basic principle of their dress code is to have key body parts covered, wearing a shirt, pants equivalent, and shoes (Student Dress Code). Students are permitted to wear hats, leggings, tank tops (including spaghetti straps and halter tops), and even pajamas. The only limitations is that students can't wear clothing depicting anything illegal, hateful, or hostile, as well as harmful accessories (Student Dress Code).

Since then, feedback on their new policies has been nothing but positive, and that was confirmed on a personal phone call I had with Evanston's principal and assistant superintendent, Dr. Marcus Campbell. He said that he and the school's superintendent were the ones to revise their dress code. He told me the rules were determined to be body positive for all students. Since its implementation, Dr. Campbell said there have been very few violations and has been received very positively amongst students, teachers, and parents. Evanston Township High School should be put on a pedestal for all high schools who have dress codes. Their rules are fair and reasonable, and other schools should be following in their footsteps going forward to not have a biased dress code.

### **Conclusion**

At the end of the day, the negative effects of school dress codes outweigh the positives, and schools today have much larger, pressing issues than having teachers send students home to change. A student's choice of clothing should be seen as a form of self-expression. Harsh dress code violations cause thousands of young women added embarrassment and self-image issues when singled out for violations, not to mention the added pressures that black girls and people who wear religious dress face. These issues also make for an awkward, negative student-to-teacher relationship with those who single students out. This all was made clear through a conducted survey of Duquesne University students, as well as the positive reception that Evanston Township High School received upon their updated policy. In all, strict dress codes that are disproportionately geared towards girls do nothing but humiliate them, take them out of class, and send an indirect message to girls that a boys' education is more important than feeling comfortable and happy with how they look.

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