



BY DAVID L. BRUNSMAN

# School Uniform Policies in Public Schools

THE SCHOOL UNIFORM MOVEMENT CONTINUES TO GROW DESPITE RESEARCH INDICATING THAT IT DOESN'T DO WHAT IT'S SUPPOSED TO DO.

The decade was the 1980s, a time when superficiality and consumption were woven deeply into our culture, and when *A Nation at Risk* warned that “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity...” It was in this climate that Washington, D.C., Mayor Marion Barry, citing the example of the city’s successful Catholic schools, first discussed the possibility of a standardized dress code for the city’s public schools. Nothing came of the idea, but in 1987 Baltimore’s predominantly black Cherry Hill Elementary School implemented the first publicized uniform policy as a means of reducing clothing costs and social pressures on children. School officials also hoped that uniforms would lead to better grades, better behavior, increased self-esteem, and school pride—assumptions that persist today.

By decade’s end, though there were precious few school uniform policies in our public schools (it is estimated that less than 1 percent of middle schools and 1.5 percent of elementary schools had them), the reactionary and superficial climate that nourished the idea of putting public school students in uniforms was growing and would continue to grow in the decades that followed.

In my recent book, *The School Uniform Movement and What it Tells Us About American Education: A Symbolic Crusade* (2004), I make a strong historical, cultural, and empirical case that the 1980s did indeed set the stage for what would become a significant reform movement in American public education. The movement to uniform public school students is significant in several ways:

- The number of schools with mandatory uniform policies in elementary schools today is 15 times what it was in the mid-1980s.
- Though still predominantly at

the elementary school level, uniform policies are expanding across all levels of K–12 public education.

- The drive to uniform public schools students occurs mostly in disadvantaged, poor, and minority schools and school districts.
- The school uniform movement continues to be rooted in pure speculation, without any scientific evidence to support anecdotal arguments for its effectiveness.
- The movement continues to grow in popularity with administrators and parents despite research in the past decade that is beginning to show that school uniforms do not work!

I wish I could say that I have a chip on my shoulder or an axe to grind, or that I had bad experiences with school uniforms. But I can’t. I came to this topic as an empirical social scientist interested in collecting educational and social data that would lead me to understand the reality and complexities behind what so many take to be a simple, obvi-

ous educational reform: the public school uniform movement.

In this article, based largely upon my book, I will illustrate the kinds of results, from a variety of data gathered during eight years of rigorous research into this issue, that have led me to a deeper interpretation of school uniform policies and their potential—or lack thereof—in public education. I will examine the distribution of uniform policies across time, sector, population, and region; discuss the impact of these policies on perceptions of school climate and safety; and present verifiable evidence related to the effectiveness of uniforms on a variety of educational outcomes.

## Which Schools Adopt Uniform Policies?

Until I began my research, there existed no reliable estimates of the number of public schools that have school uniform policies. I approached the empirical investigation of this issue through an analysis of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS) data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

In 1998–1999, 11.5 percent of public elementary schools had uniform policies, which had increased to 15.5 percent by the end of the next school year. It is interesting to note the patterns of growth in school uniform policy adoption simply between these two years. Both urban areas and rural areas increased their scope of implementation more than suburban areas. This seems to indicate that suburban parents, with their higher average economic standing and education levels, resist implementation more than their urban or rural counterparts.

While there are no reliable data



**The movement for school uniforms in public schools continues to grow despite the author's research indicating little if any impact on student behavior, achievement, and self-esteem. The author examines the distribution of uniform policies by region and demographics, the impact of these policies on perceptions of school climate and safety, and their effectiveness on a variety of educational outcomes.**



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available regarding the prevalence of uniforms in public middle and high schools, it is presumably much lower than that for elementary schools, although there is evidence that the numbers may be growing.

However, it is of considerable interest to investigate, with the available ECLS data, some patterns distinguishing those schools that have uniform policies and those that do not.

It appears that those elementary schools that had significant “problems” were also the ones more likely to have uniform policies. High enrollments and lower percentages of students achieving at grade level may have prompted administrators to pursue and eventually adopt a school uniform policy. This may also be the case where both the safety

and the educational climate of the school are perceived as poor.

Of course, it has been well documented that the key to success in schools is highly related to income, which is itself related to race and urbanization. This may explain why an examination of results for the demo-

graphic and socioeconomic factors associated with uniform policies show that more affluent schools are less likely to have uniform policies, while disadvantaged schools are more likely to have them.

Schools with high levels of poverty and a high proportion of minorities also have a much higher propensity for school uniform policy adoption, as do schools that have low levels of parental involvement. This finding is intriguing, given the fact that parents must be supportive of such policies in order for them to actually be implemented with any respectable degree of compliance. Yet, we know from previous research that urban, minority, and poor parents are much more likely to defer educational authority to the school and its staff, and therefore are less likely to be involved in their children’s education.

Looking at the relationship between zero-tolerance policies and school uniform policies, one sees that these policies overlap a good deal of the time. Elementary schools with uniform policies are also more likely than other schools that do not have such policies to have security guards, metal detectors, sign-in policies, and limited restroom time. And yet, according to a recent study (Ed-

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## Why School Uniforms?

The anecdotal reasons for pursuing uniform policies in public schools have ranged widely:

- They reduce violence and behavioral problems.
- They foster school unity and improve the learning environment.
- They reduce social pressures and level status differentials.
- They increase student self-esteem and motivation.
- They save parents money on their children’s clothing.
- They improve attendance.
- They improve academic achievement.

## Summary of Uniform Policy Effects on a Variety of Educational Contextual and Outcome Variables by Grade Levels

Outcome	Kindergarten	Kindergarten To 1st Grade (changes)	8th Grade	10th Grade
<b>School Climate</b>				
Student Perceptions of Safety Climate	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n/a
Principal Perceptions of Safety Climate	n.s.	n/a	*	n/a
Student Perceptions of Education Climate	n/a	n.s.	n.s.	n/a
Principal Perceptions of Education Climate	n/a	n/a	n.s.	n/a
Parental Involvement	n/a	n.s.	n/a	n/a
<b>Achievement</b>				
Composite Test	n/a	n/a	n.s.	*
Reading/Literacy	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	*
Math	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Science	n/a	n/a	n.s.	n.s.
History	n/a	n/a	n.s.	n.s.
General Knowledge	n.s.	n.s.	n/a	n/a
<b>Attendance</b>				
Attendance	n/a	n/a	n.s.	n.s.

"n.s." indicates the effect is *not* statistically significant.

"n/a" indicates that either data and/or outcomes were not available.

\* indicates a negative effect that is significant.

educational Testing Service 2000), such policies do not deter delinquency on campus.

### How Effective Are School Uniform Policies?

The sheer quantity of analyses of school uniform effectiveness I have conducted during the past eight years number in the hundreds, and the space limitations of this article limit me to key findings encompassing longitudinal analyses of kindergarten (1998–1999, ECLS-K data), from kindergarten to first grade (1998–1999 to 1999–2000, ECLSK-

1 data), eighth grade (NELS:88 data), and 10th grade (NELS:88; first follow-up data, 1990). The table opposite shows the effect of uniform policies on key educational climate and outcome variables: student and principal perceptions of safety and educational climate; academic achievement; and attendance.

**School Climate.** As you look across the table, you will see that school uniforms do not impact a school's climate, save for a small negative effect on 8th grade principals'

perceptions of the safety climate.

These findings are much more rigorous than previous studies of school climate (Murray 1997) and certainly contrary to the contemporary discourse on the potential effects of school uniform policies. The results of such analyses are quite detrimental to the reigning assumptions of enhancing school unity and safety through standardized dress policies.

In fact, it is in these two areas—safety climate and educational climate—that most advocates of school uniforms "theorize" that uniforms will affect many of the other assumed outcomes, like student self-esteem, behavior, and academic achievement. It is to the latter outcomes, the goal of most reform efforts in American public education, to which we now turn our empirical eye.

**Academic Achievement.** Glancing at the table again, it is exceedingly clear that school uniforms are not significantly implicated in the success or failure of elementary, middle, or high school students (except for negative effects on reading scores). Furthermore, research has shown that school uniforms neither directly nor indirectly affect academics by creating a positive school climate or a positive approach to learning. Regardless of where one starts in the chain of anecdotal assumptions (whether uniforms change context, which in turn affects outcomes, or that uniforms directly change outcomes for unspecified reasons) *the data on uniforms' effects on academic achievement simply give no evidence.*

**Attendance.** Finally, we can see that attendance rates are not impacted by school uniform policies in eighth and 10th grades (data not available for elementary schools).



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### What We Know Now

Is there a bottom line to all of this? If there is one, it would appear to be this: Despite media coverage, which has been exceedingly selective and misrepresentative, and despite the anecdotal meanderings of politicians, community members, educators, board members, parents, and students, *uniforms have not been effective* in achieving the outcomes they were assumed to aid:

- Reducing violence and behavioral problems;
- Fostering school unity and improving the learning environment;
- Reducing social pressures and leveling status differentials;
- Increasing student self-esteem and motivation;
- Saving parents money on clothing for their children;
- Improving attendance; and
- Improving academic achievement.

These findings exist even after controlling for the important variations that exist in schools to affect such outcomes. Most of these control variables are not alterable as a result of any school policy. Thus, since uniform policies do not overcome these basic variations in schooling at all levels, educators should focus on processes that are alterable.

In 1998, Kerry Ann Rockquemore and I published the following conclusion:

*“Requiring students to wear uniforms is a change that affects not only students, but also school faculty and parents. Instituting a mandatory uniform policy is a change that is immediate, highly visible, and shifts the environmental landscape of any particular school. Changing the land-*

*scape is a superficial change, but it attracts attention because of its visible nature. Instituting a uniform policy can be viewed as analogous to cleaning and brightly painting a deteriorating building in that on the one hand it grabs our immediate attention; on the other hand, it’s only a coat of paint. That type of change attracts attention to schools and implies the presence of serious problems that necessitate drastic change...A policy that is simplistic, readily understandable, cost-free (to taxpayers) and appealing to common sense is one that is politically pleasing and, hence, finds much support. When challenged with broader reforms, those policies with results not immediately identifiable and those that are costly and demand energy and a willingness to change on the part of school faculty and parents are unacceptable”* (Brunσμα and Rockquemore 1998).

Eight years later, I feel even more confident of that conclusion now than I did then. It has new teeth after intensive research that reveals facets of the school uniform movement that have had detrimental impacts on schools’ ability to educate:

- The problematic relationship between parents and schools during the implementation of a school uniform policy;
- The differential impact of school uniforms on disadvantaged and disenfranchised groups in American society;
- The underlying regression toward racism and classism implied by the structure and protocol of school uniform implementation;
- The overreliance on “common sense” and anecdote in policy formation;
- The increasing role of corporate control in American public

schooling; and

- The role of fear in dictating educational reform movements and policy strategies.

What is clear from the research is that school uniforms, as a policy and strategy, do *not* play a role in producing more parental involvement, increased preparedness, positive approaches toward learning, pro-school attitudes, a heightened feeling of school unity and safety, or positive school climates. Therefore, such a policy should not be touted as increasing the educational atmosphere at *any level of schooling*. It is my hope that these research-based findings can direct us away from the assumptions, conjecture, and unfounded claims concerning the effectiveness of school uniform policies. ■

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### Web Resources

The Parental Action Committee of Polk County, Florida, which opposes the county’s school uniform policy, explains its position.

[www.gate.net/~rwms/Uniform.html](http://www.gate.net/~rwms/Uniform.html)

The National Association of Elementary School Principals provides the texts of recently published articles on school uniforms and dress codes.

[www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=67](http://www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=67)

This Web site offers a comprehensive section on school uniforms that includes research, arguments pro and con, and reports of schools that have abandoned uniform policies.

[www.geocities.com/school\\_uniforms/](http://www.geocities.com/school_uniforms/)