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**Reyzer, Aimee L. *The Impact of School Uniforms on Student Academic Achievement and Behavior***

**Abstract**

Advocates for the implementation of uniforms in public schools believe that uniforms could be the answer in establishing a positive school climate. Arguments about whether or not school uniforms have an impact on improving the school environment, academic performance, and overall behavior have been going on for quite some time. However, with the increase of school violence, inappropriate behavior, and a decline in academic achievement advocates for school uniforms are hoping that uniforms in public schools may reduce these issues.

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## **Chapter I: Introduction**

In 1996 during the State of Union Address, Bill Clinton challenged schools across America with this statement,

I challenge all our schools to teach character in education, to teach good values, and good citizenship. And if it means that teenagers will stop killing each other over designer jackets, then our public schools should be able to require their students to wear school uniforms. (Boutelle, 2008, p. 36)

Advocates for the implementation of uniforms in public schools use this quote as their focal point for why they believe that uniforms could be the answer in establishing a positive school climate. Arguments about whether or not school uniforms have an impact on improving the school environment, academic performance, and overall behavior have been going on for quite some time. Traditionally, uniforms have only been required in religious schools. However, with the increase of school violence, inappropriate behavior, and a decline in academic achievement advocates for school uniforms are hoping that uniforms in public schools may reduce these issues (Boutelle, 2008).

Arguments date back to 1916 about how school uniforms “reduce effects of social disparity” (Bodine, 2003, p. 67). The Winthrop Normal and Industrial College of South Carolina hoped that reducing “social disparity,” and eliminating visible groups of higher wealth by requiring uniforms for all students. Winthrop Normal and Industrial College administrators felt it would allow for the focus on improved academics and achievement and to give more of a cohesive and positive atmosphere to the school. The intention was for students to focus on their studies rather than the outside factors such as socio economic status (SES), and social status (Bodine, 2003). The idea of having uniforms at Winthrop Normal and Industrial college was to

“insuring economy, democracy, and equality of opportunity” for the attending students (Bodine, 2003, p.67).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Schools have been seeing an increase of inappropriate student behavior, a decrease in academic achievement, and an overall negative vibe in the school environment (Han, 2004). On a daily basis, educators note that students struggle to keep up with the latest fashion trends, desire to have clothing that often pushes the dress code with higher hems and lower cleavage and clothes with designer labels. Other students wear extreme clothing to show status, or that they belong to a gang or clique of students. Han (2004) stated that uniform policies were enacted as an attempt to reduce gang problems and enhance school security. Many school administrators in the public school setting are now considering the possibility of implementing school uniforms in their schools. In 1987, Cherry Hill Elementary School was the very first Catholic private school that publically implemented a school uniform policy for the purpose of “reducing clothing costs, improvement of student behavior, increased self-esteem, and school pride” (Brunsma, 2006).

Some research has found “that uniforms lessen emphasis on fashion, reduce the financial burden of low-income families, and promote peer acceptance, school pride, and learning” (Lumsden & Miller, 2002, p. 2). However, there are still some researchers who are not convinced that school uniforms can solve the educational and behavioral issues viewed as “troublesome” in today’s society.

Studies on the overall impact of uniforms have been done to see whether or not uniforms have a positive correlation with increasing student academics, behavior, and school environment. Brunsma (2006) argues that school uniforms do not play any part in the academic success or failure of elementary, middle, or high school students.

However, there are still many advocates for the implementation of uniforms in the school setting, both public and private, and advocates make many convincing arguments. First, advocates believe by implementing school uniforms it will decrease the negative student behavior in correlation to gang activity and fighting. Second, advocates feel that uniforms show an increase in student learning by providing fewer distractions; have a positive attitude toward school with less status competition between students; and an increase in student academic achievement with more time to spend on studying. Third, advocates believe with school uniform implementation, behavior problems will decrease, increase student attendance, as well as decrease the use of illegal substances. Lastly, individuals who are pushing for the implementation of school uniforms feel that students will benefit in overall self-esteem, school spirit, and feelings of belonging or “oneness” among all students in the school setting (Bodine, 2003).

A review of the research may help educators, administrators and school counselors see whether or not data shows positive or negative outcomes after implementing school uniforms. Will required school uniforms increase academics and positive school behavior in students? Research is needed in order to determine whether or not data supports advocates for school uniforms. If the research shows that the literature does not support that uniforms have a positive role in student academics and behavior what factors might contribute to why uniforms are not working and what can be done differently?

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the literature to provide a more complete picture of whether or not school uniforms impact student academic achievement and behavior. A summary of current literature and research on school uniforms may help to determine whether or

not uniforms have a direct correlation on the impact of student academics and behavior may be helpful for schools to determine if they wish to require uniforms for students.

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

It is assumed that there is a relationship between student dress and appearance and the academic and behavior of the student. It is assumed that schools may want to know if uniforms help families with finances as they plan and purchase school attire each year. It is assumed that there are differences between inner city and rural schools and the size and location of schools that may also impact student achievement and behavior in addition to the dress code. There may be limited articles available on this topic and some research may only include private or religious based schools and exclude public schools. Another limitation is the possibility of classroom behavior and expectations could differ between teachers, thus resulting in varied outcomes. A final limitation is that some articles may not have been published or may have been overlooked by the researcher during spring of 2014.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms are defined for the reader to assist with understanding the literature on this topic.

**Dress code.** Regulated expectations for clothing when students attend school.

**School uniform.** A designated outfit generally khaki pants and a solid colored collared shirt worn to school.

**Social disparity.** A difference in economic status between students.

## **Chapter II: Literature Review**

### **Background of School Uniforms**

In 1916, the Winthrop Board of Trustees restated their purpose for having an egalitarian focus for their school by stating, “The uniform dress required of all students... is one of the most important features of the college as it insures economy, democracy, and equality of opportunity” (Bodine, 2003, p. 67). The idea was to give students the feeling of equality among all students and ensure that students wouldn’t have to worry about fashion and all the related social stigmas that accompany those decisions. What to wear was decided for all students to eliminate status whether elite or low-income.

Bodine (2003) stated that American public schools focused on uniforms and their leveling effect, and common dress was advocated for simplicity, practicality, and frugality. Traditionally, uniforms have been used solely in the religious school setting (Boutelle, 2008). Public schools are now taking a closer look at the possibility of implementing school uniforms as well. When Bill Clinton challenged public schools in 1996 with his speech at the State of Union Address, some schools examined their school dress codes to determine feasibility. With theft of high-price items including designer clothes, leather team jackets, exclusive shoes and high end jewelry, some schools were becoming investigators of property theft. Some schools reflected on the decline in academics and positive school behavior. Some students were spending more time pulling together outfits than they were studying. It was about a “daily fashion show” to demonstrate wealth and designer labels to others. Advocates in favor of school uniforms began to see their purpose and pushed for the implementation of school uniforms (Bodine, 2003).

## **School Uniform Controversy**

Many administrators appear skeptical when considering the idea of implementing school uniforms into public schools. Does size and location of the school impact the decision to incorporate school uniforms in the dress code? Based on a survey given to 755 principals in the United States, most respondents reported that school uniforms had not been consideration in most (75%) rural districts. However, school uniforms have been implemented in many urban areas of the country. Is it because there is a greater spectrum of wealth and poverty in larger schools than smaller rural communities? The National Association of Elementary Principals, (2000) stated that 40% of principals in the urban area were surveyed, and was found that those principals were looking at the possibility of adopting a school uniform policy, or already had a policy in place.

School violence is one of the main reasons why schools are considering the implementation of school uniforms. King stated that “approximately one in four students reports worrying about becoming a victim of crime or threats at school, and one in eight reports having been victimized at school” (King, 1998, p. 1). Theft on school busses, school lockers and in the community may contribute to students feeling unsafe with nicer backpacks, laptops and I-pads and specialized athletic gear. This could be one of many reasons why administrators and parents are looking for change in the school setting that has the potential to keep the children safer and decrease any anxiety they may have about school.

Another reason to implement school uniforms is academic achievement of students. After looking at the academic achievement in schools with low test scores and low socioeconomic income areas of the United States there is a positive relationship between these factors. In areas

where the socioeconomic status is lower there is data that supports the test scores in schools that are lower than other parts of the country. Daugherty (2002) stated that:

Many schools with low academic achievement scores, low attendance rates, and high transiency percentages have high rates of students eligible for free or reduced lunches which researchers frequently use as a poverty indicator. If families are struggling to pay for rent and utilities, it is often a greater challenge to find money to purchase school supplies and nice clothes each fall for back to school. Similarly, studies have found that the strongest predictor of school crime is the nature of the surrounding community as communities with high levels of poverty and crime tend to have schools with high levels of crime. (p. 390)

Advocates for the implementation of school uniforms have strong beliefs that school uniforms would benefit both students and the school safety. Bodine (2003) explains why advocates for school uniforms believe they help. First, advocates believe by implementing uniforms into the school it will decrease negative student behavior in correlation to gang activity and fighting. Secondly, advocates feel that uniforms show a rising trend in student learning, create a positive attitude toward school, and an increase in student academic achievement. Advocates also believe that with the school uniform implementation behavior problems will decrease, due to an increase in student attendance, as well as a decrease in the use of illegal substances. Lastly, individuals who are for the implementation of school uniforms feel that students will benefit in overall self-esteem, school spirit, and feelings of belonging or “oneness” amongst all students in the school setting.

Another study by Brunnsma and Rockquemore (1998) stated that advocates believe that school uniforms may decrease victimization (bullying), gang activity and fights, and it will also

differentiate strangers from students in buildings. Brunσμα and Rockquemore (1998) further noted that school uniforms could possibly increase students' learning and positive attitudes, decrease behaviors problems, and will attribute to positive psychological outcomes like an increase in self-esteem and feelings of belonging and oneness.

In Mississippi, a survey was given to 426 parents of a fourth grade class. From this survey, it was found that “Over half of the 34% of the parents replied and favored the use of school uniforms. In the survey the parents determined that uniforms would “eliminate cultural expression through dress, eliminate visible socio-economic differences, cost less than other types of clothing, do not violate a child’s rights under the law, and do not limit a child’s creativity or individuality” (Brunσμα, 2002, p. 3). However, Brunσμα and Rockquemore disagreed with the advocates and found research that showed how uniforms negatively affected student behavior (Brunσμα & Rockquemore, 1998). So does the implementation of school uniforms have an impact on student academic achievement and behavior?

### **Uniforms and Academic Achievement**

Brunσμα and Rockquemore (1998), claim that there is no relationship between uniforms and academic achievement. However, Ann Bodine’s, (2003) piece on *School Uniforms, Academic Achievement, and Uses of Research* reviewed the data from Brunσμα and Rockqueme’s research and found that contrary to their conclusion, some of their data that was collected does support the claims that school uniforms have an impact student academic achievement. Bodine stated, “The claim resulted from misleading use of sector analysis” (Bodine, 2003, p. 67). After taking a closer look at the data that was collected as well as the further study of the variables, Bodine suggested that Brunσμα and Rockquemore classified their data by “school sector,” so this included all schools, public schools, Catholic schools, and three

types of private-but-not-Catholic schools (Bodine, 2003, p.67). Brunnsma and Rockquemore possibly had not accounted for all the other schools that had implemented school uniforms. Bodine also found data that Brunnsma and Rockquemore collected that stated “uniformed students have significantly higher test scores than do non-uniformed students” (Bodine, 2003, p.67).

Furthermore, there was also a positive correlation between school uniforms and attendance as well as school uniforms and grades in math and language arts (Brunnsma, 2002). The misleading sector analysis gave the impression that school uniforms were not impacting student academic achievement or behavior issues.

When it comes to student behavior in schools advocates believe by implementing school uniforms there is a chance it may decrease the negative student behavior. Decreased behavior related to gang activity and fighting, an improvement in student learning, a positive attitude toward school, and an increase in student academic achievement, all may be a result of school uniform implementation. These problems may potentially decrease due to an increase in student attendance, and a decrease in illegal substance use, improved overall self-esteem, school spirit, and feelings of belonging or “oneness” among all students in the school setting (Bodine, 2003). Does the data support these advocate beliefs? Some researchers may disagree with school uniforms due to lack of evidentiary support. Bodine (2003) found that there was a significant difference in positive test scores with students who wore uniforms and students that did not.

A Long Beach, California school system found that in kindergarten through eighth grades, the numbers of suspensions and crimes had decreased when school uniforms became mandated. The number of suspensions and crimes statistically declined, (depending on the crime), assaults and batteries went down 34%, fighting dropped by 50%, and sex offenses went down 74% (Brunnsma, 2002, p. 6). Some studies have stated that there are no concrete statistics

to support the use of school uniforms. At the same time, other researchers have reported positive effects and some even report no change at all.

Gregory (1998) conducted a study and found that the “ANOVA determined significance in self-esteem, attendance, and achievement between the school with uniforms and the school without uniforms” (p. 1). This study supports the idea that the implementation school uniforms will increase a student’s self-esteem. Gregory is not alone with supporting data that school uniforms have a positive impact on student’s academic achievement and self-esteem.

Psychologists support these findings as well noting that, “There is a great deal of research which shows that the self-concept is, perhaps, the basis for all motivated behavior. It is the self-concept that gives rise to possible selves, and it is possible selves that create the motivation for behavior.” (Franken, 1994, p. 439)

In a study that involved 74 schools in Kentucky, King (2002) found that, some schools report that students base the worth of peers on the kinds of clothes that are worn but distinctions in worth were not noted when the entire school population was dressed in uniforms. The findings indicate that there are genuine issues when it comes to how much a student’s appearance impacts their behavior and academics. In addition, there was a different study from the western part of central Wisconsin that involved seventy-one teachers and 98% agreed that there is a positive correlation between self-esteem and academic achievement (Fiege, 2000). Researchers have also surveyed parents and their thoughts on the implementation of school uniforms. A survey was given to 426 parents of a fourth grade class in Mississippi. It found that over half of the parents favored the use of school uniforms. In the survey the parents determined that uniforms would “eliminate cultural expression through dress, eliminate visible socio-

economic differences, cost less than other types of clothing, do not violate a child's rights under the law, and do not limit a child's creativity or individuality" (Brunsma, 2002, p. 3).

There is also research that is against the implementation of school uniforms and they cite the First Amendment rights to freedom of expression, individual creativity, possible discrimination, and cost (Encarta Microsoft Corporation, 1993-2003). What's at the heart of the issue are the rights of students and whether or not these rights are being taken away from them by making uniforms mandatory to wear. When in a school setting, students are expected to follow school regulations and standards. However, some researchers believe that by implementing school uniforms it will be limiting the freedoms of the students to express themselves as individuals.

With conflicting research regarding the implementation of school uniforms it has been difficult to find evidence to support a right or wrong answer. Brunsma (2002) indicated his findings have been non-supportive when it comes to the idea of implementing school uniforms; however, he further noted several studies where the researchers had dismissed the results of their studies because they could not control all of the variables that were a part of the study. While some research indicated implementation of school uniforms could be cost effective, that might not be an issue for some families that are financially stable. Schools might encourage community organizations, school committees, local businesses or alumni to assist those families who are not able to afford a school uniform. Families could come together and bring their children's outgrown clothes to supply children and families that do not have the means to purchase a variety of clothing for their schools uniform policy. So whether a school requires uniforms or not depends on the school and the goals and mission that they set for the school community.

If they feel uniforms could make a difference in behavior, attendance, and academics, they should consider it and track the data to see if uniforms make a difference. There are many variables including family income, size of the school, parent support and community economic status that may contribute to whether or not required school uniforms will be effective. It might be other variables such as classroom management, parent involvement and the school environment that could be adjusted to get similar results that school uniforms could produce.

## **Chapter III: Summary, Discussion and Recommendations**

### **Summary**

Advocates for the implementation of uniforms in public schools believe that uniforms could be the answer in establishing a positive school climate. Arguments about whether or not school uniforms have an impact on improving the school environment, academic performance, and overall behavior have been going on for quite some time. However, with the increase of school violence, inappropriate behavior, and a decline in academic achievement advocates for school uniforms are hoping that uniforms in public schools may reduce these issues.

Proponents for school uniforms believe that having a standard form of dress will make it easier on families to reduce the financial burden of purchasing a wide spectrum of clothing and shoes for the school year. They also believe that students who dress in a respectful conservative manner will behave in that way too. With fewer distractions of yoga pants, see through shirts, short shorts, torn clothing, gang related clothing and cleavage, parents and educators often believe that there will be fewer distractions from the academic environment and students will be able to concentrate on the curriculum and not on the clothing choices of some. There are often those students who push the envelope and try to break the dress code to challenge school administration. By taking all the choice from the wardrobe and having a standardized uniform, students are obligated to follow the rules.

Opponents to the dress code indicate that students have the right to choose what they want to wear to school and think that uniforms infringe up the right to freely express their clothing choices in the school setting. They believe that classroom management and parents are contributing factors to attendance, discipline and behavior and that it has little to do with what the students are wearing. Citing too many variable factors, opponents think that the dress code

that requires uniforms may not be research based to improve school climate. They also suggest that uniforms themselves are costly and some families would have a hard time coming up with the money necessary to provide uniforms for their children and low-income families should be able to shop where they can get the best bargain without the pressure for uniforms.

After reviewing all the research that has been collected over the course of this paper it appears that the idea that the implementation of school uniforms does have a positive effect on student academic achievement and behavior. A majority of these studies took a look at the public schools that had implemented school uniforms.

## **Discussion**

Although there is not a lot of concrete data that fully supports the idea that school uniforms have a positive impact on student academic achievement and behavior, there are still so many variables that it is a difficult decision. Students who start out with uniforms in private schools may find it is a “way of life” for them and adapt easily knowing that this is the expectation. Older students who have it forced upon them may fight the system to have a voice in what they want to wear. Parents play a critical role in purchasing age appropriate clothing for their children. They need to set their family expectations for how short the skirts are, how tight the clothing is, and if the student is going to wear inappropriate language or advertising on their clothing. Schools have to set these guides to keep students safe and focused on learning. Often they battle with the parents as they let their kids wear what they want. In some of the research reviewed, it appears that the surveys taken by parents may have been overlooked. Teachers and staff spend a lot of time with their students, but at home parents deal with their children and see their daily dispositions. If parents support school uniforms and think they have a positive impact on their child’s school life it is something that schools should maybe consider.

It was discussed earlier that some factors, like cost, may be a concern for some families and their ability to supply uniforms for their children. However, there are options that these parents have. Schools that want to implement school uniforms should take into account the possibility of financial issues for some parents. With that being said, some schools could raise money for those families, have clothing drives, or even sponsor certain families to assist them in supplying the required uniform for school.

It appears that it would be beneficial to schools that are implementing school uniforms to observe and record data over time. The positive impact school uniforms have on student academic achievement and behavior may begin to have additional supportive data. Schools might also want to consult prior to an implementation of school uniforms asking, “What will the implementation of school uniforms do for our school?” If schools have specific issues, like poor academic achievement, student behavior issues, and violence, school uniforms might help turn these issues around.

It is crucial for students to be a part of a healthy learning and school environment and students should not have anxiety about coming to school because of what they are wearing. Right now violence is prevalent in schools due to gang affiliation and clothing theft. As professionals and leaders in the education field it is our responsibility to try and improve these issues and make schools a safe and have an environment that feels safe and comfortable for all.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Others may wish to get student input regarding uniform requirements. Are they comfortable or hot and confining? Not all uniforms are alike. Are all females required to wear skirts or dresses as their uniform whereas boys are always allowed to wear slacks or shorts? With childhood obesity, do they feel comfortable in school uniforms or do they find that they fit

poorly too? Very little of the research indicated any student input or involvement in the decision making for requiring school uniforms. Additional research may enlighten schools regarding how much a family typically spends on school clothes and what is the savings by purchasing uniforms? Are they easy to maintain and pass down to other younger children? What do teachers think? Are they forced to wear the typical khaki slacks and collared shirts also, or are teachers exempt from the school uniforms and only the students are required to wear them? Many questions remain after reviewing the materials on this topic. It seems it's a decision that must be made by individual schools that are willing to monitor for success, provide opportunities for feedback from the parents and students, and have the support of the school board.

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