

Unsure of Uniforms: Are Assumed Effects Merely Hearsay?

The controversial subject of school uniforms is one that has been debated on many levels. The issue has consistently gained more and more attention throughout the years, and was even a topic addressed by former President Bill Clinton. In regards to local occurrences, school uniforms in Valparaiso have stayed classically associated with private, religious schools, but this is not the case for some nearby Northwest Indiana cities, which include East Chicago, Gary, and Hammond. Schools uniforms may even be gaining ground in public schools in Portage, which is only miles from Valparaiso High School. Many concerns are often brought up when considering mandatory school uniforms, including two of the most popular ones: possibly reducing school-affiliated gang violence, infringing upon students' rights. The former acts as a reinforcer of the pro-uniform side, while the latter is a major facet of anti-uniform efforts. Arguments aside, the question still remains to be answered: Are mandatory uniforms more conducive to a learning environment in schools? While that may be the root of the issue, the question also correlates to whether implementation of a mandatory school uniform policy actually increases positive statistics for education or are the effects of uniforms on test scores and other measures of academic success negligible. While it is clear that the answers to these concerns are difficult to attain and would require extensive research, it is also undoubted that they are important to the school uniform debate. Significant research must be analyzed to support a conclusion that most accurately reflects the truth.

The history of school uniforms is one that has been quite varied over the years, especially in its direct manifestation. While the mandatory school uniform policy is classically associated with private, religiously-affiliated schools, it has now found popularity among various other types of school systems (Brunsma 3). Uniforms have lent a characteristic conservative look to

schools for years, most commonly seen in private and/or Catholic schools, which still account for over 65% of the nation's schools with uniform policies (Firmin). However, in current day practices, school uniforms have transformed from their conservative, Catholic-school vibe to a somewhat more casual, yet professional look (Gereluk). It is unclear whether this change in the look of uniforms is a cause or a result of the occurrence of public, non-religiously affiliated schools adopting uniform policies. What is clear, however, is that uniforms have become increasingly popular among our nation's public schools (Cruz 33). In fact, a decade ago at the beginning of the 1997-1998 school year, the Council of the Great City Schools reported that more than 50% of the nation's urban public schools had uniform policies instituted, which accounts for thousands of schools (Cruz 33). Proving the validity of the report, data from the end of the 1996-1997 school year show nation-wide statistics on public school uniform policies (Brunsma 20). From the total amount of public schools in major U.S. cities, more than 80% in Chicago had uniforms, 66% of Cleveland's, 60% in Miami, 50% in Boston, and only 10-25% in New York (Brunsma 20). As the percentages show, the overwhelming majority of public schools in very urban major cities had uniform policies. Most non-parochial schools in smaller towns nation-wide still lacked uniform policies, with only a sprinkling of suburban and rural public schools boasting uniform policies (Gereluk). The large-scale success of uniform implementation in urban schools nation-wide may have been a result of former President Bill Clinton's endorsement of uniforms and their possible benefits in his 1996 State of the Union address (Firmin). While school uniform policies have historically experienced much popularity in both private, religious schools and public schools, current day efforts are now delving further into the phenomenon by seeking empirical evidence on the actual effects of uniforms in schools.

Local occurrences of school uniform policies in the Northwest Indiana region have

maintained rather classic views of implementation over the years. The city of Valparaiso has a few schools that are private and/or parochial. Montessori School for preschool and kindergarten aged children is a private school that is not religiously affiliated. Schools that are both private and religiously affiliated include St. Paul's Catholic School and Immanuel Lutheran, both at the elementary and middle school level, and Valparaiso University at the college level. In Valparaiso, the only schools that have a school uniform policy are St. Paul's and Immanuel Lutheran, both of which are private, parochial schools. This evidence is a support to the classically held views that private, religiously-affiliated schools have school uniforms.

Other cities in our immediate area, however, have different views on uniform policies in schools. In East Chicago, for example, all schools, both public and private, have mandatory school uniforms. Additionally, Gary schools also have the same policy of all schools, regardless of public or private designation, having mandatory school uniforms. In the case of Gary schools, however, the uniform policy was just recently expanded to cover public schools in 2006, while East Chicago has had city-wide policies for mandatory school uniforms for many years. Furthermore, Hammond High School just recently instituted a uniform policy for the start of the 2007-2008 school year and some school officials in Portage Township are also pushing for following suit with a uniform policy for Portage High School sometime in the next few years (Burton). The current efforts of many public schools in the area surrounding Valparaiso who have instituted, or seek to institute, uniform policies is yet another facet of the growing trend. The reasons for uniform implementation in public schools are varied and are directly related to the benefits that the schools expect to see.

Many sound reasons do exist for why a public school would seek to implement a uniform policy. However, these reasons range from being quite likely to be seen as effects of

uniform implementation to merely best-case scenarios. Primary aims for introducing a uniform policy include reducing violence and behavioral problems, eliminating drama and biases based on fashions and clothing choices, harboring school pride, and increasing students' positive self-view and desire to do schoolwork (Brunsma 183). Secondary reasons include lowering the cost parents face in buying clothing for children and promoting a more official, formal learning environment (Cruz 36-40). One of the primary reasons that is receiving the most attention is the desire to squelch distractions in school that are caused by students' fashion choices (Firmin). Both inappropriate dress on the part of the students and the factor of expensive and designer clothing creating a visible, distinguishing difference between students of various socioeconomic groups makes eliminating clothing competition a noble goal (Brunsma 64). Whether uniforms actually accomplish this intent and successfully dissolve the divide between students who can and cannot afford the latest fashions is another issue. This possible effect will be examined and discussed in full as it applies to public schools.

Some strong advocates of pro-uniforms in public schools seem to think that the weight each reason carries as a cause for implementation carries an equivalent or similar effect as a perceived benefit. However, this is not always the case. As psychology would boast, a double-blind study would be needed to accurately support the theory that expected benefits of a uniform policy are the same as the effects that are actually seen. However, since conducting a double-blind study in schools is inevitably difficult, due to obvious compound factors of faculty and students, the assumption of expected benefits continues to be an issue. The dichotomy between expected benefits and actual effects is a pivotal aspect to the question of whether or not uniform implementation actually creates a school environment that is more conducive to learning.

A significant issue with the evidence that pro-uniform advocates use is that it tends to be

largely speculation. Supporters of the school uniform often vouch that uniforms improve learning environments in schools, thus leading to an increase in better grades, behavior, and motivation (Huss). This speculation, unfortunately, is the grounds on which most of the evidence showing the alleged benefits of school uniforms rests. Additionally, the pro-uniform side also argues that there is a lack of empirical research that has been done to produce statistics of before and after school uniform implementation, and therefore we can only assume that environments improve (Brunsma 28-29) This is not the case at all. Volumes of research have been done that show the effects of uniforms on schools after implementation (Brunsma 29). Why do pro-uniform supporters choose to ignore the empirical evidence and claim that there has not been any sufficient research done on the effects of uniforms? One can easily assume that this is done because the empirical research does not show a correlation between expected benefits and actual effects, which would be much to the dismay of pro-uniform arguments. Only through examination of the research itself can one appropriately and logically reach this conclusion.

Beyond mere anecdotal evidence and suggested benefits that school uniforms can lead to, the debate is furthered by the fact that many variables exist independently of each other in a school environment. If the presence of a positive benefit after uniform implementation is indeed found, this could be the result of any number of other variables, instead of a direct result of the uniforms themselves (Firmin). Can we really attest that it is a direct consequence of the uniform wearing that leads to such changes in the quality of education received and strengthening of the school's learning environment? High school headmaster William Wassell does not believe we can. "I honestly don't feel the wearing of uniforms will enhance the atmosphere in a school. A lot of other factors determine the atmosphere and environment that exists in a school." His stance represents similar beliefs that many people hold. Board member of Portage Townships schools

Cheryl Oprisko also needs more convincing on the actual benefits of uniforms, instead of just those that are assumed (Burton). She remarks that before she supports the implementation of a uniform policy in Portage High School she needs to see more than anecdotal evidence (Burton). The need for analysis of the research conducted on schools that implement a uniform policy is indispensable to the concern of the legitimacy of the possible benefits.

The overwhelming quantity of research done on effects of school uniforms seen in varying schools all over the United States lends a certain degree of complexity to the results. To simplify analyses, data will be discussed as it relates to what area the public school is found and the characteristics of the school itself. A public elementary school in an inner city neighborhood of Stockton, California is among the earliest research done on schools that implement uniforms (Huss). After instituting uniforms in the 1995-1996 school year, it was observed that the school experienced less discipline problems and an increased sense of pride in the school, which served as a pleasant change to the area that the school was in which was largely overtaken by crime and gang violence (Huss). In another public school, similar effects were observed. Central High School, located in a very urban area in Kansas City, Missouri, implemented a uniform policy in order to combat poor academics and the high levels of crime and gang violence both inside and outside of the school (Brennan). The improvements seen in the school include more ordered, disciplined students and an increase sense of school pride by administrators (Brennan). While it is arguable whether these observed effects are permanent in the school environment, a more long-term effect can be seen in the steady increase in academic scores in Central High School (Brennan). The apparent success of uniform policies in schools located in urban, gang and violence rampant areas does serve as some evidence to the positive effects that uniforms can lead to.

The research that shows that uniforms can lead to a better school environment in urban, high crime areas is further supported by local evidence. East Chicago and Gary, which were previously mentioned as holding uniform policies in all public schools, are also very urban areas with similar problems. Both cities notoriously experience high crime rates and dangerous gang activity. They are also both very close to the large city of Chicago, Illinois. The demographic components of East Chicago and Gary are also directly comparable to the populations of urban Chicago. Large African-American and Hispanic populations make up the majority of both cities, as well as Chicago. Additionally, the populations of both cities experience a low average income and other socioeconomic hardships. These characteristics of East Chicago and Gary may have innately led to the benefits both cities experienced upon implementing uniforms in all public schools.

It is dually noted that schools in poor, urban areas with high crime and gang activity have historically reported less academic success in students (Brunsma 187). Other statistics show that lower-class, minority populations further experience exacerbated conditions upon living in urban areas with high crime (Brunsma 188). The less than ideal characteristics of East Chicago and Gary do not foster an appropriate school environment to learning. However, as evidence shows, schools in urban areas can stimulate a positive learning environment and lower rates of gang violence and crime in schools through implementation of a uniform policy (Brunsma 187-188). The differences between schools in urban, lower socioeconomic class areas as opposed to those in suburban higher class cities, such as Valparaiso, lend to disparities between benefits and effects seen after implementing school uniform policies.

The consistency between expected benefits and actual effects of school uniforms is so far only applicable to public schools in urban, low-socioeconomic class, high violence areas. The

success many schools have had with improved behavior and academics demonstrates that uniforms can be a positive step for schools with behavioral, violence, and gang problems. As promising as this is, evidence shows it does not transfer to public schools in middle to high socioeconomic cities. The fact that the vast majority of public schools in the United States with uniform policies are in urban cities with the aforementioned characteristics lends insight into the question on whether uniforms in schools will lead to an increase in positive effects (Brunsma 188). Research shows that uniforms will have no significant effect in improving learning and educational atmosphere in schools where no such problem exists (Brunsma 181). Public schools in areas of higher socioeconomic class, and in suburban areas in general, show no significant impact in improving behavior and discipline in students and stimulating a learning environment (Brunsma 182). In addition, students in middle-class public schools with a uniform policy reported lower levels of self-perception than those in equivalent schools without a uniform policy (Wade and Stafford). In another study, a Midwest, suburban school actually saw increased levels of aggression in students through retaliation against the instituted uniform policy (DaCosta). We can accurately and appropriately conclude from the summation of empirical research done on various schools that uniforms will not produce the expected benefits in all schools.

Yet another factor that seems to play a role in the increasingly complex question proposed on whether school uniforms positively affect learning is the subjectivity of measured effects. Most sources of positive effects witnessed in schools come from faculty and administrators (Huss). The fact that these observations are naturally biased towards expecting to see positive effects in behavior of students, school spirit, and a more promising learning environment must be taken into consideration when examining evidence supporting uniforms. It

is interesting to note that when compared to data collected from the same surveys given to students and school faculty alike, that students perceived no change in gang activity or level of violence, while teachers perceived lower levels of both (Wade and Stafford). This difference in how the school was perceived to be affected by uniforms signifies a definite degree of subjectivity in observable effects of uniforms.

Certain things can be somewhat appropriately deduced based on the characteristics of the public schools that have instituted uniform policies and the reported effects. It can be concluded that implementation of a school uniform policy is likely to produce positive effects in urban, lower socioeconomic class public schools. Effects include less school violence, gang activity, and behavioral problems, along with a possibility of an increase in education received by students. However, uniforms will produce no significant changes in the same areas in schools that are suburban and/or higher socioeconomic class. Uniforms can even lead to a decrease in student self-perception and an increase in behavioral problems in some schools. In conclusion, while uniform policies in public schools may alleviate some major problems that are related to location of the school, widespread uniform policies are not advisable for all public schools as they can also lead to negative effects. To answer our question, school uniforms are more conducive to a learning environment in public schools with significant issues, especially those due to a poor surrounding community, but their effects are negligible to negative in public schools without any major problems.

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