Argument for Public School Uniforms

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School uniforms have created a debate to whether or not they are an effective addition to a school environment and to individual students themselves. Over the last decade, uniforms in public schools have increased, bringing a great deal of controversy along with them. With this public controversy there have been lawsuits, increased media attention, criticism from parents and complaints from students as well as increased academic research. There have been many recent studies done that offer evidence that school uniforms have been effective in many different ways. The purpose of this paper is to argue in favor of the implementation of school uniforms in our public education system by addressing these different articles and studies on the implementation of school uniforms.

Ann Bodine wrote an ethnography about a city in the United States and the introduction of school uniforms. In her article she writes about the introduction of school uniforms and how it intersects with different aspects of life. Bodine describes students’ clothing as a “screen on which are projected all kinds of beliefs, anxieties and aspirations about children” (2003, p. 60). Through her observations of people and their clothing she noticed that the concept of dress as a form of free speech is only a tiny part of the meaning they are actually trying to convey with their clothing. (p.67) Clothing is used to express identity through terms of socioeconomic status, membership in certain groups as well as other factors of identity that often marginalize students who don’t fit specific criteria. Bodine examines the results of her study in terms of gangs, violence, social equality, family stress, student rights and childhood environment. Her observations regarding childhood environment indicate that in the last few decades there has been a drastic change regarding the impact of the media during childhood and that this change is primarily based on a child's want of a certain reputation (p.61) In Bodine's article she cites a marketing professor who argues that children are the perfect market for products that promote identity and serve to align them with certain groups and divide them from the rest (p. 60). With these companies at work, students are drawn to find their identity and express themselves through clothing, and not in their writing and schoolwork. Students are more likely to judge themselves by focusing on physical appearance and wealth as being successful. This will make students become more and more less aware that they have other talents and abilities that can make them successful. Overall Bodine sees that uniforms are beneficial, especially in the developmental years of a child.

When public schools adopt uniforms one concern that is eliminated is inappropriate and offensive dress among the students. Marcha Boutelle wrote and article, Uniforms: Are they a Good Fit, about the implementation of school uniforms in California (2008). One incident she included was that of a sixth grade student who came to school in provocative clothing, a mid drift halter and a mini skirt. This student was taken home by her principle and when they got there the mother was offended that the school thought she was dressed inappropriately and that she thought she looked very "cute" (p. 34). This story leads into first hand accounts of multiple administrators who support the implementation of school uniforms in California. Boutelle quotes a principal of an elementary school that says, "uniforms promote school safety and enhance the learning environment, and diminish the clothing competition" (p.35) This is one of the largest arguments for uniforms, and that eliminating the competition of uniforms gives way into creating a school community and a more accepting environment with less competition among peers. She continues to receive feedback from different administrators who support a uniform policy claiming that it promotes respect, job skills and equality among students. Most importantly school uniforms are in place to diminish distinguishing each other based on clothing but rather on interactions with each other.

Peter Caruso’s article Individuality vs. Conformity: The Issue Behind School Uniforms presents several arguments on either side of the issue to show just how intricate the issue of school uniforms really is (1996). One argument that was addressed was the increased attendance of students. They have seen that without school uniforms there is a competition to have the best clothes, and many students will get them however they can even if that means skipping school. Also without the gang affiliation there are less student drug and gang activity and missing school. With the implementation of school uniforms there is decrease of distractions. With uniforms students are less concerned about "looking cool" and can focus more on their academics. (p. 87) With this students are more able to increase their confidence and self-esteem. "Students may develop strong feelings of inferiority when they feel they do not have the 'right' clothes(p. 84). Causo also argues that uniforms promote school community. Wearing a uniforms gives students a sense of belonging to the school. "A uniform can build the same feeling of unity and belonging that many students get from team uniforms, cheerleading outfits, or school jackets."(p. 85) Another fact that is presented is that school uniforms decrease violence and crime. Coruso states that, "Competition over appearance can result in taunts, fights, thefts, and even murder" (p. 86) With uniforms you can take away students competition over clothing which decreases violence in school. Lastly students who wear school uniforms are seen to have an increase in academic performance. It has been seen that "students who attend schools with a uniform policy attend more frequently, and when in school concentrate on their education rather than their social arrangements." (p. 86) Overall Caruso offers many different arguments for the use of uniforms in schools that benefit not only the school environment but the growth of each individual student educationally and socially.

In the study Parent's opinions of the Uniform Student Dress Code done by Helen Woods and Earl Ogletree in Chicago public schools they seeked out the parents perspective on school uniforms (1992). The attitudes of parents are an important factor in the success and great outcomes of implementing a dress code in public schools. They found that "87 percent believed that uniforms eliminated some competition" among peers (p. 1). It is stated that historically, dress regulations were not developed to teach conformity. They were established to teach that clothes do not make a woman or man" (p. 2). Today we as citizens of the united states are bombarded by media and messages portraying self identity and how to improve that. It is argued in this article that school uniforms help inner city students learn to dress appropriately for the world ahead of them. The only way to make school uniforms successful is to have "school officials solicited active parent involvement in the decision making" (p. 2) This is a sound argument because having parents involved in the process of implementing uniforms means that more people will be on board and that the process will go smoother.

There are many opposing opinions that argue that school uniforms are not beneficial. One of the main arguments that arise is that requiring student to wear uniforms is an infringement of first amendment rights (Caruso 1996, p. 86). School districts have the right to regulate students' attire and implement a dress code, so this argument doesn't really stand. Also, businesses and other establishments enforce dress code or require a certain uniform. Having students wear uniforms at school prepares them for the work force. The argument that free speech of students is infringed by wearing a dress code is invalidated by the fact that students are encouraged to share their opinions through other facets (p. 87). Due to dress code the encouragement of self expression is seen through more important ways other than their physical appearance.

Another argument opposing uniforms was that they create an economic hardship for families. (Caruso 1996) People argue that it is too expensive to have to buy school uniforms and "regular" clothes for students on the weekend. More and more are stores like Target and Walmart carrying clothing for children that fit into school uniform standards at low prices. The more and more school move to requiring uniforms the more competitive the market becomes for carrying them at low prices. Also having school uniforms reduces the stress on families to have to decide what to wear each day, because there are limited options when having a uniform. Overall there is not a sound argument for being too expensive.

Ryan Yeung’s published study Are School Uniforms a Good Fit?: Results From the ECLS-K and the NELS begins with the statement that his findings do not definitively support or reject the use of school uniforms, but rather, “strongly intimate that uniforms are not the solution to all of American education’s ills” (2009, p. 847). It is true that uniforms are not going to solve all of the problems of the education system and school, but it is a great start. Even though they may not solve all of the problems they definitely make a positive impact on school environments. Ultimately, there is not a clear cut answer to the school uniform issue. Both sides present evidence to support their arguments, but it is clear that uniforms would help to promote a focus on academics and social skills. This would as well as eliminate the some of the distractions associated with inappropriate dress and pop culture trends.

Works Cited

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