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School Uniforms: An “Unfashionable” Dissent

By Dennis L. Evans

Heady from President Clinton's endorsement of school uniforms, advocates of that idea are pushing such policies forward in many school districts. Admittedly, the idea of uniforms for public school students does offer some beguiling promises. Advocates, including the president, see uniforms as a way to reduce gang attire and its attendant problems; they also see uniforms as a way to blur the economic distinctions among students, and even as a way to promote a more serious and scholarly academic environment in the schools. What possibly could be the down-side of such promises?

To begin with, the programs that have gained parental support, media attention and thus, political advocacy are, for the most part, found in elementary schools where the age of the children dictates that the problems school uniforms allegedly solve do not exist to any significant degree in the first place. Concomitantly, elementary school children are not as concerned as high schoolers with issues such as individuality and personal rights and so do not view required uniforms as intrusive or objectionable.

In schools where the style and color of clothing are legitimate issues

affecting the safety of students, codes that prohibit the wearing of gang attire and regalia should already be in place and the need to adopt a school uniform policy to solve that particular problem is, for the most part, overstated and/or irrelevant. (It will be interesting to see how the courts will handle the inevitable challenges to mandated school uniforms, since there is a significant difference between a public school prohibiting specific attire because of legitimate issues related to student safety and a public school requiring uniform dress. To avoid these sticky legal issues some schools may opt for a “voluntary policy,” but besides being oxymoronic, voluntary policies simply don't work at the high school level.)

The wearing of school uniforms will, at best, be cosmetic and will not change the gang mentality nor reduce the potential of anti-social, gang-related behavior on or off campus. Ironically, the wearing of school uniforms might even make it easier to be a gang member since school administrators would no longer be able to easily observe the trappings of the gangs.

That school uniforms will blur the economic distinctions among stu-

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dents is, at best, a specious argument. In the first place, most children and adolescents (unlike adults) don't really care much about such distinctions anyway, and those who do won't have their attitudes altered by putting on a uniform.

Do those who see this cosmetic leveling as a positive aspect of school uniforms also propose to ban high school students from driving cars to school, wearing jewelry, and carrying money? Do they also propose to eliminate or make free all the various activities where finances truly do create an economic hardship for certain youngsters and their families, e.g., participation in school activities, going to the school prom, or buying school rings and yearbooks? Economic distinctions are part of the fabric of our society and they will not be unraveled by covering them with a uniform.

Finally, the notion that school uniforms will somehow create a more academic school environment and thus improve achievement has no evidence to support it. To the contrary, in my 21 years of experience as a high school principal some of the most outlandish students, from the point of view of my personal biases regarding their clothing and/or hair styles, were also some of the most outstanding scholars and school leaders. The important word in that last sentence is *some*, because kids are not "uniform" and they are impossible to categorize by their attire. The cheating scandals at West Point and more recently at the Naval Academy sadly

point out that uniforms have little to do with creating an environment conducive to true scholarship and academic achievement.

Parenthetically, one of the real ironies for me in the school uniform movement is that it is so ardently supported by many who would call themselves "conservative." I have always fancied myself to be a conservative, but that is because I always thought it was the "liberals" who supported Big Government and its intrusions into our lives and that it was we noble conservatives who opposed such social engineering (tailoring?) and meddling.

While President Clinton's endorsement of school uniforms fits nicely with my reasoning, the support for this form of governmental intrusion coming from conservatives does not. Why would true conservatives want the government (in this case the school board) telling parents what their kids must wear to school? But in a similar fashion (no pun intended), I am also confused as to why true conservatives would want the government, through the schools, to organize and support religious activities such as prayer? Perhaps I have mislabeled myself. ~B

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