School Uniforms 4 Essay, Research Paper

School Uniforms

School uniforms are creeping back into the classroom as a way to bring back a sense of community and promote a better learning environment in schools. Proponents have linked school uniforms to fewer behavior problems and higher academic achievement while also promoting school pride and self-esteem. The practice began in Long Beach, California, five years ago, and the schools there have seen a sharp drop in vandalism and crime. In the past few years several other major US cities have also taken up the practice including; Chicago, Dallas, Sacramento, Phoenix, Seattle, Kansas City, Memphis, and Baltimore. All of these cities have seen the same effects from the introduction of uniforms as the Long Beach experiment has shown.

Last year, the Board of Education for the nation’s largest school system in New York voted unanimously to recommend that elementary-school pupils start wearing uniforms, although they will not be mandatory. Individual schools will be allowed to decide whether to have uniforms, and at schools where uniforms are adopted, parents will have the final choice on whether their child will wear a uniform. For those who can’t afford the uniforms, financial aid will be available. Board of education member Carol Gresser thinks that “the wearing of school uniforms improves the tone of a school, and helps young people put the focus on who they are and what they know and what they think, rather than on what they wear.”

On the other hand, some parents and students say the money would be better spent on books, and that a uniform dress code will stifle, not stimulate creativity. The New York Civil Liberties Union has promised to sue if any student is coerced into wearing a uniform or punished for not wearing one. On the national front the ACLU has also taken up against the adoption of school uniforms. Loren Siegel, director of the public education department of the ACLU, has written; “The call for school uniforms is not constructive because it is a Band-Aid solution to a set of serious problems that defy easy answers. There is something profoundly cynical about our political leaders promoting uniforms in the face of crumbling school buildings, overcrowded classrooms, and dwindling education funds.” The ACLU has suggested two major elements for uniform policies: (1) that they have an opt-out provision, and (2) there is financial aid for those families who cannot afford uniforms. Due to pressure from the ACLU, most school districts that have adopted uniforms have adopted these elements into their policies.

There are also free speech concerns. Some feel that there are serious First Amendment problems with a mandatory uniform policy such as the Long Beach, Calif. mandatory policy. Opponents say “Uniforms rule out the possibility of students wearing clothing with messages on them. Mandatory policies forbid students from making cultural statements with their clothing.” On an open forum web site that I came across in my research I found one opponent who says ” Kids have the right to express themselves, non- violently. It’s done by wearing various rock band tee shirts, different brands of jeans, or even Polo tennis sweaters. Just because a certain person or group does not like one or any of those things does not give them the right to dictate what someone should wear. And if taught properly, children would know to send the correct message to their peers by their appearance and behavior,”

Several students have filed lawsuits challenging mandatory school dress policies. One of the most prominent of these — Phoenix Elementary School District No. 1 v. Green — arose out of a uniform policy adopted at a Phoenix public middle school. After the policy went into effect, several students wore tee shirts bearing political or religious messages. The students claimed the tee shirts and the messages on them were protected speech under the US Supreme Court case of Tinker v. Moines Independent Community School District. In Tinker, the high court ruled that school officials violated the First Amendment rights of students by adopting a policy prohibiting the black armbands students wore to express opposition to the Vietnam War. However, the Arizona court in the Phoenix case rejected the students’ claims and refused to analyze the case under the Tinker standard. The court went on to emphasize that “school officials have great latitude to regulate activities in a manner reasonably related to legitimate educational concerns”.

It is my opinion that the 6-8 hours that a child spends in a classroom environment should be concerned with education and nothing else. If in some instances, clothes bring any attention away from the learning process than we, as educators, should go to any means necessary to promote a continued learning environment. I believe that uniforms can help foster a greater sense of school pride, which having been proved in several case studies, lead to better grades for students. If given a choice a student will 9 times out of 10 pass on school uniforms. It seems to me that educators should have the final say on this and any matter that is directly tied to school performance. While some may argue that this is a violation of First Amendment rights, I believe that, as the judge in the Arizona case stated, school officials have a right to set up mandatory guidelines if its purpose is to foster a better learning environment. The world that we live in is one full of rules and guidelines that we all must follow in order to maintain an ordered society. It is necessary that children learn the rules of life early on so that they can conform to the standards of society.