

THE SCHOOL UNIFORM MOVEMENT AND WHAT IT TELLS US ABOUT AMERICAN EDUCATION: A SYMBOLIC CRUSADE

DAVID L. BRUNSMAN
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Reviewed by Suzanne McBrayer

Across the country public school districts are seeking ways to improve school climate, positively impact student achievement, and minimize undesirable behaviors. One of the means to these ends has been a movement toward standardizing dress codes or implementing a student uniform. According to Brunsmann, President Clinton, as part of his reelection strategy, initiated the notion of a required uniform in the public schools in 1996. An article in the *New York Times* regarding Clinton's position on school uniforms prompted Brunsmann and college classmate, Kerry Rockquemore, to seek research on the effect of school uniforms. What they found was that there was "no empirical research conducted to assess the effectiveness of school uniforms on student behavior and educational outcomes" (p. xxviii). Therefore, there existed a need to statistically support the assertions about the effectiveness of school uniforms.

The School Uniform Movement and What It Tells Us About American Education is a collective body of research used to examine the purposefulness of school uniform policies. The book is structured in such a way as to give background information on the history of uniforms, both in the United States and in Europe, dating back to 1222. Following the historical perspective of chapter 1, the book begins to review anecdotes for and against uniforms. The legalities and constitutionality of enforcing student dress is also examined. The following chapters then begin to aggregate the research in terms of effect on school climate, achievement, behavior, and self-esteem. The statistical data have been carefully presented in each chapter with an appendix containing tables of means, standard deviations, ranges, and the coding of variables. While the organizational presentation of the data is desirable, this reviewer feels that the conclusion of the research can be made

more clearly throughout each chapter. One might have a tendency to become mired in the statistical details.

What can be gained from this overwhelming body of data? First and foremost is the fact that this research is cutting edge. It is truly the first of its kind in the field of education with relation to the effect of school uniforms on both individuals, and on the school as a community. There certainly exists a plethora of articles giving opinions or statements about why uniforms are necessary and how they can benefit the educational climate of schools. Unfortunately, none of these assertions is based upon research. Instead, a large body of untested hypotheses regarding school uniforms is pervasive in our educational journals, politicians' speeches, and principals' policy manuals. Another benefit of reading this book is that variables that affect student achievement and behavior are isolated. New conclusions can be drawn about the correlations and relationships of these variables on learning. So, what does the research conclude? Those who support school reform and school uniform policy outline seven outcomes believed to be associated with the wearing of a school uniform. These issues are:

A reduction of violence and behavioral problems; fostering school unity and improving the learning environment; reducing social pressures and leveling status differentials; increasing student self-esteem and motivation; saving parents money on clothing for their children; improving attendance; and improving academic achievement. (p. 183)

On the contrary, the research concludes that not only are school uniforms ineffective in meeting these ideals, but they can actually create negative outcomes. How can this be? What school uniforms try to eliminate they conversely exasperate. One example of a negative effect of school uniforms is the discriminatory and racist overtones in the schools that are requiring them. Most of the public schools with uniform policies serve the urban population. By wearing uniforms, these students are easily identified, as opposed to their minority counterparts who attend more affluent suburban schools where uniforms are less likely to be required. The underlying message is one of social ranking and status. Poor and minority students whose schools are often identified as failing are typically the first to become uniformed. Again, this is done because principals, parents, and school boards want to control factors that they believe will have a more positive effect on the learning environment and student achievement. The keyword is believed, because as evidenced in the reading, no empirical data, until now, have been available to positively support such thoughts.

In closing, the author presents the findings of the research that will have major implications for public school educators. School uniforms are not the answer to the problems that run rampant in public education and society.

There is nothing in the research that supports uniforms as a method for improving individual student performance and behavior or school-wide climate. Indeed, the factors that most strongly influence performance and behavior are often unable to be controlled by schools. For instance, parental involvement has a strong correlation to achievement. The more parents are involved in their children's studies and activities, the more likely the child will be successful academically. Parental involvement can also reduce the chances of a child becoming involved with gangs, abusing drugs and alcohol, and engaging in other negative behaviors that would also influence academic performance. Brunsmma adds that the real issue that needs to be addressed with relation to our public schools is the unconstitutionality of school funding—the local property tax. This system creates inequality. When coupled with the decrease in state and federal funds available to schools, there are more pressing issues to be addressed than what students wear. Ultimately, schools, parents, and politicians are going to need to revisit the meaning and purpose of education in our global society, and whether societal structures that embed our schools can be confronted.

While the research in this book has focused on uniform policies in America's public schools, there are questions that Catholic school administrators and teachers might ask about the wearing of uniforms by their students. Questions regarding the style and nature of the uniform should be considered in light of the school's mission. Tradition and school history should be taken into account when determining a uniform or change in uniform policy, because so often school identity can be traced to this tangible and highly visible aspect of the school. The plaid uniform has been culturally synonymous with Catholic schools. Today, however, uniforms have become less formal, replacing dress shirts for polo shirts emblazoned with the school name or mascot. Sweaters and blazers have given way to sweatshirts in many Catholic schools. Administrators and teachers may have initiated this change in keeping with the more secular phenomenon of "business casual." Furthermore, rising tuition, declining enrollment, and a change in demographics may have also contributed to new trends in the Catholic school uniform. Although the research cited here indicates that uniforms do not have a positive effect on behavior or achievement, and a number of students today may dislike wearing the uniform, the uniform is a distinctive hallmark of Catholic school identity. The uniform does not impart Catholicity, but instead is symbolic of oneness in the body of Christ. This reviewer wonders what research might indicate on the effects of school uniforms on the behavior, academic achievement, and school climate of Catholic schools.

Suzanne McBrayer teaches sixth grade at St. Susanna School in Mason, OH.