# Can schools be too strict on uniform?

**Issue:** uniform [1] discipline [2]

**Julian Stanley considers how a school's tough stance on dress code can impact on a child's education.**

There have been several stories recently where schools appear to be reinforcing rules too stringently. Boundaries, classroom rules and student “discipline” in terms of structure are, of course, critical to children and similarly to adults; rules are the cornerstone of a civilised society. However, we should not fetishize every rule without looking at the context and using some discretion when necessary.

Just a few weeks ago 13-year-old Lewis Kenny was put in isolation for what the school considered an “extreme” haircut. I thought this style: “a number three cut on the sides (and within the school’s guidelines) and longer on top” was hardly extreme. It’s tidy; it’s not long and not dyed an extreme colour. It would not, as Sir Michael Wilshaw is so concerned about, make him unemployable.

Earlier this month, a head teacher made waves in Bradford when she sent home hundreds of students en masse [4] over a couple of days for wearing the wrong school uniform. Some for something as petty as not wearing their school ID in a lanyard. School rules such as wearing the correct dress code, arriving on time and completing homework are key in preparing children for the world of work and expectations of full time employment. But removing children from class, without giving them and their parents time to rectify a problem, is counterproductive and unjustly impinges on their education.

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Schools must engage with parents, families and staff when establishing boundaries and expectations in the first instance and find other ways to reinforce when rules are flouted for the first time to give students and their parents time to respond and learn from the mistake before rolling out harsh reprimands. In these examples the swift punishment seems extreme and inappropriate for the crime.

I remember when I was sent home from school by a wonderful but firm head teacher in what would’ve been Year 10 for wearing the wrong coloured socks. The school had a strict uniform policy and it was unusual for me not to be in the required attire. My mother, who ran

her own business after leaving school at 14 and missed out on the benefits of a full education beyond that, couldn't believe it. She sent me right back with a note saying: "What benefit is it to my son's education to miss three lessons because of the wrong socks? Perhaps you would like to come round and fix the broken washing machine?" She wasn't being obstructive. She was very strict that we adhered to the school's dress code but sometimes parents can't afford to repair or replace tired school clothes.

> "Teachers must strike a fine balance between being too restrictive and allowing some flexibility when individual situations call for it."

This is another factor schools must consider. Uniforms in state schools often act as a leveller between more well-off and poorer pupils so that school becomes an equal place where children can learn and gain skills to give them opportunities in life. It eliminates that competition for who is wearing the newest, coolest and often most expensive trainers, jacket or rucksack, and avoids highlighting whose family may not be able to afford it. In my case, my being sent home for something beyond my control was a public humiliation based on a personal circumstance, not because I knowingly flouted the rules, and for some children it may be due to family finances.

In both of these examples, removing these students from the classroom was a knee-jerk reaction which unnecessarily draws bad press to schools and create a news story where there was none to be had. When I was growing up, our generation were confined by so many rules and perhaps children these days are given too much leeway. Sir Michael is right that rules are important, particularly in the formal setting of school for certain pupils who lack structure at home. But teachers must strike a fine balance between being too restrictive and allowing some flexibility when individual situations call for it. Instead of creating an "us versus them" attitude between parents and teachers, schools must work with families so that the academic and social education of children is a collaborative effort.

Source Url: http://teachersupport.info/print/635