BOOKS & CULTURE

No Uniform Solution

Uniforms make students look sharper, and they create a safer environment, but they can't they raise a school's achievement level

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On Nov. 4, the Los Angeles City Council, looking to prod the city's school board into being proactive in addressing steep budget cuts, teacher unrest and chronic underachievement, unanimously passed a resolution recommending all students in L.A. public schools wear uniforms. Councilmember Jose Huizar (former president of the LAUSD's Board of Education) hailed this proposal as a harbinger for greater "order," "focus" and "higher achievement" in classrooms across the district.

Perhaps. The clothing company Classroom Uniforms certainly cheered — it announced a new line of uniforms the same week as the City Council vote.

It seems that ever since the surprising success of Long Beach Unified School District's 1994 mandatory school uniform policy — the first large urban school district to institute such a requirement — educators and administrators have been clamoring to announce the astounding benefits that uniforms can bring to struggling districts. In Long Beach, which is part of the Los Angeles metro area, the U.S. Department of Education found that school crime decreased 36 percent, sexual offenses fell 74 percent and fights between students dropped 51 percent after the policy went into effect. Is correlation, as the scientists say, causation?

About 14 percent of all public schools mandate their students wear school uniforms. While there's been some uncertainty and controversy regarding these uniform policies, the often bland outfits have made some schools safer, toned down excessive gang aggression and set a "business-like" tone for academic study. They've also eliminated the need for students to one-up each other with fashionable clothing (easing the strain on poorer families), easily identified trespassers on school property and helped foster community identity and school spirit.

But it's these benefits that have administrators and desperate school boards (like L.A.'s) believing that school uniforms can not only raise achievement levels but act as a panacea for deeply rooted problems.

New research published in the November issue of Educational Policy muddles this perception.

The study, authored by Ryan Yeung, suggests that school uniforms have little to no effect on boosting achievement levels and, in some cases, can hurt them.

The data analyzed was culled from the National Center for Educational Statistic's National Education Longitudinal Survey and Early Childhood Longitudinal Study. These surveyed both primary and secondary school students in waves dating from 1988 to 2004. Econometric analyses performed on these studies are the first to investigate the effects of school uniforms on achievement.

The research found that while some scores were higher in schools that had uniform policies — most notably in the reading portion for eighth- and 10th-graders — the vast majority of the data led to inconsistent and inconclusive results. The regression results from the National Education Longitudinal Survey study found that uniformed public school students, on every other examination other than reading, scored worse than their uniform-free counterparts.

In the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, children in private schools with uniform policies scored below their counterparts with no uniform policy in reading and math examinations. In public schools, uniform policies were found to have little or no effect on mathematics achievement. And, surprisingly, Catholic schools with required uniform policies scored lower in reading, science and history than their counterparts with no uniform mandate.

On first glance, these seem like head-scratching results. After all, most of the schools with strict uniform policies are clustered in poorer, mostly urban, districts that historically performed poorly anyway. But Yeung notes that both sets of data support one general conclusion: "Once I control for a number of factors, including race, sex and socioeconomic status, none of the regressions for the NELS and the ECLS-K are significant, leading me to conclude that there is little evidence that school uniforms have an impact on student outcomes."

Simply put: Even if teachers and administrators perceive that students look sharper, more disciplined and attentive in spiffy uniforms, they don't actually perform any better academically.

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