

Case Study: Dress Code

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Summary of the case

A new administrator has been tasked with devising a way to combat an ever-increasing number of dress code and ID violations. The situation is contentious. Students complain the dress code is unfair, teachers feel uncomfortable enforcing it and administrators are frustrated with the rising number of violations even as several parents complain, in emails and phone calls, that administrators aren't doing enough to solve the problem.

Issues to be resolved

Among the issues to be resolved are the following:

1. Reduce the number of dress code and ID violations.
2. Create an atmosphere where students feel respected without compromising an atmosphere that embraces learning by limiting distractions.
3. Resolve numerous parental complaints that the student dress is inappropriate.
4. Reduce the uncomfortable position teachers are in trying to enforce the dress code.

Stakeholders

The stakeholders include everyone who is touched by the dress code. The district, admin, teachers, parents, and students all have a stake in a dress code policy that is fair and equitable.

Existing related laws or court rulings

In North Carolina, parents have sued a charter school that is enforcing a dress code that requires girls to wear a skirt, skort or jumper in school. Parents call the dress code promotes “archaic sex role stereotypes” and “burdens girls with restrictions of their freedom of movement that boys do not suffer” while the school’s founder says the policy encourages “chivalry,” and “a code of conduct where women are treated, they’re regarded as a fragile vessel that men are supposed to take care of and honor” (Panetta, 2023). A federal court has ruled against the school finding that as a “state actor” it is violating the Equal Protection Clause with the skirt requirement and promotes “harmful gender stereotypes.” The U.S. Supreme Court has been asked to take up the case.

Possible solutions

There are several approaches that could be taken to addressing the issue. The first step I would take is to reexamine the ten-year-old dress code to see if any requirements are outdated and/or arcane. After a reassessment of the dress code, it would be critical that EVERYONE in the school knows what is expected with the dress code and ID wearing from day one (Tingley, 2023). I would host an assembly where the dress code is addressed seriously but also humorously, a “What NOT to wear pageant” comes to mind. If the ID requirement can’t be loosened to allow students to simply have their ID on their person, then perhaps wearing the ID can be made to be a fun activity. One school in Texas allows students to wear create -- school appropriate – lanyards which allows students to express their individuality while complying with school rules (Johnson, 2022).

After establishing a school-wide understanding of what dress is and is not acceptable, perhaps a student-led “jury” could be established to hear and rule on subsequent dress code/ID violations making it less of an administration/faculty-versus-student battle and allowing students to let their peers decide consequences. The other obvious solution is to draft a proposal to the district to institute some kind of uniform at the school. The uniform does not have to be formal but instead could include jeans or khakis, short sleeve knit shirts, appropriate t-shirts and the like. That would be followed with some kind of compensation for students who may not be able to afford the newly required clothing.

Solutions chosen to resolve the issue

I would start by setting ground rules on dress code and ID wearing during the first few days of school. Host an assembly, and support teachers by asking them to hold a strict line on dress code violators from the beginning. I would monitor and reassess the results near the end of the year. If violations continue to be a concern, I will draft a proposal to the district for a school uniform policy after consulting with parents and getting input from staff and students.

Action steps

2. The issue has already been identified. I think setting a realistic goal about the number of violations we hope to have with a new approach should be the first step. Will the principal be happy with a 10% reduction in violations, 50%, or does he want a 90% reduction in complaints. It’s important to set realistic expectations with the administration before the school year begins.

3. I would kick off the year with a school-wide assembly where the topic of dress code and ID violations is front and center. The rules should be clear, but the presentation should also be entertaining, so students realize that what's being asked of them is being done in order to make everyone at school feel safe and connected.

4. The next step would be constant and vigilant monitoring of the rules. Start the year with strict adherence so there is no question what is acceptable and what is not. Reassess the results as the year progresses.

5. Take a hard look at the policy enacted as the year ends. Did it make a difference. Did the number of violations reduce to a level acceptable to the principal and if not, is it time to push the district for a more formal dress code/ID policy.

Potential moral and legal consequences

The biggest complaints against enforcing a formal dress code is that it's difficult to enforce the rules equally for every student. Female students are far more likely to get cited for dress code violations than boys which smacks of gender bias that can make female students feel targeted and self-conscious. In addition, enforcing dress code violations can produce the unintended consequence of humiliating students and stifling self-expression (Trekker, 2022). As far as ID wearing, some consider it unnecessary and a privacy intrusion although most schools that require IDs be visible do so to keep students and the campus safe from intruders.

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