School Uniforms: *Esprit de Corps*

Rosemary P. Ryan and Thomas E. Ryan

"I challenge all schools to teach character education: good values and good citizenship. And if it means teenagers will stop killing each other over designer jackets, then public schools should be able to require school uniforms," asserted President Clinton in his 1996 State of the Union speech. The concept of public schools requiring students to wear school uniforms is a very controversial topic in education, yet it is gaining popularity nationwide. School uniforms are a part of the solution to the growing problems with discipline and student conduct that America’s schools are facing.

Student safety is a top priority for all school district leaders, both administrators and parents. "We know that every parent who walks a child to the bus stop and waves good-bye in the morning should never have to worry about whether their child will come home safely. Every parent has a right to expect that their children would be safe in school. Every parent has a right to believe that their children are spending their time learning and teachers are able to spend the day teaching," stated President Clinton at a Long Beach, California school conference. School uniforms remove some of the causes of gang activity, crime, and violence within schools. By preventing the wearing of gang colors and display of gang related paraphernalia, schools send a zero tolerance message to gangs that reside in their community that they will not be allowed influence in the school system. In schools, gangs mainly communicate through sporting colors and other insignia. School uniforms help prevent gang communication on school grounds. "The uniforms help reaffirm the district’s position that gang activity and gang paraphernalia will not be tolerated in our schools and our community," stated an Illinois Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Thomas E. Ryan.

The *School Community Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 2, Fall/Winter 1998
Due to a declining student interest in academics and learning, the achievement scores of America’s students are the lowest in history. School uniforms cut down on the distractions that keep students from learning in school. According to Barbara Sneed, a fifth grade teacher in Illinois, “Uniforms are a way of communicating expectations and that school is not goof-off time.” Today, students are concerned about looking “cool”, which makes learning second to gaining approval from their peers on their priority list. School uniforms take away the distraction of who is wearing the “coolest” item that day and refocuses students’ energy on the academics of the day.

Student self-esteem and confidence increases when they are wearing uniforms. Students not wearing the “in” clothes of that season (in a school without uniforms) are often made fun of and then feel inferior to their peers. When the pressure to wear something “cool” is removed from the school atmosphere, the students are then able to be more confident in themselves, something all students are able to benefit from. Even those students who are able to afford designer clothes learn to judge their peers by who they are versus if they are wearing the same Tommy Hilfiger label jeans as them. If the students are able to work in an environment that is healthy for their self-esteem, they will all benefit, both academically and socially.

Students with a high self-esteem perform better in the classroom. Those students who feel better about themselves and their performance in school will generally attend school with more regularity. In a span of two years after the implementation of uniforms, School District 168 noticed an overall 63% increase in attendance among those students with a record of excessive absenteeism. In many low-income area school districts, students work many long hours to pay for “cool” clothing items, hair styles, and accessories. This need to fit in can drive them to skip school to either work or become involved in illegal activities, all in order to obtain the money to pay for the “cool”, expensive items. When the pressure to buy these items is taken away from the students, and their environment, they can focus once again on learning instead of having to decide between school and working. When students regularly attend school, they retain more information, thereby making them a more well-educated individual.

“Students tend to behave the way they are dressed,” commented Ronald Stephens, Director of the National School Safety Center. School uniforms also contribute to improved classroom behavior. In addition to the way they think others perceive them, clothing influences the way students perceive themselves. Uniforms give the students a positive standard to live up to, once they know their teachers’ expectations of them. Teachers also admittedly have a tendency to treat students in uniforms
with more respect than those in regular clothes. "I really cannot explain it," Ellen Radcliffe, an Illinois elementary school principal attempted to explain, "but I just feel more respect for students in uniform. It's an illusion, actually, because they are the same student as they were the year before without a uniform, but there is definitely a noticeable change in the way the teachers treat their uniformed students." This "illusion" described by Ms. Radcliffe is due in part to the Hawthorne Effect. The Hawthorne Effect states that a group of people who are treated in a special way tend to behave differently, according to the way they are treated. Thus, if more is expected of students in uniform, the students are more likely to work harder to live up to the new, higher expectations.

School uniforms also create an *esprit de corps*, a positive feeling of student belonging. In theory, when students are dressed similarly, the issue of trendy new clothing is set aside as the students form new friendships and discover what lies on the inside of their potential friend. "They [the uniforms] teach our young people one of life's most important lessons—that what really counts is who you are and what you can become on the inside, not what you are wearing on the outside," stated President Clinton in a radio address in 1996 from California.

The main argument that opponents to school uniform policies use is that the policies violate students' civil rights. It appears as though by having the school districts regulate the students' dress, the students are not allowed to express themselves. However, the United States Supreme Court has decided that students' choice of dress can be regulated by school officials when what they are wearing violates school policies, even though the students have extended First Amendment protections. This ruling is unclear as to where to draw the line between the students' First Amendment rights and the school's dress code policy and provides judges with room for many ways of interpreting it. Some courts have ruled in favor of the students; others have ruled in favor of the school officials. As long as judges have opposing viewpoints on this issue, there will never be a clear-cut answer to this dilemma.

Despite what anti uniform activists would like the public to believe, freedom of both political and religious expression are provided for within school uniform policies. Students are allowed to wear their own message, whether political or religious, provided it is in compliance with the school uniform policy. Students, protected under the Constitution of the United States, are allowed to wear religious messages as much as any other expressive message is allowed, including yarmulkes and head scarves. Neither religious nor political expression are hindered by school uniform policies. Students also cannot be forced to wear a message provided by the school.

Another argument against school uniforms is that uniforms are just a
way for the administration to "show some muscle" and thereby demonstrate its power over the students. Although this essay certainly cannot represent every school district, among the districts included in this essay, it can be concluded that by no means is a school uniform policy a way of preventing students from self-expression, but rather they are a proactive attempt to regulate students' actions that are holding back the student body's educational progress as a whole. Gang violence and interaction is becoming rampant in America's schools, as we can see in the 150 gang members under the age of 16 who reside in Bloomington, and uniforms are currently part of a solution to wipe-out gangs from our nation's schools. These gangs threaten student safety, a number one concern for district officials.

The cost of a school uniform is another argument used against a uniform policy by low income families. Overall, however, school uniforms decrease clothing costs for families. The uniform, that lasts for at least one year, costs far less than a peer pressured individual would spend on a new wardrobe every season. Local businesses and the individual school districts also offer assistance to those families who qualify, in order to ensure that every student comes to school with a uniform. A school official, usually the superintendent, has the power to grant aid to those families who need help purchasing the uniforms for their students.

It is true that social classes still exist, even when students are in uniform. Why, though, strengthen the dividing lines between those classes by permitting students to show off their most expensive items in school? School is a learning environment, and has no place for negative social stratification. Uniforms only try to bridge the gap between social classes, through attempting to have everyone on the same common ground. "Uniforms really level the playing field between the haves have the haves-nots," observed Long Beach District spokesman Richard VanDerLaan.

The benefits of school uniforms far outweigh their short-term costs. School uniforms not only keep students safe, but they also increase their self-esteem and promote a more positive attitude throughout the school. "Uniforms are not a magic pill," claims third-grade teacher Judy Jacobs, "but any school will see payoffs. We have an entire generation of children who have grown up with no boundaries. Watch what happens when you provide a few."

Rosemary P. Ryan is an English major and secondary education minor at Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington, Illinois. Dr. Thomas E. Ryan is the superintendent of the Community Consolidated School District 168 in Sauk Village, Illinois.