

School uniforms

Erosion of individuality or better learning environment
By Justin Pope

I was waiting for my cousin Matt by the main doors to his school where we had planned to meet and then head for the mall. As he approached it struck me that our appearances were vastly different. He with his black dress shoes and pants, white dress shirt and grey sweater hanging off his shoulder and me with my K-Swiss sneakers, Tommy Hilfiger jeans, hooded sweatshirt and jean jacket from the Gap. Together we represented the opposite poles of the always controversial subject of school uniforms. It made me wonder about the school uniform and whether it enhanced the learning environment of students today.

As I began discussing the hot issue of whether we students today should wear uniforms or not, I must admit that I felt lucky to be in a public school where I could wear what I wanted and therefore express my creative individuality. I came to believe though, that uniforms help promote a better learning environment for us. One that is more equal, less stressful and safer.

Since I could not find a single book on this issue in the library, I surfed the Net for media articles and interviewed teachers, parents and students for their opinions.

In telephone conversations with the Peel District School Board, Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board and the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, I discovered that uniforms were not required in any public schools in Peel but were required in all Catholic

high schools and all private schools.

As a student in a public high school, I have a good understanding of how clothes can make or break you. I have always felt that dressing in the latest labels insured me of being widely accepted and a part of the "in crowd." Every day I see students being picked on and looked down upon because they don't have the right look. School uniforms eliminate this problem and promote equality and a feeling of community among the students. In a conversation with a teacher in a public high school, he admitted that the appearance of a well-dressed student provokes a more immediate acceptance of that student from most teachers. He firmly believes in school uniforms.

Matthew and Dominique, both students at Catholic high schools, and Chlodagh, a student at a private school, all agree that uniforms are easy and simple. There is no morning stress or valuable time wasted on what to wear to school that day. When I think of how much time and energy I spend on what I'm going to wear, I realize what a break it would be to eliminate that task. I could sleep longer, have more time for homework or breakfast and maybe even wait for the school bus instead of it waiting for me.

My research revealed that another area of stress is the economics of dressing for school. Every parent I spoke to, including my own, felt that it was far less costly to dress their children in school uniforms

than in regular clothes and welcomed or would welcome their use. According to Brenda, my cousin's mom, she would spend less than \$300 on a new uniform for Matt. My attire for one day out of the school week can cost that much or more. Two very good friends of mine have part-time jobs so that they can afford to dress the way that trends dictate. Though one is a gifted student, the other is not and the time she spends at her job could probably be better spent on schoolwork.

While surfing the Net, I read an article by Brian Knowles where he cites from *Education Week* that since Long Beach Unified School District in California implemented a system-wide mandatory uniform policy in 1994, assaults have decreased by 85 percent. Uniforms not only help to reduce internal differences but also make recognizing school intruders easy. Students, parents and teachers alike want safe schools.

It may be time for public school boards to recognize that students have many ways other than clothing to express their creative individuality and that school uniforms help to encourage a learning environment that is level, focused and safe. This same environment can reduce economic stress and burdens to both students and parents alike. I would like to be a part of that kind of learning environment!

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