

# Schools around the country face criticism for dress code policies

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Leggings like the ones seen in this picture have become part of the debate about appropriate school clothes in schools across the U.S. Many feel that school dress codes unfairly target girls. Photo by: Peter Muller

There has been a lot of controversy around school dress codes online. Specifically, the concern is that schools are enforcing the rules in a way that discriminates against girls.

A video on the dress code policy at Marcus High School in Texas showed only girls as rule violators. The video went viral. In St. Louis, Missouri, Oakville High School's principal is on video apologizing to parents after telling female students they should not show off their bodies for fear of "distracting" male classmates. A school in New Orleans, Louisiana, forced a sixth-grader to leave the classroom, in tears, for having hair extensions.

Schools with strict dress codes claim that these codes prevent distractions and create a professional environment. They say dress codes reduce pressure for students of different incomes to dress similarly, especially if they cannot afford to. Dress codes also help stop gang

activity, they say. However, we live in an age of the #MeToo movement and easy internet access. People say sending students out of class for dress code violations is wrong. Some people say these rules are more strongly enforced against girls, especially girls of color.

## **Perceptions Of Dress Code Violations**

The website Change.org says it has more than 400 open petitions against individual school dress codes. Many of the petition titles call their schools' dress codes sexist or unfair.

The National Women's Law Center did a report on school dress codes in the District of Columbia. The group is called NWLC for short. The report states, "These rules aren't neutral. Many target girls, and especially black girls, by regulating skirt length and headwraps."

And the rules aren't applied equally, either. "Students report that black girls, and especially curvier students, are disproportionately targeted."

Across the United States, 53 percent of public schools had a strict dress code during the 2015-2016 school year, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. The NWLC study takes a rare look at dress code violations.

The report was released in April. It examines the experiences of 21 black girls who attend or attended 12 District of Columbia schools and analyzes districtwide student discipline data.

All of the girls reported experiencing or witnessing dress-code enforcement in their schools. Common punishments included missing class time or facing suspension. The punishments were for hair, makeup or clothing styles that were considered inappropriate. Since the report's release, two of the schools have made changes to their dress codes.

Nia Evans is the NWLC's manager of campaign and digital strategies and education. "[Dress codes] ... impact girls differently, they impact black girls differently," Evans says. "And when you add discipline to it, it's really a disaster."

The concern is that students fall farther behind in class when they miss time dealing with dress code punishments. Nationwide, African-American girls are 5 1/2 times more likely than white girls to be suspended. It is unclear how many are from dress code punishment.

## **Protections For Students' Self-Expression**

Adrienne Dixson is a professor of education at the University of Illinois. Dixson believes dress codes can prevent self-expression. Girls of color are more likely to wear styles such as braids, hair extensions and Afros, which are often not allowed in school policies. They are more likely to be punished, as the Louisiana sixth-grader was.

The American Civil Liberties Union is a civil rights group. They say dress codes are legal as long as they do not "treat boys and girls differently, force students to conform to sex stereotypes or censor particular viewpoints." This includes protection for transgender students, students who do not identify as male or female or any students who dress in nontraditional ways.

In some cases, the protests from students and parents are making a difference.

Victoria Schantz was a senior last year at Indian Trail High School in Kenosha, Wisconsin. The school's Women's Empowerment Club decided to take on the district's dress code.

Schantz joined in. She was pulled out of class for her clothing, given clothes and sent home to change. One time she was sent home for wearing a baggy t-shirt and leggings, and was sent home twice and had to spend the rest of the day in the office. Schantz posted the group's petition to change the dress code.

The school board reviewed 3,000 signatures and discussed the issue. They created a more relaxed dress code. Changes include allowing students to wear leggings.

## **Schools Versus The Internet**

Like Schantz's district, many of the schools that have been in the internet spotlight have apologized or changed their dress code.

Marcus High School's principal admitted that the video "absolutely missed the mark." Oakville High School's principal apologized to the parents and promised to apologize to the students.

The Louisiana sixth-grader's family brought a lawsuit against Christ the King Parish School. As a result, the rule banning hair extensions has been removed.

Some schools responded to controversies with a more relaxed dress code or by switching to uniforms. Others, such as Evanston Township High School in Illinois, decided to completely change their rules.

Evanston's new dress code states that it wants students to have equal "educational access" and "does not reinforce stereotypes." Students cannot wear clothes that show hate speech, illegal items or bad words. They also can't wear clothes that reveal undergarments or accessories that could be considered dangerous.

Essentially, students must wear a shirt, pants, dress or skirt and shoes that are non-threatening.

Superintendent Eric Witherspoon helped change the dress code. He said, "We wanted students to know that your body is your body, and we want you to feel proud and comfortable in your own skin."

The new dress code was implemented this past school year.

"The school did not fall apart, education kept going on and students did not become more disrespectful," Witherspoon said. "We have students of all different races, body shapes, gender expressions and backgrounds, and the great thing is that they now are able to express themselves."

**Quiz**

- 1 According to the article, why did the National Women's Law Center determine that dress-code rules are NOT neutral?
- (A) The group confirmed that the students who have brought lawsuits against their schools have been all girls and no boys.
  - (B) The group confirmed that dress codes "force students to conform to sex stereotypes or censor particular viewpoints."
  - (C) The group found that rules target girls, and mostly black girls, by regulating things like hair, makeup and clothing.
  - (D) The group found that most of the suspensions of African-American girls from school are a result of dress codes.
- 2 According to the article, which of the following MOST influenced recent school decisions to change dress codes?
- (A) students' online videos of punishment
  - (B) attention from the television media
  - (C) spokeswomen from the #MeToo movement
  - (D) online petitions, lawsuits and a report
- 3 According to the article, how do schools justify strict dress codes?
- (A) They say dress codes prevent distractions, status issues and gang activity.
  - (B) They say dress codes improve student grades and graduation rates.
  - (C) They say dress codes eliminate school success differences between income levels.
  - (D) They say dress codes help students feel more proud of and comfortable in their bodies.

4 A student claims that students learn better when they do NOT have to follow dress codes.

What additional evidence would the student need to make her claim stronger?

- (A) data showing that student grades improved after dress codes were loosened
- (B) statistics on how many students who followed dress codes went on to college after graduation
- (C) a report showing that black girls are punished most often for dress code violations
- (D) an essay explaining the student's opinion about why dress codes are unfair