

I'm not a bot

























School uniforms in public schools are considered essential for teaching children to obey rules and develop a sense of community in many countries, including the UK and Australia. But public schools in other countries like the USA and Canada rarely enforce mandatory school uniforms. It is, however, far more common for private schools to enforce school uniforms, matter the country in question. This article takes a deep dive into the pros and cons of school uniforms, showing that there are positive arguments on both sides of this debate. Pros of School Uniforms/Cons of School Uniforms1. Pro - Uniforms Build School Spirit1. Con - Less Bullying in Schools2. Con - Lack of Freedom of Expression3. Pro - Saving Time in Mornings3. Con - Uniforms Teach Gender Norms4. Pro - Improves School Choice5.Pro - Clear 'Appropriate Dress' Rules5. Con - Uniforms can Violate Religious Expression6. Pro - Uniforms Improve a School's Reputation6. Con - Uniforms Highlight Social-Class Differences Between Schools7. Pro - Uniforms can Increase Student Focus7. Con - There's Less Visible Diversity8. Pro - Protection of a School's Religious Identity8. Con - It's Another Thing for Teachers to Police9. Pro - School Truancy can be more Easily Identified9. Con - Parents need to Manage Laundry Routines around School Days10. Pro - Ensures Appropriate Sporting Outfits10. Con - Difficulty in Finding the Uniform Many schools intentionally choose uniforms that are very basic, such as "white polo shirt and grey shorts", so that parents do not have to pay exorbitant amounts of money on the uniforms. Many low-cost clothing stores also make the effort to produce and distribute these typical uniform-conformant clothes at low cost during back-to-school sales. A typical 5 pack of basic white polo shirts that students can wear to school as a uniform is likely to be significantly cheaper than an outfit a child would wear otherwise. Furthermore, while children in schools without uniforms would feel pressure to change up their outfits regularly (adding to costs), the forced repetition of wearing Related Article: 17 Surprising School Uniform Statistics, Facts & Data It is regular practice at schools with school uniforms for parents to offer uniforms for free as hand-me-down outfits once their children grow out of the uniform. This has the effect of helping poorer families to access uniforms for their children without cost. There tends to be an over-supply of uniforms - both new and second-hand - because of the sheer number of children growing out of their uniform every month. As a result, parents in desperate need of uniforms are often able to source uniforms for free. Many schools have a hand-me-down bin in their front of form, allowing parents to drop-off pre-loved uniforms, and other parents to arrive and request free shirts and pants discretely. If all children are dressed the same, the poorer children whose parents cannot afford brand-name clothing are not as visibly singled-out. They will be wearing the same clothes as the wealthier children. This can have the effect of reducing chances of bullying based on a child's family's levels of wealth. But it also enables children who are poor to feel as if they are no different from others. It helps to start all children off on a level playing field, and makes them feel more secure that they're just another student - neither better or worse than other students who are of higher or lower wealth. In this study by Chris Baumann and Hana Krskova, published in the International Journal of Educational Management, it was found that children wearing school uniforms tend to listen more intently and for longer periods of time than children without uniforms. As a result, they found that teachers also spent less time disciplining students and waiting for students to give their attention to the teachers. This leads to more engaged working time in the classroom. One potential reason behind this finding is that the conformity in dress reduces distractions for students. However, there are plenty of other studies that have found no significant difference in academic achievement by parents, so in my opinion the jury is still out on whether this is true. More research is required. Even schools that do not have mandatory school uniforms often have sports uniforms for physical education lessons. This is for several reasons, including both conformity and practicality. Firstly, there are unique pros and cons of sports uniforms that differ from those of school uniforms. Namely, teams in sports need to have a sense of camaraderie and unity that the uniform can help achieve. Wearing the same colors can instill team spirit that helps with the team's performance. Secondly, a team uniform is useful in sports for helping to quickly identify team members to pass the ball to or seek support in the fast pace of a game. Thirdly, a sports uniform is specifically designed and loosely fitted so students are comfortable while engaging in physical activity, which may include physical contortions, stretching, sprinting, and other actions not usually undertaken outside of the sporting arena. A study by Nathan et al. in the International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity found that children who wear dedicated sporting outfit during sports lessons tend to do more physical activity than children who do not. This was a sizeable study - with 42 schools and over 3000 children studied - making these findings some of the more reliable results within the school uniforms literature. Logically, this also checks out. Firstly, if all children are wearing a pre-approved sporting outfit that is fit for purpose and can be comfortable during physical activity, they will have less clothing distractions and have one less potential barrier preventing them from participation in lessons. Secondly, another logical rationale for this is that the students know they can change out of the uniform after the lesson (into either their regular uniform or non-uniform clothing), giving them the sense that they can sweat and get the uniforms dirty without suffering negative consequences for the remainder of the day. Thirdly, it could be argued that the act of putting on the sporting uniform can help students psychologically prepare for the physical activity. The uniform is a psychological signal to the students that it's time for them to do exercise. School uniforms could remove one more thing that children can be bullied over. If all children are dressed the same, then children will not bully one another for their fashion choices. And high school students seem to agree that bullying will be decreased if mandatory uniform policies are introduced. However, empirical evidence does not always support this widely-held belief. This study, for example, found no difference in disciplinary issues before and after a school uniform was introduced at one particular school. It is possible that bullying will happen regardless of uniforms, and that making all children wear uniforms does nothing to actually teach kindness. A bully will be a bully - targeting things other than dress codes if need be - unless the bully is actively taught not to do so. A study by Sanchez et al. interviewed 604 middle school students found that the students reported increased confidence and self-esteem while wearing uniforms. The primary hypothesis for this growth in confidence is that students didn't feel so self-aware about the way they dressed. However, it's possible that some students may also develop increased confidence by expressing themselves through their uniforms. By trying out new clothes, children learn to develop a more unique identity and sense of self. Wearing a uniform with a better image in the community than a school without a uniform, or even with an outdated or simple uniform, can have a positive effect on the school's reputation. The National Association of Elementary Schools Principals (NAESP) shows that this is a key concern for school principals. 83% of principals in the study reported that they believed the uniforms improved their school's image in the community. Here, the main concern of the school principals is the message the uniform sends and not an actual tangible effect. Given there are several studies highlighting that there is no academic benefit of a uniform, this seems like a vanity metric. Nevertheless, the symbolism of having well-dressed students can have the effects of attracting new parents to the school and having parents and the community value and respect the school and its students more. School spirit, 77% of school principals in schools with uniforms believed that uniforms did help with school spirit. Many parents also like schools that have uniforms. It's simply easier to get ready in the morning if children know exactly what to wear. There is no back-and-forth choosing and changing outfits or arguments between parents and children about what is acceptable to wear. And in fact, the NAESP study found that 92% of parents believe it's easier to get their kids ready in the morning if they have a school uniform. Similarly, 93% of parents believe that a uniform policy saves time in mornings. Significantly, the parents cited less wardrobe battles as the key reason time is saved. If all students are wearing school uniforms, it's easier to identify people on the school grounds who do not belong there. Those people would not be wearing uniforms. This is why (as this study shows) parents and teachers tend to perceive uniforms as positively impacting school safety, while students don't believe uniforms make them more safe. Of course, there is one big hole in this argument. It would only make it easier to identify children or teenagers who do not belong, but parents who do not belong could easily be confused for a teacher seeing who most schools don't have uniform policies for teachers. And of course, the big threat to school safety is adults coming onto the grounds impersonating teachers. Which begs the question: why do children have to wear uniforms and teachers don't? If the argument is children on school grounds need to be identifiable by their uniforms, then shouldn't teachers also have to wear uniforms so they're identifiable? It seems like adult hypocrisy to me. Uniforms may also be useful to schools for age identification of children. This would require different year levels to have different uniforms. For example, the infants could wear one color while the older children can wear another. This would allow schools to police movement through the school. If a younger child is in a part of the school reserved for the older children, they could be easily identified and sent to their dedicated space (which may also help with safety). This identification could also work across gender lines, where different genders can wear different uniforms. For example, if there are two private schools side-by-side where one is all-girls and one is all-boys, then it could work well to ensure the two genders remain separated, as per the private schools' policies and ethos. It could be argued that, if all students dress the same, then there is less chance of prejudice by students and teachers. For example, if a child wears a particular religious dress that a teacher dislikes, the teacher may treat them differently. But if all children dress the same, then the teacher is less likely to be prejudiced toward that child. However, there is an obvious flaw in this argument. It doesn't reduce prejudice because it is potentially prejudicial to tell some children they're not allowed to dress in ways that accord with their culture or religion. School excursions to busy places can be stressful for teachers. The teacher needs to keep an eye on all the students in the class while there are also many other members of the public in the same space. Uniforms are very useful in these situations. The teacher can count-off all the people in uniform to easily ensure all the students are there and ready for their next instructions. All cultures have rules around acceptable forms of dress. Usually, these have to do with not wearing sexually provocative clothing and not wearing clothing with insulting or provocative signs on them. A uniform gives students a set of guidelines about what is considered acceptable and unacceptable to wear. And it seems parents and school administrators often cite this as a key reason for mandatory school uniform, particularly in religious schools. However, this also raises concerns about exclusionary dress. Different people have different ideas around what is and is not appropriate. If you're attending a school that has more conservative values than your family, you may feel particularly constrained by an arbitrary dress code that doesn't conform with your own values. Most people believe that sexuality and sexualization should not be associated with childhood. By enforcing a school uniform, children are discouraged from wearing sexually evocative clothing that most of society would consider inappropriate at a young age. Thus, by enforcing a uniform, children feel less pressure to focus on their outfits, 'looking good' for the opposite (or same) sex, or thinking about sexually provocative clothing. I grew up in a school where we all wore uniforms. Police would often approach students walking around town in uniform during the school day. They would ask if we were supposed to be at school (and sometimes even call the school). If students were found to be truanting, the police would drive them back to school. Thus, uniforms can also be a useful way for the whole community to oversee where children of school age should be at all times. Of course, children can simply get around this by bringing a change of clothes, which would in-turn make it easier for them to truant if the police are looking for people in school uniform! Many conservative parents want their children to grow up conforming to society's gender norms. Boys are raised to be leaders and girls are raised to be ladies. And while in today's age, gender norms are increasingly considered to be bad for society and children, some parents still desire this for their children. So, for those parents, uniforms could be a positive. Girls are taught to wear skirts and dresses, while boys are taught to wear shorts. Even these uniform requirements send a message - it's harder to do rough and tumble activities in a skirt than shorts! By raising children from a young age to wear gender-conforming outfits, the schools are showing the children how to 'act their age' and young people are more likely to conform to the gender norms of society. I personally consider this to be a negative, but many parents see it as a positive, so I've placed it here for them! Public schools usually do not have religious, cultural or social-class identities that diverge from the mainstream. However, many private schools have particular affiliations, such as: Affiliation with a religion. A desire to appear upper-class. Affiliation with a particular cultural group (such as international schools). For these schools, uniforms can act as signals about the school's values. An upper-class school might enforce the wearing of blazers with school crests on them. And some religious schools may have rules about wearing traditional or conservative clothing. This can help create a unified sense of the school's identity. In areas where gangs are active, school uniforms can help ensure gang-related colors are not worn on school grounds. This can help make schools gang-free zones and help prevent student recruitment into gangs. Without the visible signs of gangs at school, the gangs' influence and perceived power is reduced. It can also help minimize chances of rival gang groups from targeting one another on school grounds based on the clothing the students are wearing. Furthermore, students who have no affiliation to gangs could be made to feel safer if the visibility of gangs is reduced. The intimidating insignia of gangs would not be visible to them at school each day. Read more about the relationship between gangs and school uniforms here. Let's finish up with a fun one. In Australia we used to have a thing called "mufi day". We would have this day about twice a year. And it was a day where you could wear whatever you want! In the lead-up to mufi day, we would all be on our best behavior so it would go ahead. The day was, after all, a reward for good behavior. On mufi day, everyone would be very excited. We would plan out and wear our favorite outfits. This gave the teachers extra leverage to get the students to behave. And it gave the students something fun to look forward to! Several studies have found no changes in academic achievement between groups of students who wear uniforms and those who do not. There is no clear academic benefit of a uniform, it can be argued that the uniforms are pointless. It seems that the true benefit of wearing a uniform is in the hidden curriculum - that is, in teaching things at school that are not in the academic curriculum. That includes things like discipline and conformity. Whether it's the role of schools to teach these things, however, is open for debate. Should schools just focus on grades and not on reinforcing conformity and discipline? There are some who question the legality and constitutionality of enforcing school uniforms in public schools in the United States. The First Amendment protects freedom of speech, which may also protect free dress. However, to date, the Supreme Court has not made any comment on the constitutionality of uniforms. In 1969, it got close, but upholding students' rights to wear black armbands to protest the Vietnam war. Overall, the key argument here is that a dress code restricts creative expression. If we want our education system to build-up creative, critical, and free-thinking people, a uniform seems inappropriate. The uniform literally makes people uniform, in the sense that 'uniform' means 'the same'. Do we really want schools to be making us all the same? Isn't that exactly the problem with the education system today? People who argue for school uniforms say that it prevents bullying. It stops children from teasing each other because of what they wear. But if we want a multi-cultural world, isn't school the perfect place to start talking about our diversity and how it's a good thing? But making all children wear uniforms, we're hiding ("sweeping under the rug") diversity. We're preventing conversations about it and celebration of it. Thus, uniforms are arguably outdated in a world where diversity should be something that is visible, celebrated, and discussed - especially in schools. Another key problem with school uniforms is that children often don't get a chance to have a say about what the dress code would be. Many uniform dress codes are decades old, and the children currently wearing the uniforms just wear what they're told to wear. But, you would think that a fair and democratic school would let the children wearing the uniform to choose what it looks like. Unfortunately, it is usually the teachers, administrators, and parents who make these decisions. Even worse, sometimes it's a parent that is hired to select the uniform, and rarely consulted. What would be the point of what some people we're talking about? Do you really want to raise children who are not able to make their own decisions that directly affect them? Related: 31 School Dress Code Examples This may seem like a very superficial point, but it's also serious. We're forcing children to wear clothing that the children themselves might consider to be ugly. It seems a little unfair to tell people to wear something that they consider to be unattractive. You look around at some schools and they have color schemes that include browns, mustards, and greys, that most people wouldn't choose to wear if they had the choice! Of course, this isn't the most serious of points. But, for the children, it may be a very serious one indeed. They have to deal with it every day! This is one of the most serious problems with school uniforms. There are religions that have very strict dress code rules. These include having to wear certain colors, hair coverings, and even ceremonial knives (for some Sikhs). By enforcing a strict uniform policy, you may be violating religious liberty. When I was in school, we had one girl at the school who was a Muslim and who wore a Hijab. Her parents had to negotiate with the school principal about what uniform she could wear, seeing as the school didn't have approved hijabs in the uniform code. At the end of the day, her mother made her a hijab that was in the school colors, and everyone was happy. But, it still required some negotiation because of differences between religious requirements and school uniform policy. Uniforms can cause conflicts between the school and the parents. I remember one girl I went to school with who would sometimes come to school out of uniform. She would get into trouble and not be allowed to play at lunch. The problem was that it wasn't her fault. Her parents often wouldn't wash her uniform for her, meaning she didn't have a choice but to wear a non-uniform outfit. Here, my classmate was getting into trouble even though it wasn't her fault - it was her parents' fault. I can see that parents need to cooperate and consent to the school uniform policy. They have to make sure their child wears the uniform, and if enough parents don't, the school will have to change the policy. In fact, some elite private schools require 'white collared' dress shirts, while public schools will require 'blue collared' shirts you'd more commonly see being worn by a construction worker. These different dress codes are not only unfair to the school system, wealthy people have the choice to go to elite schools where they're raised for high-powered, high-paid white collar jobs (lawyers, etc.). Many public schools, as seen by the sorts of uniforms provided, are more humble and appear to be raising people in comfortable clothes that you'd expect to be worn for manual labor jobs. In other words, uniforms don't just train people to embrace gender norms. It also trains people to embrace social-class based identities. Mandatory school uniforms are just one more thing for teachers to have to worry about. In a world where teachers are over-worked and under-paid, it might be better for teachers to simply not have to worry about what their students wear. Furthermore, for teachers who are on a power trip, it gives the teachers an excuse to get children into trouble. A small and minor problem, such as having an untucked t-shirt, could lead a child to get into trouble. Here, rather than the school focusing on education, it may focus on nit-picking and bullying of students (as a teacher, I have a real issue with how often I see teachers bullying students based on things irrelevant to their education). While it is arguable that school uniforms can be a more affordable choice than non-uniform outfits for children, some still argue that mandating school uniforms adds a cost burden for parents. Parents need to buy everyday clothing for their children regardless of whether they're at school. Children need something to wear on weekends and during school holidays, after all! So, at the start of the school year, often parents do need to fork out money they hadn't planned to, and all at once. For example, this report from the London School of Economics, points to one case study where a parent in England had to pay £310 for their child's uniform at the start of the school year. The parent was a single mother, and often train and pay for clothing on substantial debt. In the UK, a school uniform, which was £50 a year, was a significant impact on school uniforms on the family budget. In this instance, the school's policy of mandating uniforms was not only unfair to the parents, but it was also a financial burden. In the United States, where uniforms are more commonly seen, many private schools have committees have simple hand polo shirts. 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First Amendment protects freedom of speech, which may also protect free dress. However, to date, the Supreme Court has not made any comment on the constitutionality of uniforms. In 1969, it got close, but upholding students’ rights to wear black armbands to protest the Vietnam war. Overall, the key argument here is that a dress code restricts creative expression. If we want our education system to build-up creative, critical, and free-thinking people, a uniform seems inappropriate. The uniform literally makes people uniform, in the sense that ‘uniform’ means ‘the same’. Do we really want schools to be making us all the same? Isn’t that exactly the problem with the education system today? People who argue for school uniforms say that it prevents bullying. It stops children from teasing each other because of what they wear. But if we want a multi-cultural world, isn’t school the perfect place to start talking about our diversity and how it’s a good thing? But making all children wear uniforms, we’re hiding (“sweeping under the rug”) diversity. We’re preventing conversations about it and celebration of it. Thus, uniforms are arguably outdated in a world where diversity should be something that is visible, celebrated, and discussed – especially in schools. Another key problem with school uniforms is that children often don’t get a chance to have a say about what the dress code should be. Many uniform dress codes are decades old, and the children currently wearing the uniforms just wear what they’re told to wear. But, you would think that a fair and democratic school would let the children wearing the uniform to choose what it looks like. Unfortunately, it is usually the teachers, administrators, and parents who make these decisions. Even worse, sometimes it’s an outside company that is hired to select the uniform. Children are rarely consulted. What does that say about what sort of people we’re raising in our schools? Do we want to raise compliant sheep, or creative people who are active participants in community decision-making, especially when it comes to decisions that directly affect them? Related: 31 School Dress Code Examples This may seem like a very superficial point, but it’s also serious. We’re forcing children to wear clothing that the children themselves might consider to be ugly. It seems a little unfair to tell people to wear something that they consider to be unattractive. You look around at some schools and they have color schemes that include browns, mustards, and greys, that most people wouldn’t choose to wear if they had the choice! Of course, this isn’t the most serious of points. But, for the children, it may be a very serious one indeed. They have to deal with it every day! This is one of the most serious problems with school uniforms. There are religions that have very strict dress code rules. These include having to wear certain colors, hair coverings, and even ceremonial knives (for some Sikhs). By enforcing a strict uniform policy, you may be violating religious liberty. When I was in school, we had one girl at the school who was a Muslim and who wore a Hijab. Her parents had to negotiate with the school principal about what uniform she could wear, seeing as the school didn’t have approved hijabs in the uniform code. At the end of the day, her mother made her a hijab that was in the school colors, and everyone was happy. But, it still required some negotiation because of differences between religious requirements and school uniform policy. Uniforms can cause conflicts between the school and the parents. I remember one girl I went to school with who would sometimes come to school out of uniform. She would get into trouble and not be allowed to play at lunch. The problem was that it wasn’t her fault. Her parents often wouldn’t wash her uniform for her, meaning she didn’t have a choice but to wear a non-uniform outfit. Here, my classmate was getting into trouble even though it wasn’t her fault - it was her parents! We can see that parents need to cooperate and consent to the uniform policy. They have to make sure their child wears the uniform, and if enough parents don’t participate, the mandatory uniform policy falls apart. In today’s day and age, we’re learning that enforcing gender norms in schools could be a violation of the gender expression of children. Some girls don’t want to wear dresses. And sometimes this isn’t even an issue of gender selection. It’s simply the fact that some girls don’t want to wear dresses! Here, a uniform could be considered a violation of a child’s gender expression. Conservative old people are telling kids what to wear, even though perhaps their values are outdated for today’s world! In fact, this became a big issue in a state in Australia where it was found many private schools forced girls to wear dresses. The state government had to intervene, with a government commissioner saying the schools were “stuck in a different age”. While school uniforms are seen as a positive for helping to erase visible social-class differences in schools (rich vs poor), they also have the negative effect over erasing cultural differences. Children of all different races, cultures, and ethnicities attend modern schools. But, at least in Western schools, they must all adhere to a western dress code that doesn’t allow for cultural expression. Forcing children to wear the clothes of a culture that is not their own is most visible (and, perhaps, offensive) when it comes to religious objections. However, even without the religious element, forcing children to wear uniforms can be seen as a form of cultural assimilation. It denies people their chance to practice their culture in the public sphere. When a school decides to enforce a uniform policy, it needs to take into account how easy it would be for parents to find the uniform. Many public schools with uniform policies intentionally make this easy. They will be okay with a plain white or blue polo shirt. But more prestigious schools will often develop uniforms that are very specific - with complex logos or designs on them. These uniforms often need to be bought straight from the school uniform shop or a small number of pre-approved nearby stores. At the start of the school year, it can be find to get your hands on a uniform. All the parents are trying to get them at the same time! This can also lead to price gouging where shops raise the price because they know demand is higher than supply. If you look at different schools’ uniform policies, you quickly see that some schools have very posh policies while other public schools that serve working-class communities have simple bland polo shirts. In fact, some elite private schools require ‘white collared’ dress shirts, while public schools will require ‘blue collared’ shirts you’d more commonly see being worn by a construction worker. These differences in dress codes from so early on reveal something unfair about the school system: wealthy people have the choice to go to elite schools where they’re raised for high-powered, high-paid white collar jobs (lawyers, etc.). Many public schools, as seen by the sorts of uniforms provided, are more humble and appear to be raising people in comfortable clothes that you’d expect to be worn for manual labor jobs. In other words, uniforms don’t just train people to embrace gender norms. It also trains people to embrace social-class based identities. 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And some academic studies found conflicting information, particularly around whether uniforms increased grades. In other words, it seems like a lot of these arguments are philosophical and hypothetical. People can land on either side of the mandatory school uniforms debate depending on their own values, opinions, and backgrounds. Another thing I found really interesting personally was that my friends who didn’t wear uniforms as kids looked at uniforms negatively - they saw them as tools for suppression of creative expression and even referred to them as looking a little communist! By contrast, my friends who wore uniforms as kids were much more positive toward them. For me, this shows just how much our backgrounds and experiences have conditioned us to sit on one side of the debate or the other. So, I’d encourage you to genuinely think about the other perspective and see if you can come to the debate with as neutral and open a mindset as possible (if that’s possible at all!). 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