



20 November 2015

Dress Standards and Uniforms in ACT Public Schools

The ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations (Council) appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Education & Training Directorate's (ETD) draft Dress Standards and Uniforms in ACT Public Schools policy (including the associated procedures and guidelines).

Council recognises the various benefits of school uniforms, including their role in promoting the safety of students through easier identification. In some schools, uniforms (in conjunction with other measures) have also helped to promote school identity and belonging among students leading to positive educational and social outcomes.

Concerns

1. Interpretation and Scope

The draft policy states that "each ACT public school... are required to develop and implement a... dress standards policy and procedures. This dress standard will entail a school uniform..." Following the definition of school uniform in the policy, consisting of "a limited range of clothing, footwear", Council interprets this statement as placing a requirement on all schools (including colleges) to introduce school uniforms that "identif(y) students as belonging to a particular school."

Council believes that all schools should be given the option to not include a school uniform (as currently defined in the policy) in their dress standards policy. The school community may want to introduce specific dress requirements (including a colour code) which may not fit the definition of a school uniform. This is particularly relevant to colleges and some high schools. In addition, Council believes it is inappropriate to make the inclusion of a school uniform mandatory in colleges. The policy statement should be broader in order to allow individual school communities to confidently implement what is best for their school.

2. Equity

Within the context section of the draft policy, it is stated that a benefit of school uniforms includes: "keeping costs of clothing within reasonable limits for parents". Council disagrees with this statement and questions its factual accuracy. Many parents have noted that formal school uniforms are almost always more expensive

than alternatives. Council cannot stress the importance of keeping the cost of clothing within reasonable limits for parents.

It is the right of every child to be given the opportunity of an education. Government school education should aim to provide for the maximum development of every student without distinction due to social or economic status, ability, gender, race, religion, colour or family beliefs. Council believes that the public education system should be free (that is, fully publicly funded and provided) so that access to a school experience of the highest quality is not dependent on capacity or willingness to make financial contributions. With this in mind, the new uniform policy should not impose a financial burden on low-SES students and families.

Stricter uniform guidelines will lead to increased costs for families so more attention needs to be placed on mitigating potential equity concerns. Students should not be stigmatised or punished due to the financial constraints present in the home. Council is supportive of the financial support strategies and programs outlined in the policy. However, these strategies need to be clearly advertised and promoted to parents. Recognising cultural, religious and financial differences, the onus should be on the school to reach out and support families who will require assistance.

3. Consultation

Prior to the Minister's announcement, Council had not received any feedback suggesting that there were issues with the current uniform policy. At an individual school level it should be assumed that the status quo is working. At the end of the day, it is up to these communities to determine what standards should apply and whether the current regime should change.

Council notes within the procedures the requirement to engage in consultation with parents of students, students, the school community and staff. This requirement needs to be clearly articulated with a minimum level of consultation set. Consultation should be extensive, open and formalised, for example, through surveys, interviews, workshops and publications.