

## Against school dress codes

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Tallie Doyle says the Fisher Park Public School dress code is sexist. She might be right, but a non-sexist dress code is still a dress code. Better that the school has no dress code at all.

Doyle, a 14-year-old grade eight student at Fisher Park, in Ottawa, violated the school's dress code last week by wearing a top whose spaghetti straps allowed her bra straps to show. Both spaghetti straps and glimpsable undergarments are forbidden by the code.

School officials typically appeal to one or another of three considerations when defending regulating what students wear. The first is that codes teach students how to dress in order to find and maintain a job. The second is that codes help to reduce distractions in the classroom. The third is that the codes promote the development of self-directedness and self-respect within individual students.

Even if they do succeed in one or another of these tasks, dress codes are an infringement on students' freedom of presentation, a core part of freedom of expression. More than that, though, they thwart the educative mission of the school by substituting coercive training for inquiry and discussion.

Certainly we want that schools teach children the norms of the world of work. We also want that schools help children to behave in ways that don't interfere with whatever worthwhile projects people are pursuing. Yet, at the same time, we want that children, and adults as well, dress appropriately and behave well for their own good reasons—that is, because they themselves like to dress and behave as they do. In order to become the sort of people who enjoy dressing appropriately, children need education in taste and values. Learning to follow a dress code (or else), on the other hand, is learning to give in to other people's reasons.

The third of the three considerations I listed is the idea that dress codes are for the children's own benefit as they grow and mature into self-respecting young adults. If we prevent our children from dressing like sluts and punks, this line of argument goes, they are less likely to become sluts or punks, with all the self-esteem problems that allegedly go with being a slut or punk.

Instead of having dress codes, schools should incorporate information and discussion about dress and comportment into their social studies and health courses. That is, dress and comportment, in all their fascination and importance, should be studied academically.

Students could inquire into and discuss critically what various modes of dress say and don't say. They could ask why some people like to look tough and aggressive and why others enjoy looking sexy. They could investigate the effect that various styles have on people in the

street, in the workplace, in the classroom, and why people would and would not want to create such effects.

These discussions would not be aimed at changing anyone's behavior, of course. They would be aimed only, as education should be, at broadening students' understanding and developing their critical facilities. Education, in the end, is for the sake of liberating minds from convention and received ideas, so that we can think for ourselves.

Nonetheless, discussion of dress would have the effect of changing behavior, as all education in taste does. One effect it would certainly have is to increase the range of students' appreciation and tolerance. By having students take punkish or slutty ways seriously, they will inevitably come to bring the punk or slut experience into their own worlds. That accomplished, they will no longer be distracted or upset by their classmates' apparel.