

303. Dress and Decorum in the High-School Classroom

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Folks seem happy that the Halton District School Board has committed itself to developing a policy for teachers on “dress and decorum in the classroom.” Everyone is relieved that, finally, a teacher at Oakville Trafalgar High School will no longer be able to show up to class wearing gigantic false breasts.

I don’t think people have thought this through.

Is objectionable dress a general problem in the district? It appears not; only a single teacher ever gets mentioned. And yet every teacher will come under the policy.

Most of the people who will write and enforce the coming dress and decorum code are dedicated to the practices and ideology of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). It’s a fair bet they will seek to use the policy to further the goals of EDI. They will have no patience with dress or decorum that, in their view, serves to oppress people from marginalized groups. In EDI, compliance methods are harsh. No quarter will be given teachers who run afoul of the policy’s enforcers.

The existence of a policy will invite the easily offended to launch complaints. Complaints will have to be investigated and adjudicated. We can look forward to the spirit of litigiousness settling into the district.

Teacher dress and decorum at Oakville Trafalgar is currently, I hazard to guess, by and large conventional and staid. With a policy over their heads, the few teachers there who like colours and drama or fun in their dress will prudently tone it down. Unless, of course, their unconventional clothing is associated with people of the marginalized group with which they identify. And then we can look forward to complaints of minority privilege.

I’m not saying that persecution, all-day meetings, dowdiness and friction will *certainly* come to the Halton district. I do think they will come, but my point is served by noting merely that bad things *might* come in the wake of a new policy, the badness of which could easily outweigh the heaviest of false breasts.

Creating the risk of a terrible outcome in order to deal with an isolated problem is not something people should cheer. Wisdom counsels either taking a lighter approach than policy and rules or simply living with the problem.

Suppose the policy does what people hope it will do without the side-effects I’ve mentioned. (Could we know it has no bad effects on dress or morale among teachers and students? Who would risk complaining about it?) Nonetheless, because it introduces yet another element of oversight and control into a school, it is fundamentally anti-educational.

What are students learning from the way the Halton school board is handling the false-breasts case? What students are witnessing is a coalition of offended or upset adults muscles a board into action against a person's sartorial choices. The coalition's complaint isn't that the way a particular teacher dresses is putting someone's life, limb or pocketbook at risk. It is, rather, simply that they don't like how the teacher dresses.

Students are learning, then, that if you don't like how someone lives, you should organize to pressure the authorities to prevent them from living that way.

One might object to my argument by saying that dressing up in front of the students gives the teacher a sexual thrill. Or that the teacher's ridiculous apparel mocks women. Or that the teacher's dress encourages depravity among the young students or otherwise might warp someone's young mind.

Anyone's dress might do any one of these things. The difference between those who get away with it and the teacher at the centre of this controversy is that most people are a lot more subtle in their self-expression. It's only that the teacher is blatant and obvious about it.

What's to be gained should a teacher hang up his or her false breasts for good, but not because that teacher has come to come to understand and accept an argument they shouldn't wear them to school, but because they fear being punished if they do? Will the teacher be a better teacher once the hammer has come down? Will he or she then merit the esteem of their students?

We want our high schools to help students learn to think for themselves and to come to their own values for themselves. Rules about dress, comportment and decorum prevent them from doing so. They impose values on people and make us comfortable with conformity and authority. And they make us ill at ease with non-conformity.

One charge against the teacher is that she is narcissistic, and that narcissism is strongly correlated with bad teaching. Since bad teachers should not be teachers, narcissistic people ought not be in charge of classrooms. Let's suppose that our fetishistic teacher is indeed a narcissist and that narcissists are rarely good teachers. Even so, we cannot conclude that this teacher is a poor teacher. For that, we need to see whether her students are learning from her.

My argument that teachers should be able to dress as they want, even if they want to wear cartoonishly large false breasts, does not mention the rights of transgender people or the need of schools to be diverse and inclusive. It applies to all teachers, whatever they identify as. (It applies to students, too, who are much more likely to be disciplined for how they dress than are teachers.) It is, rather, an argument about teaching and learning. Teachers do not become better teachers by being told how to dress. Telling them how to dress can only serve their students poorly. Students, for their part, will learn intolerance and authority – or, at least, about intolerance and authority – by observing hammers falling arbitrarily, when nothing of significance is at stake.

Dress and comportment are topics high school students should be discussing in class with their teachers, discussing critically. What dress expresses and signals is an exciting and useful topic.

Perhaps there is, after all, a supportable distinction between appropriate and inappropriate dress for teachers, and perhaps that distinction can be discovered through investigation and argument. But students should not be encouraged by a school board's example to make the leap from "teachers shouldn't dress this way," even if it's true that they shouldn't, to "teachers shouldn't be allowed to dress this way."