

No Place for Hate® Activity Library

Student Dress Codes and Fairness

Lesson Plan and Overview

Lesson Plan: Student Dress Codes: What's Fair?

Over the years, student dress codes have tried to address a wide range of issues and have incited different degrees of controversy. In recent years, a desire to prevent conflict over designer labels and create a more “professional” school environment resulted in dress codes and uniforms becoming more popular. In the past several years, student dress codes have made headlines because groups of students across the country—predominately girls—have challenged and protested their school’s dress code policies, saying they unfairly target girls, girls of color and transgender students. They say these policies are inequitable, enforced inconsistently and are rooted in certain gender and other social norms.

Grade Level

Grades 6–8

Learning Objectives

- Students will understand more about the student dress code controversy and the actions associated with them.
- Students will consider the extent to which dress codes unfairly target certain identity groups.
- Students will reflect on their own opinions and the opinions of their classmates regarding student dress codes.

Materials Needed

- Signs: Agree, Disagree, Strongly Agree, Strongly Disagree, Not Sure
- Article: [School dress codes face censure around the country for biased rules](#) (one for each student)

Words You Might Use

Racism: The marginalization and/or oppression of people of color based on a socially constructed racial hierarchy that privileges white people.

Sexism: The marginalization and/or oppression of women, based on the belief in a natural order based on sex that privileges men.

Stereotype: An oversimplified generalization about a person or group of people without regard for individual differences.

Core Activity

Explain to students that in recent years, student dress codes have been in the news a great deal because several groups of students—predominately girls—have questioned, challenged and, in some cases, protested, student dress codes. Their messages and protests traveled far and wide through social media and news articles. The young spokeswomen say the dress codes unfairly target girls, girls of color and transgender students; they send a message to girls that if they are harassed by boys, it is their fault; they feel judged by the dress codes; and that a different standard is applied to girls who are more “curvy and developed” than other girls. Explain to students that they will learn more about this by reading an article.

Next, engage students in a “Here I Stand” activity (classroom/ several combined classrooms/large group) where students express their opinions on a continuum. Tell students they will listen to some statements and decide to what extent they agree or disagree with the statement. They will indicate their opinion about each statement by positioning themselves along an imaginary line, depending upon how strongly they agree or disagree. Select a large open space and indicate the position of an imaginary line with the farthest left point representing a “Strongly Agree” response and the farthest right point a “Strong Disagree” response. In between these two positions, indicate “Agree,” “Not Sure,” and “Disagree” along the continuum. Read some/all of the statements below, requesting students to take a few minutes to decide where they stand in the continuum and have them walk silently to that place and observe where others choose to stand. Explain to students that there is no right or wrong answer, and they should find their place silently so each person has the opportunity to decide for themselves. Let students know that they will be able to discuss their choices after.

- Everyone is entitled to freedom of speech and clothing is part of free speech.
- If students do not like a school policy, they should accept and find a way to deal with it.
- Young people should not wear the same style of clothes to school that they wear outside of school.
- Wearing school uniforms prevents a lot of conflict and drama.
- When students dress in short or tight clothing, it is distracting for other students who cannot concentrate on their work.
- Schools should have dress codes.
- It is the school’s job to protect students and that includes having dress codes.
- Dress codes are unfair to certain groups of people in the school community.

After they are positioned in their spots, take a few minutes to have some students share why they are standing in those positions.

After the activity, engage students in a discussion by asking: *Was it easy or difficult to decide where to stand? Why? Did you sometimes have an opinion different than the majority of the group? How did that feel? Did you ever change your mind after hearing other people's opinions? Did new information sway you one way or the other? What did you learn by doing this?*

Have students silently read the article (or have students read the night before for homework) [School dress codes face censure around the country for biased rules](#). Engage students in a discussion by asking some or all of the following questions: *What did you learn by reading the article? What is the reason cited in the article for strict dress codes? What are your thoughts about these reasons? Why do you think some people are protesting their schools' dress code? How are certain students singled out under a school dress code policy? Can you relate to this issue and if so, how? What is our school dress code policy and is it fair? What impact does it have on our school's climate?*

Optional Follow-Up/ Going Further

Note: These additional activities can be done as follow-ups to the core activity and they can also serve as an additional NPFH activity if the core activity is completed first.

- Have students conduct a school survey on dress codes. The survey can be designed by a group of students and then distributed to the entire school community—including students, parents/families and staff. They can ask specific questions about what each group wants and needs, how they feel about current dress code policies and how it should be enforced. After all the surveys are compiled, collect the information, and write a report with recommendations that can be submitted to a committee (see below) who may be working on dress codes.
- Have students work in pairs or small groups to create their own ideal student dress code policy. They should take into consideration these three questions: (1) *What does the school need in a dress code policy?* (2) *What do the students need in terms of what they wear to school?* (3) *How can our dress code be fair and equitable (i.e. not discriminate) for all?* They can then make a list of needs of students, needs of parents/families and needs of school (perhaps asking some students, parents/families and school administration to share their thoughts on that) and then write up a proposed dress code policy that includes the guidelines (do's and don'ts), how it will be enforced and a statement of assurance that it will not be discriminatory. Consider holding a contest or judging to determine the best proposed policies to share with the school administration.
- Help to organize a school committee that looks at the school's dress code policy. The committee should include students, parents/families, teachers, school staff and school administration. The committee can conduct research on other schools/school district policies, analyze the survey and proposed policies (see above activities) and use that to inform a new school dress code policy. Then they can organize a school-wide or grade-level assembly where the above information is shared, students have an opportunity to share their points of view and the administration shares the old policy and perhaps a new policy.

Home Connection

Share ADL's Table Talk [What's Fair and Unfair About Student Dress Codes?](#) with families.

How Activity Meets NPFH Requirements

All students will engage in discussions about dress codes, the impact they have on the school and the extent to which they are enforced equitably. This will result in a conversation among the student body about the fairness of dress codes and how they impact school climate.

School dress codes face censure around the country for biased rules

By *Education Week*, adapted by Newsela staff 09.27.2018

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Recommended for: Middle School—High School

Word Count: 1017

Text Level: 9



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

School dress code controversies have been trending on the web in recent months, fanning a controversy over whether schools are enforcing the rules in ways that discriminate against girls.

A video on the dress code policy at Marcus High School in Texas drew criticism last month for showing only girls as rule violators. In St. Louis, Missouri, Oakville High School's principal is captured on video apologizing to parents after telling female students they should not show off their bodies for fear of "distracting" male classmates. A Roman Catholic school in New Orleans, Louisiana, came into the internet spotlight when a sixth-grader was forced to leave the classroom, in tears, for having braided hair extensions, which were against the school's hair policy.

Schools with strict dress codes claim that these codes prevent distractions, create a professional environment, reduce pressures based on socioeconomic status and deter gang activity. However, in an age of the #MeToo movement and easy internet access, there is controversy about whether excluding students from the classroom for violating dress codes is worthwhile. Some people say such rules are disproportionately enforced against girls, especially girls of color.

Are Most School Dress Codes Just Sexism?

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

"These rules aren't neutral: many target girls, and especially black girls, by regulating skirt length and headwraps," states a report on school dress codes in the District of Columbia that was compiled by the National Women's Law Center. It is called the NWLC for short. "And the rules aren't applied equally, either. Students report that black girls, and especially curvier students, are disproportionately targeted."

Nationwide, 53 percent of public schools enforced a strict dress code during the 2015-2016 school year, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. It is hard to find data on dress code violations, and the study by the NWLC takes a rare quantifiable look at the issue.

The report, released in April, 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 deemed inappropriate. Since the report's release, two of the schools have made changes to their dress policies.

"[Dress codes] sit at that intersection where they impact girls differently, they impact black girls differently," said Nia Evans. She is the NWLC's manager of campaign and digital strategies and education. "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 too much time dealing with dress code punishments. Nationwide, African-American girls are 5 1/2 times more likely than white girls to be suspended from school. It is unclear how many suspensions come from dress-code punishment.

Adrienne Dixson is a professor of education policy, organization and leadership at the University of Illinois. She believes dress codes can prevent self-expression. Girls of color are more likely to wear styles such as braids, hair extensions and Afros, and are more likely to be disciplined, 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, non-binary gender or any students who dress in nontraditional ways.

In some cases, the protests from students and parents are making an impact.

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

Schantz joined in, remembering feeling objectified by her teachers. She was pulled out of class for her clothing, given temporary clothes and sent home to change on multiple occasions, once for wearing leggings and a baggy shirt. One day, she 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 policy.

The school board reviewed 3,000 petition signatures and discussed the issue multiple times and agreed with Schantz's club; they created a more relaxed dress code. Changes include allowing students to wear yoga pants and leggings.

Schools Make Changes

Like the Kenosha district, many of the schools that have found themselves in the internet spotlight have apologized or changed their dress code policies.

Marcus High School's principal admitted that the video "absolutely missed the mark." Oakville High School's principal apologized to parents, promising that she will apologize to students too.

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

Some schools have 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 change their policies.

The new dress code states that it "supports equitable educational access" and "does not reinforce stereotypes." Students cannot wear clothes that show hate speech, illegal items or profanity, nor can they 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.

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

The new dress code was implemented this past school year, and according to Witherspoon, the school has not received any negative feedback.

"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."



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