

The Long Beach Unified School District Uniform Initiative: A Prevention-Intervention Strategy for Urban Schools

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# *The Long Beach Unified School District Uniform Initiative: A Prevention- Intervention Strategy for Urban Schools*

Rebecca A. Lopez

*One school-based solution to providing a more healthy and equitable learning environment for children is discussed here. This article describes the first, most extensive mandatory school uniform policy in place in the United States—that of the Long Beach (California) Unified School District. The relative ease of assimilation of this policy and its compelling crime and absentee reduction outcomes to date are discussed. Several theoretical perspectives regarding the contributions of dress to the developing self-esteem in school-age children are also presented.*

The ability of public schools to maintain an atmosphere of safety for academic achievement and social competence has been increasingly encroached upon by several contemporary social and commercial phenomena. Schools have become sites of violence and dysfunction even as more and more children depend on them as pivotal resources in fostering healthy and productive development. For many children, the school setting can determine children's success or downward spiral into failure in surrounding social systems. According to Garbarino, Dubrow, Kostelny, and Pardo (1992), "Not only are schools one of the most continuous institutions in children's lives, but, after the family, schools represent the most important developmental unit in modern social systems" (p. 121). We expect that our schools will not only address academic and intellectual growth, but will also be available to contribute to the child's sense of psychological comfort and trust (Comer, 1980; Gibbs & Huang, 1998). Yet, our schools reflect many of the social problems extant in the surrounding community and are hard-pressed to provide refuge for many children. Gang influence has pervaded many of our cities and schools, as has vandalism and other expressions of rage against our schools. Several accounts in the popular press have reported the horrific actions of students who have been bullied into unthinkable acts against classmates and staff. Whether it be a local occurrence or far across our country, we are all casualties of these events as we watch a generation of children living in fear in what was once considered an island of predictability—the school setting.

Society is dependent upon our schools to "transfer" to new generations our social expectations, our hopes, beliefs, and values (Feldman, 2000, p. 318). But we must ask ourselves what bodies of values and beliefs many schools are sponsoring when children are confronted by violence in the school setting. And what of the role of media and commercial exploitation which offers many ideals, but few opportunities? The bombarding of our children by influence peddling in the form of dress, food, and other products from corporations and industries, detract from the optimal functioning of schools in their academic mission and may play a role in providing social obstacles for poor or minority children (Goldstein & Conoley, 1997). Daily exhibitions of commercialism and conspicuous

consumption by some students can mean that the building of a positive sense of self in childhood can rest on the ability to wear the latest clothing label.

This article describes a school-based program that seeks to provide a safer and more stable environment and climate for one group of children in California public schools. The evolution of the program and challenges to mandatory dress requirements are offered. A survey of child developmental tasks that may be influenced by appearance is also provided.

## DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS OF SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

### Theoretical Perspectives

The developmental needs of school-age children have been cited in decades of literature in areas of physical, cognitive, social, and emotional growth typified by increasing social interaction (Berger & Federico, 1985; Erikson, 1959; Gibbs & Huang, 1998). The person-in-environment perspective espoused by Erikson (1968) requires that we consider opportunities lost when schools do not offer safe settings for socialization and for learning skills that will allow the individual to participate in greater societal systems. Berger and Federico (1985) refer to "social-structural obstacles" that preclude healthy, normative child development. Instead of facilitating development, these obstacles serve to "reduce the child's sense of safety, security, competence, mastery, or health" (p. 156). The sources of these social events include poverty, racism, discrimination, natural disasters and accidents, and challenged and even dysfunctional families, schools, and peer groups. These obstacles can hinder the social and emotional development of children as they strive to solidify positive self-concepts of who they are and where they fit into the environment.

The person-in-environment perspective espoused by Erikson (1968) must take into account that schools are one crucial social setting for the testing of three inherent "social drives" that include the need for (a) social attention, (b) competence in mastering environment, and (c) structure and order in one's life. The building of self-esteem in this drive is pivotal during the school-age period—it sets the stage for children's sense of mastery in progressively expanding social interactions (Erikson, 1968; Ho, 1992). Mutual peer assessment is part and parcel of the school experience. Children in classrooms and schools become involved in a process of "social comparison" which forces evaluation of their behavior and abilities in comparison to their peers (Baumeister, 1993; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Weiss, Ebbeck, & Horn, 1997). Also relevant to understanding the process of development of self-concept is symbolic interaction theory, which stresses evaluation and internalization of those evaluations as contributors in forming children's self-images (Lawrence, 1998). Children that are perceived to be "different" or "less" by other children will receive those messages in no uncertain terms. A school system that promotes difference in the form of status indicators is one example of the "caste" system (Appleby, Colon, & Hamilton, 2001; Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). Segregation among children, created by status differences, can occur and discourage and estrange those enmeshed in the critical tasks of self-categorization and personal estimation. In reference to the sense of "differentness" particularly experienced by oppressed children, Appleby et al. (2001) indicate that oppression by schools is an "institutional process that is experienced personally as stigma, stress, guilt, and shame. Stigma significantly influences identity development" (p. 45). Gibbs and Huang (1998) comment on the "triple stigma" which exists for children who are non-White, non-Anglo-Saxon, and non-middle class (p. 12). They suggest that many children in America today are faced with this obstacle to personal development.

While much of the literature describes various challenged and dysfunctional school climates that hinder healthy development, researchers are unanimous in their depiction of the ideal setting. It is the positive school climate or what Garbarino et al. (1992) refer to as a "mental health environment" where "instruction, discipline, social activities and relationships at the school are coordinated to provide a secure school environment in which children are encouraged to exercise self-discipline and are also provided with opportunities to enhance their self-esteem" (p. 168).

Erikson (1968) identified a second major developmental task for children. The task of identity development, while peaking in adolescence, has its foundation during childhood. The social skills required to enter into peer relationships involve being able to form friendships, display empathy, engage in cooperative and competitive activities, and manage emotions—all tasks that lead to the adolescent formation of a selected identity and life direction (Ho, 1992, p. 20). Children who are not able to participate in peer interactions may fail to develop the skills to move successfully to other social and emotional tasks in adolescence (Erikson, 1959). The long-term consequences of repeated rejection by peers can be observed among youth who drop out of school or become involved in juvenile offenses and other problem behavior (Bagwell, Newcomb, & Bukowski, 1998; Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995).

### **Impact of Negative Schooling Experiences on Children**

As a primary setting for social change and socialization of the young, Elliot and Voss (1974) use strain theory to explain the possible antisocial outcomes of negative school experiences. In fact, they suggest that dropping out of school and delinquency are predictable responses to the frustrations of negative school experiences. Frustrations born of economic and racial segregation are often noted as two crucial factors contributing to educational failure and delinquency (Lawrence, 1998). For example, Nijboer and Dijksterhuis (1983) found a "devastating" effect of negative labeling in their work with children labeled as delinquents. Negative experiences and interactions in the school environment can distort personal values, crush hopes, and force a "self-imposed alienation," which pushes the child further out of the mainstream and closer to delinquency (p. 4). Dupper and Meyer-Adams (2002) suggest the existence of "low-level violence" that promotes the alienation and victimization of the student when schools allow bullying, peer sexual harassment, and psychological maltreatment by peers and teachers (p. 350).

### **SCHOOLS AS SAFE AND EQUITABLE ENVIRONMENTS**

#### **Opportunities and Challenges**

The burden of creating equitable environments, then, often falls to our schools. Schools are expected to initiate many of the social remedies for society's class and racial segregation while maintaining demanding scholastic standards. As a major community institution, schools have opportunities to implement programs of integration of the growing segments of social, racial and ethnic classes (Bowen & Richman, 2002). This imperative becomes more acute as we face an urban America with increasing numbers of ethnic minorities who constitute a new "rainbow underclass" (Rumbaut & Portes, 2001, p. 10).

We must also add to this imperative the fact that many children are increasingly confronted by the lure of dangerous gangs as an escape from families and schools that may be unable to meet children's identity and other needs. Sanders (1994) extensive study of juvenile gangs found some predictability for gang involvement when "the school may

be grounds of failure, the straight kids may be grounds of rejection, and the family may be grounds of indifference" (p. 24). Gang recruitment in and around our schools is but one part of the picture. Gang violence, or the threat of such violence, challenges the learning environments in schools. Yet, many urban schools invest valuable time and resources in gang intervention, at the expense of many children (Goldstein & Conoley, 1997; Tompkins, 2000). This time includes assessing indicators of gangs and activity, such as the youth wearing certain dress items (e.g., bandanas, baggy pants), gang-affiliated colors, or other accessories. In and around schools, certain dress differentiates gang members from various peers including opposing gang members, sometimes with tragic consequences for other children (Holloman, La Point, Alleyne, Palmer, & Sanders-Phillips, 1996; Tompkins, 2000).

### **The Case for and Against School Uniforms**

School atmospheres that lack control are unable to provide optimal learning environments and place the children at risk for protecting their safety (Canino & Spurlock, 2000). Given limited resources and legal authority, many public schools are using dress codes and uniform policies as one attempt to structure environments to enhance learning and development and diminish dress-related problem behavior and crime related to gangs (Kodluboy & Evinrud, 1993). This includes many schools that have gone beyond voluntary dress policies to mandatory dress codes and school uniforms (Hoge, Foster, Nickell, & Fields, 2002; Holloman et al., 1996).

Research studies on the effectiveness of uniforms on student behaviors and other school outcomes are inconclusive (McCarty, 2000). When students constantly compare their dress to others, and it seems to be the norm for many, uniformity in dress is viewed by some to be a great equalizer among children (Buckman, 1974; Joseph, 1986; Thomas, 1994). The literature suggests there are advantages to a level playing field for growing children. Uniforms are thought by some to have a positive impact on the "caste system stigma" (Rumbaut & Portes, 2001) that already exists for many minority children who struggle for competent identities in an oppressive, commercialized society (Behling, 1994; Loesch, 1995; National Association of Elementary School Principals [NAESP], 1998). The president of the Long Beach Board of Education voiced the expectation that school uniforms can have a major impact:

Uniforms help to create unity amid diversity by easing ethnic and cultural tensions and encouraging values of tolerance and civility. Uniforms also bridge differences between students and families of widely disparate income levels. Students from modest economic backgrounds are often the target of exclusion or ridicule on account of their dress. Even from the earliest grades, children feel the pressure to conform to idealized standards of dress, which may be beyond their family's means. Uniforms eliminate this pressure and allow the attention of students to be directed to learning and growing. (Polachek, 1994, p. D-5)

The practical impact of uniforms is equally compelling. Children are able to concentrate on necessary scholastic activities without the distractions of constant competition in dress. Rossi (1994) described the "disengagement" that occurs when students cannot identify with and participate in school activities (p. 13). Other research studies and numerous anecdotes suggest that the negative aspects of dress-related problem behavior include challenges to academic achievement, attendance, and other school behaviors (Herbon & Workman, 2000; Holloman et al., 1996). Major objections to mandatory uniforms have revolved around objections that First Amendment rights are abridged and that uniforms interfere with the child's need for autonomy and experimentation (Brunsmas & Rockquemoire, 1998; Caruso, 1996; Cohn & Siegal, 1996). Other objections cite possible violation of the Fourteenth Amendment in suggesting a student should be at liberty to control their own appearance (Kuhn, 1996; Paliokos, Futrell, & Rist, 1996). Cases have been scrutinized

at both the Federal District Court and Circuit Court levels in several states. To date, the courts have upheld local school boards' and districts' authority in regulating the use of school uniforms (Burke, 1993; Dowling-Sendor, 2001). In one decision by the 5<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court, the constitutionality of uniform codes was addressed: "...the board's purposes in adopting the uniform code—to increase test scores and to reduce behavior problems—were not related to the suppression of student expression" (cited in Dowling-Sendor, 2001, p. 4). In effect, the courts have maintained both *in loco parentis* (the independent power of the school boards) and the schools' contention that the welfare of the entire school community outweighs individual student rights (Dowling-Sendor, 2001). (For further legal analysis of school uniforms, see Mitchell and Knechtle, 2003.)

## THE LONG BEACH UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT: SCHOOL UNIFORM INITIATIVE

### School District Description

Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) has over 97,000 students in 90 public school programs, including 60 elementary schools, 23 middle schools, and 13 high schools (LBUSD, 2003). The District includes the cities of Long Beach, Lakewood, Signal Hill, and Avalon on Catalina Island. It is the third largest school district in California and, with 46 different languages spoken by local students, it serves a remarkably diverse and large city.

Current demographics of the City of Long Beach reflect an international city with many growing segments of immigrant populations similar to trends throughout southern California. These demographics are clearly mirrored in enrollments in Long Beach public schools for 2000-01. In the LBUSD, about 45% are Hispanic American or Latino; about 20% are African American; about 18% are White; about 12% are Asian; about 3% are Filipino; and less than 1% are Native American or children self-identified as multiple ethnicity (California Department of Education, 2002). The City of Long Beach and its schools have experienced all the characteristic growing pains of major urban centers attempting to integrate immigrant populations and a wide range of socioeconomic groups.

### Family Support for School Uniform Policy

Approaching the 1990's, as in many urban districts, schools in the LBUSD increasingly became hotbeds of "factionalism, ethnic rivalry and socioeconomic class divisions" (Polachek, 1994, p. D5). In an effort to improve student performance and schools, concerned community members worked closely with the Board of Education to pilot a school uniform policy and program at one elementary school. Parents were particularly vocal about the need to distinguish registered students en route to and from school, from gang members in the area. Safety concerns, performance issues, and an overall desire to improve the school climate provided consensus for the Whittier School community to advance their desire for uniforms (LBUSD, 1997).

By 1993-94, the school district had accrued enough support from parents and community members to launch a uniform policy in 10 additional elementary and middle schools. Early evaluation of this policy and program indicated improvements in attendance, academic achievement, and school safety, as well as reduced ethnic and racial tensions. Disparate compliance levels were significantly tied to commensurate positive outcomes in decreased school crime rates and increased school attendance (LBUSD, 1997). With positive preliminary results and a largely supportive community, the Long Beach School Board initiated a mandatory uniform policy and program for all students grades K-8. Speaking on behalf of the recommendation by the LBUSD, board member Edward Eveland wrote:

We, Board Members, believe school uniforms at the elementary and middle school level will simplify proper dress for school business, which is, indeed, very serious business. We know that dress significantly influences behavior. In education, we have seen its influence on dress-up days and color days. We have also seen in the schools that have adopted school uniforms a "coming together," greater school pride, and better behavior in and out of the classroom. Moreover, with the complete elimination of gang attire, all of the students at those sites are safer, less intimidated or threatened. . . (LBUSD, 1994)

### **Implementing the School Uniform Policy and Program**

LBUSD became the first large urban school district in the United States to implement school uniforms for grades K-8. Beginning with the 1994-95 school year, all 60 elementary schools and 15 middle schools, in consultation with their respective local communities, were required to determine the appropriate uniform, create programs for financial assistance, and create compliance measures. Information was disseminated to all parents in the following areas: (a) uniform types and colors; (b) availability of financial support; (c) exemption criteria from the program; (d) compliance measures; and (e) listings of local, competitive uniform vendors. Schools were encouraged to use a variety of information dissemination strategies such as official school materials (e.g., school newsletters, registration and enrollment materials), Parent Teacher Association and other parent forums, telephone hotlines, media announcements, and school and community posters (LBUSD, 1997). Specific guidelines were also forwarded to all schools regarding policies and support for students whose families needed financial assistance in meeting the mandatory uniform policy.

Compliance standards also allowed for three circumstances (beyond financial hardship or parent-initiated exemption) when uniform use could be waived. Exceptions to the policy were allowed when students wear (a) buttons, armbands, or other dress to exercise the right to freedom of expression, unless the items are related to gang membership or activity; (b) uniforms of a nationally recognized youth organization such as the Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts on regular meeting days; and (c) school uniforms that violate students' faith-based beliefs (LBUSD, 1997).

Crucial support for this initiative came as the Board and District quickly received bipartisan legislative support for this initiative in Senate Bill 1269. This measure amended the California Education Code to reflect support for school-wide uniform policies or other reasonable dress code policies as a means of combating gang proliferation, weapon concealment, and as a means of promoting student and staff safety:

The children of this state have the right to an effective public school education. Both students and staff of the primary, elementary, junior and senior high school campuses have the constitutional right to be safe and secure in their persons at school. . . many of our public schools are forced to focus on the threat of violence and the messages of violence contained in many aspects of our society, particularly reflected in gang regalia that disrupts the learning environment. (California SB 1269, sec. 1,35183, (a)(1))

Implementation of the uniform policy had some challenges. First, there was resistance by some stakeholders who viewed the policy as an infringement of students' right to freedom of speech. This challenge was resolved by accessible, district-wide waiver policies. About 2% of enrolled students, to date, have requested exemption from the policy for a variety of reasons (LBUSD, 2002). Second, some parents indicated financial hardship as a challenge. This challenge was overcome by required provisions for families unable to afford uniform costs. More than \$160,000 in financial assistance has been provided by a variety of privately funded resources such as the Assistance League, Long Beach Education Foundation, Kiwanis Club, Rotary Club, Board of Realtors, faith-based communities, and individual donors (LBUSD, 2002). In another example, many graduating students can also donate their used uniforms to families in need (U.S. Department Education, 2002). Informal cost analysis of the uniforms suggests, however, that it is more cost effective for

families to dress their children in uniforms instead of spending more money for costlier, commercial dress (LBUSD, 2002; NAESP, 2001).

Equally powerful, however, has been the support of many families for whom school uniforms are a natural, expected standard for schools. Many of the families in Long Beach are recent immigrants from Latin American or Asian countries, most of which have long traditions of requiring uniforms in all schools (R. van der Laan, LBUSD Information Officer, personal communication, January 6, 2002). Adjusting to uniform policies was viewed as very minor and, in fact, was strongly urged by these families. Families, too, were supportive of a policy that would make for a safer environment for their children whose dress would not be viewed as gang or clique attire.

### **Evaluating the School Uniform Policy and Program**

The quantitative outcomes of the policy have been remarkable. Crime report summaries are now available for the five-year post-uniform policy period and reflect that school crime overall has dropped approximately 86%, even though K-8 student enrollment increased 14%. The five categories of school crime where comparisons can be made between 1993 levels and 1999 levels are as follows: (a) sex offenses down 93% (from 57 to 4 offenses); (b) robbery/extortion down 85% (from 34 to 5 cases); (c) selling or using chemical substances down 48% (from 71 to 37 cases); (d) weapons or look-a-likes down 75% (from 145 to 36 cases); and (e) dangerous devices down 96% (from 46 to 2 cases; LBUSD, 1999).

The impact of uniforms on 3 other critical areas of school crime—assault and battery, assault with a deadly weapon, and vandalism—is inconclusive because of changes in reporting criteria and definitions of these crimes which were implemented at the state level during this period. However, using previous measurement categorizations, the LBUSD notes that incidents of assault and battery have declined from 319 cases to 82 cases during the same period and vandalism has declined from 1,409 incidents to 106 incidents. The only category that increased over this period has been the category of assault with a deadly weapon. From 6 incidents in 1993, to 16 incidents in 1995, this category has slightly, but steadily, increased to 24 by 1999. Again the latter three categories of school crime have experienced revisions in interpretation and definition at the state level, ergo the numbers alone may not be an accurate indicator of decline or increase in these categories (LBUSD, 1999).

Analysis of attendance figures has also provided interesting outcomes for the uniform initiative. In the fourth year that school uniforms have been required in K-8 grades, the percent of actual attendance reached almost 95%, noted as the highest point in the 18 years that the district has maintained statistics. Middle schools also registered comparable improvements in student attendance reaching almost 95% (LBUSD, 2002).

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND POLICY**

As indicated earlier, there is little research on the effectiveness of school uniforms. Thus, there is a need for additional research given the positive outcomes for children and schools as reported from the LBUSD evaluation. Given the continuing challenges that schools face in providing a safe and healthy environment for students learning and health, school uniforms may serve to promote student's achievement and well being. This may be especially relevant in the context of ever-growing commercial influences on children's development.

While preliminary evaluation of the uniform policy and program is encouraging for Long Beach and for other school districts, little scholarly research exists on the use of



uniforms from the students' perspective. For example, some students in the LBUSD voiced opposition to perceived constraints of uniforms on personal expression. The courts will likely be the stage for future objections to infringing on student independence (Dowling-Sendor, 2001). Several developmental implications for school uniforms have yet to be fully explored and it appears that a major impetus for dress codes and uniforms remains focused on school and staff safety.

Given the effectiveness of the uniform policy as reported in this evaluation, there are future plans to expand the uniform policy to other levels of education in the LBUSD. For example, several high schools have adopted policies of mandatory uniforms with minor compliance problems and with successful, preliminary outcomes. A contributing factor to the apparent success may be that many of the elementary and middle school students that feed into high schools have already experienced schooling with mandatory uniforms. Another contributing factor may be that parents in Long Beach continue to show overwhelming support for the initiative and more vocal parents advocate for expansion of the uniform policy to remaining high schools. Results of the most recent survey of parents by LBUSD showed 91% believed school uniforms improved the school environment (LBUSD, 2002). Further, the most recent data show LBUSD schools met or exceeded goals for student academic growth (LBUSD, 2003).

The use of uniforms in public schools also appears to be growing nationally. For example, 958 school principals responded to a variety of questions in a survey related to mandatory uniform policies (NAESP, 1998). The majority (or approximately 87%) had no uniform policy, although 15% were in the discussion phase of policymaking. Interestingly, 52% of the schools with no uniform policy responded that the issue had not been officially raised; while 32% stated that their current dress code policies met the school's needs without resorting to mandatory uniform policies (NAESP, 1998). With few major improvements in crime and delinquency, particularly in our urban communities, it is likely that more student, school, family, and community stakeholders may view school uniforms as one intervention, within their power to implement and enforce—an effective strategy to resolve several challenges in creating a safe climate for students to achieve academically and socially. At the same time, each school district and stakeholders may decide that school uniforms are not needed in their particular school and community context. However, if school uniforms are implemented in a given school, perhaps, sacrificing the objections of a few students may be for the greater good. The LBUSD has instituted a uniform policy and program that has made a difference in students' lives. It remains to be seen if Long Beach schools can remain safe harbors amidst the increasing violence and other social problems that surround our children today.

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