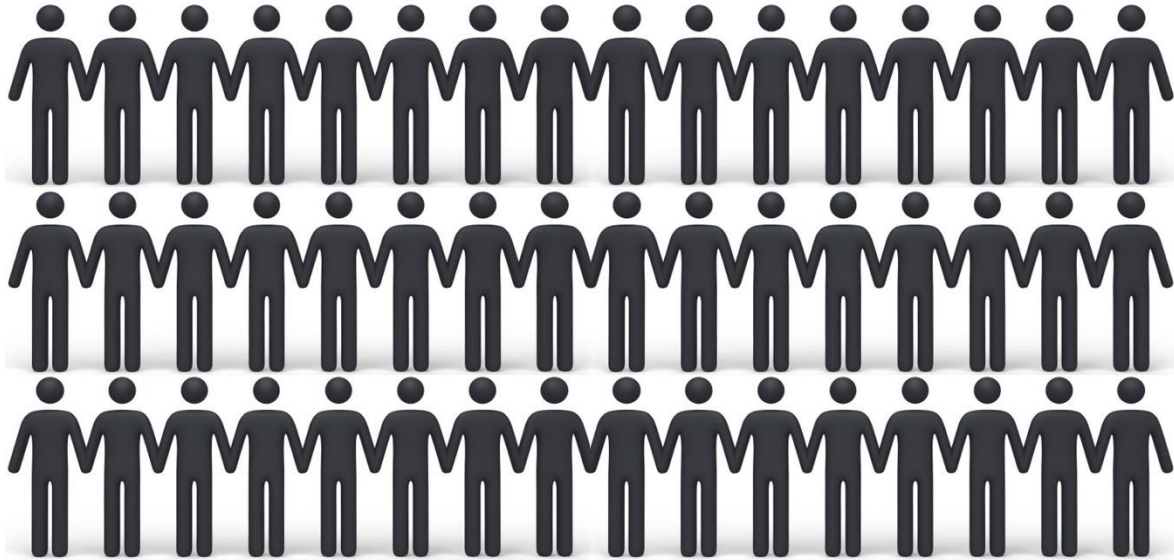


# Are School Uniforms Good or Bad?

*Shôn Ellerton, March 23, 2019*

*We are becoming increasingly relaxed with wearing formal clothes in the workplace yet many are intent on retaining the tradition of forcing school children to wear uniforms.*



I've often asked myself this question:

“Why do so many of us believe that school children should wear school uniforms?”

Some of us engage in talk on how modern techniques of school education revolves around how pupils can make, sometimes controversial, life choices or choose what they want to learn or participate in. Yet, interestingly, they have no choice in what clothing they want to wear.

Once I became a parent, I wanted to know why so many of have this bizarre notion that school children should wear uniforms.

## My Story

I spent most of my school years in the United States within the state-school system where the dress code is basically tidy, casually smart and inoffensive. Frankly, I don't remember anyone I knew who wore a school uniform, although I'm certain those who might have attended an exclusive private school or a

military-style school academy would have done so. In any case, the very thought of wearing a school uniform seemed downright weird.

Later, I moved to the UK and then on to Australia where school uniforms are simply the norm, although, when I did move, I was already out of school and did not have to face up to the humiliation of wearing a school uniform.

Now with a four-year-old in tow living in Australia, it looks dead certain that I'll have to frock the poor lad up with a school uniform once he enters school. However, he'll probably view that as, simply, a normal way of dressing up for school when the time comes.

## What Countries Use School Uniforms?

An obvious bit of research was to find out which countries advocate the use of school uniforms. What I found was that most countries *do* insist on the wearing of school uniforms with the notable exception of the United States, Canada and most countries in Europe (except Ireland and the UK by choice rather than regulation). The United States; however, has regressed back into a more conservative stance of enforcing school uniforms since the late 1980s starting with Washington DC and Maryland. It is now estimated that nearly 20 percent of public schools in the United States have started to wear uniforms again. Many of the more progressive nations in Europe actively *discourage* the use of school uniforms. It was once quoted by the Conference of Education Ministers in Germany *that the imposition of school uniforms would be excessive government encroachment on personal liberty of pupils and parents*. I tend to agree.

## Why Wear School Uniforms

It's interesting that many workplaces are increasingly adopting the smart casual approach to clothing rather than wearing that traditional suit and tie. During March 2019, Goldman Sachs relaxed the dress code to smart casual, at least for those who sit out of view from the client or not required to sit on an external meeting or conference. I've worked in many professional environments where wearing a suit and tie looked genuinely out-of-place and 'stuffy'. In the world of education, I can't think of any university which adopts a policy on having to wear uniforms except military academies. Yet we seem more than happy to force school children to wear uniforms in most parts of the world.

Most of us have opinions on whether school uniforms are a good or a bad thing. I certainly do; however, I did manage to come up with a list of pros and cons.

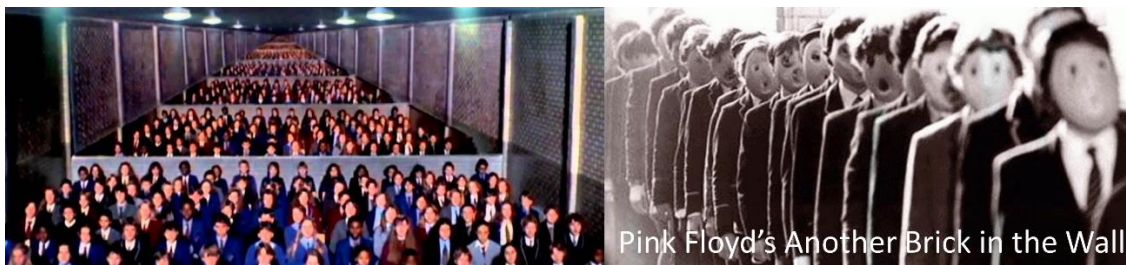
### **Pros**

1. Pupils have a sense of belonging. Many (not all) pupils take a great sense of pride in the school they belong to. That only works if the school they belong to is well-regarded and not shunned by the community. That practice is largely attributable to school zoning (along with artificially increased house pricing), a topic for another occasion!
2. One of the most irksome rituals for parents are pupils (particularly girls) who find it difficult to decide what to wear for school. It's very easy and convenient to say to your child, yes, that's your uniform. Wear it. No questions!
3. Those in more impoverished communities or those attending schools situated within a highly-affluent neighbourhood do not need to worry about their social status with respect to the clothing they are wearing as everyone wears the same uniform. However, this could be viewed as flawed reasoning. The reality is that pupils tend to know what the social status of others are without the need to look at their clothes. It is by the car that picks them up. The house they live in. What they talk about. The food they eat. Even the language or dialect they use.
4. No issues with offensive or unacceptable clothing. There will *always* be someone with offensive or unacceptable clothing in schools where uniforms are not enforced. However, most non-uniform schools *do* have a dress code and pupils are reminded, sometimes all too frequently, to abide by the code.

### **Cons**

1. Pupils wearing the same uniform may suffer from 'clan culture'. This often occurs when pupils end their school day to join up with friends whilst still in uniform. Pupils tend to stick around their own group from the same school which may hamper integrating with the wider community. Reflecting back on my childhood, I would have felt far more uncomfortable if I socialised with friends from another school (which I did frequently) if I was in uniform. After all, you wouldn't expect to socialise with others after playing a team sport still wearing your sports outfit, would you?
2. Uniforms are, let's face it, generally bland and boring. I remember Pink Floyd's *Another Brick In The Wall* video where uniformed school children are pressed onto conveyor belts wearing the same uniform while the lyrics

are pumping away, “We don’t need no education”. Perhaps that is the intention, but I remember how others in my school dressed. There was so much character in what they wore and, frequently, I came to know those who simply wore a shirt or other item of clothing inscribed with something which interested me; for example, with a name of one of my favourite rock groups or something else we had in common. I remember there was a boy and a girl in my old school who *chose* to wear something akin to a school uniform. The boy wanted to look like the singer from *AC/DC*, a popular rock band. The girl wanted to, well, just simply attract attention. And she most certainly did!



3. One could argue this point over and over, but there are many pupils which simply don’t ‘fit’ properly or are extremely uncomfortable in a school uniform as hard as one tries. This can add extreme stress to pupils who suffer this fate along with increased absenteeism and poor school results. In the right environment, I take pride in wearing a nice suit and tie; however, I would have been mortified if I would have been forced to wear a school uniform. At least, you can choose your suit and tie at your workplace!
4. On a more delicate subject, there is a darker side to uniform culture which could suggest an element of sexual and, sometimes, violent provocation and harassment. Some may be reading this thinking that this is a preposterous observation; however, unless one’s been living in a hermetically-sealed chamber cut off from society, one cannot deny that this is not the case. Try typing *Japanese movies* into your search engine and click on images. A friend of mine who is a member of the local school council mentioned to me that another (male) council member suggested that girls’ uniforms should be made even *shorter* along with tighter leggings at this particular school. I gaped with shock and horror when I heard this. No doubt, some of those who are reading this are probably thinking I’m making this all up! There was a study that took

place by the UK branch of Plan International who surveyed schoolgirls from ages 14 to 21. Of more than 1,000 girls surveyed, 35 percent experienced unwanted sexual attention such as being wolf-whistled, groped and stared at whilst walking back home from school. Simply put, there is a very high number of female pupils who *do not* want to wear skirts and feel far more comfortable and less threatened wearing slacks. This point, alone, I feel is more than enough to discourage the mandatory use of uniforms full stop.



5. There is an element of cost for school uniforms; however, there are often subsidies available for those on a limited income. Saying that, the average United States pupil spends \$250 per annum on school uniforms. In any case, manufacturers of school uniforms make a good little ‘earner’ out of this and schools get extra marketing through their branding. Why state-run public schools need marketing is another issue.

## Conclusion

I believe the keeping of tradition is one of the main reasons why uniforms are still in widespread use today. There is nothing wrong with tradition in most cases; however, if it is imposed forcefully with no real compelling reason except to say that *‘it’s always been done like this so why change it’*, then I disagree with it. I see no harm with private schools taking the uniform stance, but one has a choice whether to attend that school or not.

Some take the view that wearing school uniforms grooms pupils on how to dress appropriately for the professional workplace and on formal occasions. I view this

as a total myth. A significant number of those who work in a workplace requiring formal attire have most probably attended university after school. To my knowledge, I know of no university that has enforced the use of uniforms. Most universities do not have any dress code at all!

Many European countries have taken a more progressive view of uniforms in public schools dispelling the myth that wearing them breed better behaved and educated pupils. Interestingly enough, it is these same countries that are proponents of retaining traditional learning techniques without the need of laptops or tablets!

What is most extraordinary out of all this is that in an era of increasing political correctness and freedom of choice, so many of us are adamant that uniforms should be upheld in public schools. Perhaps we should be asking the children.