

Are school uniforms helping or hindering?



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Aug. 19, 2013 at 10:49 AM ET

Are your kids dressing for school this fall in standard khakis and polo shirts or are they getting decked out in the latest skinnies and cool graphic T-shirts?

The number of public schools asking students to wear school uniforms is on the rise, with nearly one in five requiring them, so TODAY held a mini-debate Monday on the virtue of mandatory school uniforms.

Educational psychologist and TODAY contributor Michele Borba thinks uniforms are a good idea because they create “emotional safety at a school, which is pivotal to learning.” Having kids wear uniforms will reduce bullying because kids won’t pick on each other for how they’re dressed, she said, and in urban settings, gang affiliation through dress will go down as well. The uniforms also reduce distractions, Borba said.

“It gets down to, ‘Let’s focus on the thing we’re supposed to be doing, called learning,’” she said.

But child and teen development specialist Robyn Silverman said uniforms aren’t always the answer.

“At a time where teens and preteens want to express themselves, clothes provide a vehicle, a benign vehicle, to allow them to express themselves and say, ‘I’m different,’ without having to approach more risky ways of saying the same thing,” she said.

Should adults stifle kids’ individuality? TODAY’s Savannah Guthrie asked Borba. While she said she loves individuality, Borba said a new mindset is needed.

“It’s not the stuff you wear, it’s the stuff on the inside,” she told Guthrie on the TODAY show plaza. “Let’s start getting kids to be expressive in terms of their thoughts, their words, their deeds.

“They have 50,000 activities they’re signed up for, for heaven’s sake, they can be expressive there,” Borba added. “When you walk into school, let’s be dressed for success and be prepared to learn.”

Silverman noted that uniforms can have an unintended consequence, where kids compare how they each look in the same outfit, much like magazines ask readers to judge celebrities in “who wore it best” photo spreads.

“As a body image expert, I hear from students all the time that they feel it allows for a lot of comparison,” Silverman said.

“So if you have a body that’s a plus-size body, a curvier body, a very tall body, a very short body, those girls often feel that they don’t look their best,” she said, and that can be detrimental to learning.

Nineteen percent of public school principals reported requiring uniforms in the 2009-2010 school year, up from 12 percent a decade earlier, according to TODAY. The percentage of public schools whose principals reported enforcement of a strict dress code rose from 47 percent to 57 percent during the decade.

FOR HOMEWORK:

After reading this article, choose what you feel is the strongest point made in the article for either side in the debate, and explain why you found this particular point convincing. Then, choose what you feel is the weakest point made in the article for either side in the debate, and explain why this point did not convince you. Your response should be at least 6 sentences total. In your response, cite specific claims made in the text.