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## STUDENT DRESS CODES: WHAT'S FAIR?

Over the years, student dress codes have sought to address a wide range of issues and have incited different degrees of controversy. For example, in the late 1960s and 70s, young men with long hair were sometimes physically attacked by their classmates and, as a result, many schools required boys to wear their hair cut to their ears or shorter. In the 1990s, there was a push for dress codes as a strategy to prevent gang-related violence. In recent years, a desire to curb conflict over designer labels and create a more “professional” school environment resulted in dress codes and uniforms becoming more popular.

Last spring (2014), student dress codes made headlines because several groups of students—predominately girls—began to question and protest school dress codes. Their words quickly traveled via social media and news articles. The young spokeswomen said that: *The dress codes unfairly target girls 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. The dress codes have become a complex issue, especially for young women. On one hand, there is increasingly more variety in girls' clothing and more opportunity for “inappropriate” dress and schools are obligated to provide a safe and suitable learning environment. On the other hand, these rules are often seen as unequal, enforced inconsistently and rooted in sexist social norms.*

This lesson provides an opportunity for middle and high school students to reflect on their own opinions regarding student dress codes, identify school and students needs and perspectives and design their own dress codes that satisfy both student and school needs.

**Grade Level:** grades 6-12

**Common Core Anchor Standards:** Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening

**Learning Objectives:**

- Students will understand more about the student dress code controversy and the actions associated with them.
- Students will reflect on their own opinions and the opinions of their classmates regarding student dress codes.
- Students will identify school and student needs and perspective regarding student dress codes.
- Students will design a dress code that satisfies both student and school needs.

**Material:**

- “What should students wear? Who decides? Dress codes can be a real minefield for schools” (Fox News, April 16, 2014, [www.foxnews.com/us/2014/04/16/what-should-students-wear-who-decides-dress-codes-can-be-real-minefield-for/](http://www.foxnews.com/us/2014/04/16/what-should-students-wear-who-decides-dress-codes-can-be-real-minefield-for/)); one copy for each student

- [Proposed Dress Code](#), one copy for each group (see “Writing Activity”)

### Vocabulary:

Review the following vocabulary words and make sure students know their meanings. (See ADL’s [“Glossary of Education Terms.”](#))

- accessory
- decorum
- perspective
- appropriate
- enforcement
- petition
- ashamed
- inconsistent
- professionalism
- ban
- judgment
- sexism
- controversial
- modesty
- transgender

### WARM-UP: STUDENT DRESS CODES

Ask students: *What words, phrases and feelings come to mind when you hear the words “student dress codes?”* Record their responses on the board/smartboard. Then ask: *Based on what we all shared, what is your observation about how we think and feel about student dress codes?*

### INFORMATION SHARING

1. Ask students: *Does anyone know if our school has a dress code? If so, what is in it?* If the school has a written dress code, provide that to students and review it together.
2. Explain to students that last spring, there were a lot of stories in the news about school dress codes. Ask: *Does anyone know what the controversy was about?*
3. Explain that student dress codes made headlines last spring (2014) because several groups of students—predominately girls—began to question and, in some cases, protest, 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 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. Share a few examples of what happened last spring:
  - In March 2014, over 500 students at Haven Middle School in Evanston, Illinois signed a petition opposing what they’d been told was a full ban on leggings and yoga pants. Many girls wore yoga pants or leggings in defiance of the ban. “Not being able to wear leggings because it’s ‘too distracting for boys’ is giving us the impression we should be guilty for what guys do,” said Sophie Hasty, a 7th grader at the school, “We just want to be comfortable!” ([www.foxnews.com/us/2014/04/16/what-should-students-wear-who-decides-dress-codes-can-be-real-minefield-for/](http://www.foxnews.com/us/2014/04/16/what-should-students-wear-who-decides-dress-codes-can-be-real-minefield-for/))
  - In April 2014 at Kenilworth Junior High in Petaluma, California, a school administrator pulled all the girls aside one afternoon instead of heading to their last class that day. All the female students reported to the multi-use room and when they found out why, it caused quite an uproar. The school administrator told all the girls they couldn’t wear pants that were “too tight” because it distracts the boys. Some parents were upset because they felt it sent the wrong message to girls, and in a

sense were blaming them because the boys were distracted by their attire.

([www.ktvu.com/news/news/local/petaluma-middle-school-bans-too-tight-pants-girls/nXD6S/](http://www.ktvu.com/news/news/local/petaluma-middle-school-bans-too-tight-pants-girls/nXD6S/))

- In May 2014, a Canadian teenager was publicly chastised by high school officials for wearing shorts. Students had to stand up for a clothing inspection where girls were subjected to the “fingertip length” test (the length of her clothing must be longer than where the tips of her fingers reach). One female student was wearing a pair of denim shorts and was told they were too short and she had to change. She questioned the dress code and then proceeded to print 20 posters that said, “Don’t humiliate her because she is wearing shorts. It’s hot outside. Instead of shaming girls for their bodies, teach boys that girls are not sexual objects,” which she posted around the school. ([www.takepart.com/article/2014/06/02/teen-girl-slut-shamed-wearing-shorts-strikes-back-her-school?cmpid=tp-ptnr-upworthy](http://www.takepart.com/article/2014/06/02/teen-girl-slut-shamed-wearing-shorts-strikes-back-her-school?cmpid=tp-ptnr-upworthy))
- At Wasatch High School in Utah, students’ yearbook photos were edited (photoshopped) to conform to the school’s dress code which calls for “modesty.” Sleeves were edited on to tank tops, necklines were raised and tattoos erased. The school stated that they issued a statement on picture day that if the student’s clothes didn’t comply with their dress code that the photos may be edited. Female students said that none of the boys’ photos were edited and that girls’ photos were edited selectively, with some dress code violations left untouched. The school acknowledged that the yearbook staff made some errors and they are evaluating this policy. ([www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/05/30/utah-high-school-alters-inappropriate-yearbook-photos-of-female-students/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/05/30/utah-high-school-alters-inappropriate-yearbook-photos-of-female-students/))
- In August 2014, the Superintendent in Noble, Oklahoma pulled a group of high school girls aside for a special assembly to discuss appropriate outfits. According to several girls, Superintendent Bass reportedly checked the length of their shorts by asking them to bend over and also referred to some of the girls as “skanks.” Bass denies using this language. Many of the girls went home that evening crying and humiliated and parents have started a petition to get the superintendent to resign. ([www.takepart.com/article/2014/08/25/school-checks-girls-skirt-length-telling-them-bend-over](http://www.takepart.com/article/2014/08/25/school-checks-girls-skirt-length-telling-them-bend-over))

If the students are interested in the legal aspects of student dress codes, you may want to note that like some other school policies, established student dress codes are subject to constitutional challenges in the courts. If students feel their school’s dress code policy violates their rights, they can challenge it but there is no guarantee that a court will overturn a formal school policy, unless it violates students’ free speech rights or is discriminatory. Lower courts have generally sided with schools and the Supreme Court has never taken a case on dress codes or school uniform policy.

## HERE I STAND ACTIVITY

1. Explain to students that they will listen to some statements and decide to what extent they agree or disagree with the statement. They will be indicating their opinion about each topic by positioning themselves along an imaginary line, depending upon how strongly they agree or disagree with a statement.
2. 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 “STRONGLY DISAGREE” response. In between these two positions, indicate “AGREE,” “IN BETWEEN/NOT SURE,” and “DISAGREE” along the continuum. Create signs with these words and hang them up on the wall.

3. Read each statement 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.
  - a. Everyone is entitled to the right of free speech and clothing is part of free speech.
  - b. If students do not like a school policy, they should accept and find a way to deal with it.
  - c. Young people should not wear the same style of clothes to school that they wear outside of school.
  - d. Wearing school uniforms prevents a lot of conflict and drama.
  - e. When students dress in short or tight clothing, it is distracting for other students who cannot concentrate on their work.
  - f. Schools should have dress codes.
  - g. It is the school's job to protect students and that includes creating and enforcing dress codes.
  - h. Dress codes are unfair to girls.
  - i. Dress codes are unfair to transgender students and those who don't conform to traditional gender norms.

After everyone has chosen their spot, ask for a student or two to share why they have chosen to stand there.

4. Lead a whole group discussion, using the following questions:
  - Was it easy or difficult to decide where to stand? Why?
  - Were some statements easier to decide than others?
  - Did you sometimes have an opinion different than the majority of the group? How did that feel?
  - Did you ever change your mind after seeing whether other people stood and hearing their opinions?
  - Did new information sway you one way or the other?
  - Did you learn anything new and if so, what?

## READING ACTIVITY

In order to learn more about the controversy, have students read the article "[What should students wear? Who decides? Dress codes can be a real minefield for schools.](#)" You may decide to have students read the article for homework the night before the lesson so they are prepared to discuss it.

After reading the article, engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:

- What did you learn by reading the article?
- What part of the story most stood out for you?
- What messages to girls/young women are being conveyed in the details of the dress codes?
- What was the reaction of the students?
- Why does the school feel that their dress code is necessary? What is their perspective?
- How do the girls feel about the bans? Why does it make them feel that way?

- How are certain students singled out under a school dress code policy?
- Are these dress codes sexist? Why or why not?

## UNDERSTANDING NEEDS

1. Explain to students one of the reasons for the controversy is that the students and schools may have different needs and perspectives when it comes to appropriate clothing for school.
2. Have students brainstorm what their needs are and what they think the school's needs are. Ask students: *Why does the school need to have a dress code policy? What do the students need in regard to what they wear to school?* The students can try to guess what the school's needs are or you, as the teacher, can represent the school's point of view and needs.
3. As students brainstorm, record on chart paper or smartboard so everyone can see the responses. It may look something like this:

### Student's Needs:

- Want to be comfortable
- Enforce consistently
- Limited budget—leggings are most of the clothes I own
- Want to look attractive/cute
- My body size does not conform to dress code
- Want to express myself

### School's Needs:

- Standards for "professional" feeling of school
- Consistency
- Reduce teasing and bullying
- Don't want complaints from parents
- Want students to be focused/serious
- Concerned about students engaging in sexual behavior

4. After brainstorming, ask students the following questions:
  - Are there things that both the school and students need and if so, what are they? (e.g. consistency)
  - Are there any needs that seem to be in conflict with each other?
  - Do you think it is possible to design a dress code that takes into account both student and school needs?

## WRITING ACTIVITY: WRITE YOUR OWN DRESS CODE

1. Explain to students that now they will create student dress codes.
2. Divide students into groups of four and distribute the [Proposed Dress Code](#) handout to each group. Based on the needs outlined above, have the small groups come up with a dress code that they think will work. Additionally, they should write a paragraph explaining how it will be enforced. Give students 10 minutes to complete this task. If there are some needs that cannot be addressed or seem to be in conflict, students should note these as "outstanding issues."
3. To try to build consensus (and time permitting), have each of the 4-person groups join another group to create an eight-person group. Instruct the new eight-person groups to compare their dress codes and try to come up with a list that incorporates the two lists.

4. When these groups have completed their work, reconvene the whole class and try to come to consensus on a dress code.

## CLOSING

Ask students: *What is one new thing you learned as a result of today's lesson?*

## HOMEWORK/EXTENSION ACTIVITY

1. For homework or as an extension activity, have students conduct a media analysis of how girls and women are portrayed in the media. Brainstorm with students what media is, including: TV/internet shows, online or regular magazines and newspapers, advertisements, social networking sites, videos, podcasts, music videos, internet shows, video games, smartphone apps and associated ads, billboards, movies, etc.
2. Students should look at 5–10 different items, noting (1) the form of media, (2) what they observed, (3) how they think the girls/women were portrayed and (4) any stereotypes exhibited or dispelled.
3. After doing their analysis, students are to write a reflection essay that includes the following:
  - what they found out from their media analysis
  - the messages the media conveys about girls and women's bodies and the type of clothing they should be wearing
  - how they think those messages impact how girls and women approach their styles of dress
  - the extent to which girls and women receive "mixed messages" from the media and school and/or home about how they should dress

## ADDITIONAL READING

- ["Whose Dress Code Is It and Why?"](#) (*The New York Times* Motherlode blog, June 16, 2014)
- ["My Daughter Was Dress-Coded for Wearing Shorts"](#) (*Slate* XX Factor blog, June 9, 2014)
- [Spalding County \(Georgia\) Student Dress Code](#) (Griffin-Spalding County School)
- ["These Quotes From Students Nail Everything That's Wrong With School Dress Codes"](#) (*The Huffington Post*, June 25, 2014)
- ["A Dress-Code Enforcer's Struggle for the Soul of the Middle-School Girl"](#) (*The Atlantic*, February 14, 2013)
- ["Baring Shoulders and Knees, Students Protest a Dress Code"](#) (*The New York Times*, June 6, 2012)
- [Students Rights: Dress Codes](#) (American Civil Liberties Union, Vermont)

## COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS

Content Area/Standard
Reading
Standard 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
Writing
Standard 4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
Speaking and Listening
Standard 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

