

School uniforms: Do they really improve student achievement, attendance and behavior?



Students in Lowell, Nebraska, 1911. (Library of Congress)

By [Denise-Marie Ordway](#)

Decades ago, uniforms were mostly worn by students who went to private or parochial schools. But as public schools nationwide have focused more on improving standardized test scores and campus safety, a growing number have begun requiring their students to wear uniforms – typically, a polo shirt of a particular color paired with navy or khaki pants, skirts or shorts. About [20 percent](#) of public schools in the United States required uniforms in 2013-14 — up from almost 12 percent in 1999-2000, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

Proponents argue that students will pay more attention to their classwork if they aren't preoccupied with fashion, and that they'll be better behaved. Meanwhile, school administrators say uniforms help eliminate gang-related styles and logos. They also make it easier to spot a stranger on campus.

Despite their reported benefits, mandatory uniforms are controversial because a lot of parents and students don't like the idea of forcing children to dress alike, which they say suppresses freedom of expression. Some families complain about the financial burden of purchasing uniforms in addition to their kids' other clothing. Years ago, parents also complained that it was difficult to find uniforms, but that ceased to be an issue after large chain stores like Target and Wal-Mart began selling them.

As public schools debate the merits of uniforms – some school boards have been bouncing the idea around for years — it's important for journalists to know what the research says on this topic. School officials do not always consult academic research before they put a plan on the table.

To help journalists ground their reporting and fact-check claims, Journalist's Resource has rounded up several academic studies worth reviewing. Reporters may also want to examine [reports on uniform use](#) from the NCES, which collects and reports data related to school uniforms, dress codes and book bags in public schools.

[“Dressed for Success? The Effect of School Uniforms on Student Achievement and Behavior”](#)

Gentile, Elizabetta; Imberman, Scott A. *Journal of Urban Economics*, 2012, Vol. 71. doi: 10.1016/j.jue.2011.10.002.

Abstract: “Uniform use in public schools is rising, but we know little about how they affect students. Using a unique dataset from a large urban school district in the southwest United States, we assess how uniforms affect behavior, achievement and other outcomes. Each school in the district determines adoption independently, providing variation over schools and time. By including student and school fixed-effects we find evidence that uniform adoption improves attendance in secondary grades, while in elementary schools they generate large increases in teacher retention.”

[“Are School Uniforms a Good Fit? Results from the ECLS-K and the NELS”](#)

Yeung, Ryan. *Educational Policy*, 2009, Vol. 23. doi: 10.1177/0895904808330170.

Abstract: “One of the most common proposals put forth for reform of the American system of education is to require school uniforms. Proponents argue that uniforms can make schools safer and also improve school attendance and increase student achievement. Opponents contend that uniforms have not been proven to work and may be an infringement on the freedom of speech of young people. Within an econometric framework, this study examines the effect of school uniforms on student achievement. It tackles methodological challenges through the use of a value-added functional form and the use of multiple data sets. The results do not suggest any significant association between school uniform policies and achievement. Although the results do not definitely support or reject either side of the uniform argument, they do strongly intimate that uniforms are not the solution to all of American education’s ills.”

[“Effects of Student Uniforms on Attendance, Behavior Problems, Substance Use, and Academic Achievement”](#)

Brunsma, David L.; Rockquemore, Kerry A. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 1998, Vol. 92. doi: 10.1080/00220679809597575.

Abstract: "Mandatory uniform policies have been the focus of recent discourse on public school reform. Proponents of such reform measures emphasize the benefits of student uniforms on specific behavioral and academic outcomes. Tenth-grade data from The National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 was used to test empirically the claims made by uniform advocates. The findings indicate that student uniforms have no direct effect on substance use, behavioral problems, or attendance. Contrary to current discourse, the authors found a negative effect of uniforms on student academic achievement. Uniform policies may indirectly affect school environment and student outcomes by providing a visible and public symbol of commitment to school improvement and reform."

"School Uniforms, Academic Achievement, and Uses of Research"

Bodine, Ann. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 2003, Vol. 97. doi:

10.1080/00220670309597509.

Abstract: "School uniforms are being advocated for a range of social, educational, economic, and familial reasons. In 1998, *The Journal of Educational Research* (The JER) published an article by D. Brunsma and K. Rockquemore that claims that uniforms correlate negatively with academic achievement, but data presented in this article actually show positive correlation between uniforms and achievement for the total sample, and for all but 1 school sector. Examination of structure of argument reveals that the erroneous claim results from misleading use of sector analysis. Simultaneous with The JER article, and on the basis of the same National Education Longitudinal Study: 1988 database, an Educational Testing Service article reported that no correlation exists between uniforms and achievement. The two articles are contrasted in this study. The effect of new communication technology in amplifying political uses of academic research is discussed."

"Public School Uniforms: Effect on Perceptions of Gang Presence, School Climate, and Student Self-Perceptions"

Wade, Kathleen Kiley; Stafford, Mary E. *Education and Urban Society*, 2003, Vol. 35. doi:

10.1177/0013124503255002.

Abstract: "This study attempts to clarify the relationships between public school uniforms and some of their intended results: student self-worth and student and staff perceptions of gang presence and school climate. The instruments used in the study included a questionnaire on gang presence and identity, the National Association of School Principals Comprehensive Assessment of School Environments, and the Harter Self-Perception Profile for Children. Participants consisted of 415 urban public middle school students and 83 teachers. Findings indicate that, although

perceptions did not vary for students across uniform policy, teachers from schools with uniform policies perceived lower levels of gang presence. Although the effect size was small, students from schools without uniforms reported higher self-perception scores than students from schools with uniform policies. Student and teacher perceptions of school climate did not vary across uniform policy.”

“The Effect of Uniforms on Nonuniform Apparel Expenditures”

Norum, Pamela S.; Weagley, Robert O.; Norton, Marjorie J. Family & Consumer Sciences, 1998. doi: 10.1177/1077727X980263001.

Abstract: “The uniform industry has grown steadily the past 20 years with increased attention from employers trying to create a professional image among workers as well as school administrators considering uniforms to curtail school violence. Although an important part of human dress for centuries, uniforms have received little attention from researchers of the clothing market. This study examines the impact of uniform purchases on household expenditures for selected nonuniform apparel subcategories based on an economic model of conditional demand. Expenditure equations are estimated using the 1990–1991 Consumer Expenditure Survey. The results suggest that, on average, consumers do not substitute uniforms for other apparel purchases. Rather, uniforms and nonuniform apparel appear to be complements in consumers’ purchases, resulting in greater household expenditures on nonuniform apparel. These results are a first step in understanding the economic effect that uniform purchases, mandated by employers, schools, or others, have on household clothing expenditures.”

Keywords: school uniforms, khaki pants, uniform policy

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