

# Mandatory School Uniforms?

A Reality-Based Case Study for Middle Level Learners

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## **Overview**

This case study is developed around the real world context of the 1999 Polk County, Florida school uniform controversy. The case study begins with students encountering the facts related to the class action law suit filed on behalf of over 500 Polk County public school parents who sought to have the school board's mandatory uniform policy overturned. In the introduction to the problem, students learn about the school uniform policy and the nature of the parents' complaints.

Students are then divided into issues-focused research groups that encounter a variety of case-related facts and prepared statements from the individuals who are involved in the controversy. These groups are challenged, through the skillful use of questions, to further research their issues using resources provided in the case study packet, their media center, and the World Wide Web. Based on this research, each group is urged to take a stand, pro or con, on the acceptability of the school board's uniform policy.

The case study concludes with a mock school board meeting where the students take on the roles of citizens who speak to each of the issues that they have researched. The school board votes on whether to retain, modify, or repeal its present school uniform policy. Finally, students are required to make formal recommendations to a newly created school district on the formation of a school dress code or uniform policy.



## **Phase One: Dressed for Success?**

Phase One of the case is designed to familiarize students with the Polk County Mandatory school uniform controversy and get them thinking about the important issues that a mandatory school dress code raises. The instruction begins with students reading the springboard/grabber article “Dressed for Success?” (Handout #1). This article introduces students to a simplified version of the Polk County, Florida school uniform policy, the law suit that was filed to halt the policy, and the perspectives of students and parents who opposed the uniform policy.

After students have read Handout #1 they should be engaged in reviewing the facts of the case and, more importantly, phrasing the issues and problems that arose from the dress code policy. Here are some examples of the kinds of statements that students might make:

Sample fact statements derived from Handout #1:

- On May 11, 1999 the Polk County, Florida school board voted to put into effect a mandatory K-8 uniform policy.
- Glen Reynolds, the Superintendent of the school district, stated that children would be suspended for noncompliance and later threatened to send parents to jail if they disobeyed the policy.
- The policy specifies certain colors, fabric types, and styles of clothing.

*(...continue on having the students formulate **other** fact statements)*

Sample issues and problem statements derived from Handout #1:

- Does the School Board really have the authority to require students to wear uniforms?
- Will the uniform policy really improve students’ behavior and learning?

- Does the policy increase the expense of clothing and is this fair to low income families?

*(...continue on having the students formulate **other** issues and problem statements)*

Once students have had a chance to review the facts and issues of the case, distribute copies of the five shortened newspaper articles (Handouts 2-6) for the students to read and share. One way to do this would be to form the students into groups of five so that all five articles are read in each group. The students can take turns reading their articles aloud to one another and, when all are finished, they can be engaged in either a small group or a whole-class discussion of the following questions which should be written on the board:

- **How do parents, students, and school personnel seem to feel about the uniform code? What part of your article gave you this impression?** (These questions are designed to help the students identify the feelings of the people who are involved in the case and then to support their judgments with references to the articles that they have just read.)

- **What problems have come up and how important were they?** (This question attempts to get the students to freely identify and summarize the problems they are aware of with the uniform policy.)

- **What are the biggest and most important issues that are raised by this mandatory uniform policy case?** (This question asks the students to prioritize and place a value on the problems and issues they have identified.)

- **What more would you like to know about this case and how can we go about finding it?** (This question is designed to lead the students into their research groups, which form the focus of Phase Two.)

## Dressed for Success?

On May 11th, 1999, the Polk County, Florida school board put into effect a new district-wide school uniform policy that dramatically limited what kindergarten through eighth grade students could wear. The new uniform policy immediately set off a round of parent complaints and led to a lawsuit designed to stop the new policy. The school board's appointed superintendent, Glenn Reynolds, made it clear that students would be suspended for violating the uniform policy and later said he would even consider "*sending parents to jail for contributing to the delinquency of a minor*" if they refused to properly dress their children according to the new uniform rules.

### Questions:

- Why would the school board want students to wear uniforms?
- How do you think students might feel about having to wear a uniform?
- Why might parents oppose school uniforms?

### Black, Blue, Tan, or White

The new district-wide policy stated that the basic uniform for girls would consist of a long or short sleeved navy blue or white collared blouse or polo shirt with a dark blue, black or khaki (tan) skirt, walking shorts, slacks, skorts, jumper made of denim, corduroy or twill fabric. The basic uniform for boys would consist of a long or short sleeved navy blue or white collared shirt, such as a polo or oxford dress shirt, and a dark blue, black or khaki (tan) pair of long pants or walking shorts made of denim, corduroy, or twill fabric. In addition, the new uniform code allowed the Principal of each elementary or middle school to designate an official school T-shirt, one additional school

color that could be worn on the top, and a school plaid that could be worn on the bottom. Exemptions to the new uniform policy were allowed for the uniforms of national youth organizations such as Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, students who were new to the school district who have 30 days to buy their uniforms, and students who objected to the uniform code on the basis of the sincerely held religious beliefs of their families. The dress code banned all emblems, words, phrases, or insignia--except buttons, armbands or other similar symbols that were worn to exercise the right of free speech guaranteed by the United States Constitution.

### **Questions:**

- Why do you suppose the district wanted all students to wear these clothes colors and styles?
- How would you feel if you were dressed in this school uniform?
- Do you think it is a good idea to allow different schools to have their own color, plaid, and official T-shirt?

### **The Lawsuit**

The class action lawsuit, filed by an attorney for over 500 families, alleged that the new uniform code: (1) placed the school in a position of authority and control over students' dress that is more properly exercised by parents and their children; (2) caused school personnel to take actions that prohibited students from wearing clothing that contains political, religious, educational, commercial, and other forms of free speech, (3) deflected the schools' attention from their primary educational purpose and mission; (4) prevented students from choosing clothing that expresses their individuality, identity, gender, and ethnic, and religious heritage; (5) caused parents extra clothing expense because uniforms had to be purchased in addition to other regular clothes; (6) was

enforced differently from school to school; and that it (7) created psychological stress, health, and safety concerns. The lawsuit asked that the school board overturn its new uniform policy and revert back to its prior dress code which did not limit students' and families' selections of styles, colors, or materials.

### **Questions:**

- Who should have authority over what children wear--parents, children, or the school system?
- Why might it be difficult to enforce even a simple uniform code?
- To what degree are your clothes an expression of your gender, identity, and individuality?

### **The Incidents**

The passage of the school district's new uniform code caused many problems once school started. In fact, over 1,000 "loaner outfits" had to be distributed on the first day of school! Here are a few examples of what happened.

- A vice principal at Westwood Middle School suspected a girl was wearing Spandex (one of the forbidden fabrics). In order to test this idea, the vice principal grabbed the girl's pants, opened them up, and put her hand down in them to pull the tag out. The result was that the girl was sent to In School Suspension (ISS) for having pants with only a 4% Spandex content!

**Question: How much Spandex is too much?**

- A parent said her second grader followed the rules at Auburndale Central Elementary School by wearing navy blue pants. But he got in trouble when he wore a pair that were a little faded.

**Question: When is navy blue too faded to be called navy blue anymore?**

- A parent sent one of his children to school in a white, polo style shirt on which an American flag image and the text "God, please bless America one more time" had been transferred. The child was made to change into a loaner shirt so that he could remain in class. (The loaner shirt has a large "L" which, therefore, identifies him as a uniform code violator.)

**Question: Should the school have done this?**

- Many parents chose to send their children to school in uniforms, but with a small sticker or button of protest. Messages ranged from: "*Uniforms stink!*" to "*It's not what you wear it's what you do.*" A large number of parents reported that their children were forced to remove the stickers under threat of severe discipline.

**Question: Do you think this restricted students' and parents' rights to protest?**