



FREE TO BE ME

Why We Fuss about Dress Code

Like most schools with mandated uniforms or dress codes, we fuss a lot with our kids about the length of skirts and hair, the height of heels, and the style of pants. It is perfectly understandable, in fact, it is to be expected that our students do not comprehend the philosophy of dress code. They see the dress code as limiting and they never for a moment understand that it actually sets them free. They protest: Why can't I wear my designer shoes? What's wrong with long hair on a boy? You are denying my individuality! We shouldn't have to all look alike! But they protest because they are ten, twelve and fourteen years old, and the depth of the issue is a little beyond their reach right now.

I had to laugh when the young man in front of my desk, while talking about his dress code infractions, told me passionately, "You don't know how the kids feel!" I told him I knew exactly how the kids feel because I felt the same way, long before he was born! I did not go in detail for him about the rolling up of pleated skirts, the platform shoes stashed in the locker, just for the bus ride home, the carefully teased hair that took ten minutes to get just right once the school hat came off. And I certainly didn't mention the white lipstick! (Well, it was the sixties!)

Like every young person since dress codes began, I hated my school uniform, and my friends and I subverted it as much as possible. We thought that mindless adults just liked looking out over the school assembly to see everyone look the same, but different from the rival school. We thought it was about denying individuality and promoting the oneness of the school. And for sure we did not understand the classic irony of our buying into an alternative but equally restrictive dress code—the obligatory mini skirt, the compulsory baggy sweater, the teased hair and the oh-so-cool white lipstick!

But of course, enforcing the dress code has nothing to do with making everyone look alike. And far from denying one's individuality, the dress code is an open invitation to every child to express their uniqueness. But it is the uniqueness of personality, of soul, of mind, and of heart that we want them to express, not the uniqueness of appearance. It is only when we are not distracted by style, by fashion, or the lack thereof, that we can truly express ourselves as who we are; as students, as athletes, as friends. Rather than hide behind or come to depend upon the masks of appearance, we can learn the importance of developing our

good judgment, our sense of humor, our capacity for kindness, our work ethic. We want each student to be who they really are, and to be confident about who they are. But we want them to know that who they are does not depend on the length of their skirt, the label on their jacket, or the cool factor of their hair.

Ultimately, as adults, we want them to come to an understanding that yes, appearance is important, but only as servant, not as a master. We should be in control of our “image” whatever that is. It should not control us. But for right now, in these school days, we want our kids to focus on the important things, not on the hair, the shoes, the label.

So when, from Wyndcroft, we send home the message that the hair is too long, the skirt too short, or the shoes are the wrong color, we hope that while the children (for they are still children) rant and rave about restrictions, we as adults can remember that the dress code, far from restricting, sets them free to find and develop their true, authentic selves. Let us remember how important it is to at least give our children the chance of a life where their sense of self does not depend on the shallow criteria of appearance, but on depth of character.

Just don't expect the kids to get it, for they won't, but that's OK. It's a right of passage.

Dr. Kathleen E. Wunner
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