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School Uniforms

An ‘Unfashionable’ Dissent

BY DENNIS L. EVANS

Mr. Evans always fancied himself a conservative. Now, he’s not so sure.

HEADY from President Clinton’s “bully pulpit” endorsement of uniforms in public schools, advocates of the notion are pushing such policies in many school districts. Admittedly, the idea of uniforms for public school students does hold out some beguiling promises. Those favoring uniforms, including the President, see them as a way to get around the problems posed by students’ wearing gang attire; they also see uniforms as a way to blur the economic distinctions among students. They even see uniforms as a way to promote a more serious and scholarly academic environment in the schools. What possibly could be the downside of such promises?

To begin with, the programs that have gained parental support, media attention, and, as a result, political endorsements are mostly in elementary schools, where the age of the children means that the problems the uniforms will allegedly solve don’t exist to any significant degree. At the same time, elementary school children are not as concerned with individuality and personal rights as high schoolers are, and so they do not view required uniforms as intrusive or objectionable.

In those schools in which the style and color of clothing are legitimate issues that affect the safety of students, codes that prohibit the wearing of gang attire and regalia should already be in place. Thus the need to adopt a school uniform policy to solve that particular problem is overstated or irrelevant. It will be interesting to see how the courts will handle the inevitable challenges to mandated school uniforms, since there is a significant difference between a public school’s prohibiting specific attire because of legitimate concerns for student safety and a public school’s requiring uniform dress. To avoid these sticky legal issues, some schools may opt for a “voluntary policy.” But, besides being oxymoronic, voluntary policies simply don’t work at the high school level.

Where gangs are concerned, the wearing of school uniforms will be cosmetic at best and will not change the gang mentality or reduce the potential of antisocial, gang-related behavior, either on campus or off. Ironically, mandating the wearing of school uniforms might even make it easier to be a gang member since school administrators could no longer readily recognize the trappings of the gangs.

That school uniforms will blur the economic distinctions among students is, at best, a specious argument. In the first place, most children and adolescents (unlike adults) don’t really care much about such distinctions anyway, and those who don’t have their attitudes altered by wearing a uniform. Do those who see this cosmetic leveling as a positive aspect of school uniforms also propose to ban high school students from driving cars to school, from wearing jewelry, or from carrying money? Do they propose to eliminate or make free all the various activities that pose an economic hardship for certain youngsters and their families? I mean such things as participation in school athletics, attending the school prom, or buying school rings and yearbooks. Economic distinctions are part of the fabric of our society, and they will not be unraveled by covering them with a uniform.

Finally, the notion that school uniforms will somehow create a more seriously academic school environment and so improve achievement is not supported by any evidence. To the contrary, in my 21 years of experience as a high school principal, some of the students whose clothing and hair styles were (from my point of view anyway) the most outlandish were also among the most outstanding scholars and school leaders. The important word in that last sentence is some. Young people are not “uniform,” and we cannot categorize them as academically inclined or not merely by looking at their attire. The cheating scandals at U.S. military academies clearly demonstrate that uniforms have little to do with creating an environment conducive to genuine scholarship and academic achievement.

One of the real ironies that I see in the school uniform movement is that it is so ardently supported by many who would call themselves “conservatives.” I have always fancied myself to be a conservative, but that is because I always thought that “liberals” supported “Big Government” and endorsed its intrusions into our lives. We noble conservatives opposed such meddling and social engineering (tailoring?). While President Clinton’s endorsement of school uniforms fits nicely with my view, the support for this form of governmental intrusion that comes from conservatives does not. Why would a true conservative want the government (i.e., the school board) telling parents what their children must wear to school? I find this as puzzling as I do the fact that some conservatives want the government, through its schools, to organize and support prayer and other religious activities in schools. Perhaps I have been mislabeling myself.

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139