

# Negative Reception: A Survey of Opinions of School Uniforms in an Urban Charter School

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## **Introduction**

Before concluding the effectiveness of uniforms in schools, it is necessary to examine the literature regarding a) the benefits of uniforms to students, b) the reason why people disagree with them, and c) the studies used to support both sides. School uniforms have been a controversial topic for a long time. Many people argue that school uniforms have proven benefits. Some of those benefits are that it supposedly protects against bullying and keeps classes more focused. Chloe Spencer, a high school student, states that “Perhaps most importantly, a uniform means students don’t have to worry about peer pressure when it comes to their clothes.” (Spencer 2013). Schools are known for having hierarchies that put some people down and make others distracted from their work. A uniform establishes a sense of unity, most uniform supporters argue. Today, most private schools and some public schools have uniform policies, but the majority of public schools (and schools in general) have no uniforms. 22 percent of American schools currently require uniforms, which is a higher number than the 12 percent from 20 years ago. However, that number is a rise from the 12 percent from 1998. (Ordway 2018) This could be indicative of a uniform trend, but it is still a hotly debated topic among school systems and students alike. The positive effects of uniforms have been well documented (such as reducing competition and decreasing distractions, but many schools and people still don’t support uniforms for a number of reasons. One of which is the gender aspect. Many people believe that school dress codes are detrimental to girls by “body shaming” them and restricting some girls from wearing outfits that are allowed on others. Kelly Wallace of CNN cites a woman who claims that “there are these subtle messages that sort of carry on that

we shouldn't show something. Why shouldn't we show something? Because something's wrong with our body." (Wallace 2017) Dress codes can unfairly target some women, and some see uniforms as a solution to this while others view it as an extension of the problem. However, there are downsides to school uniforms that go beyond gender. Mark Oppenheimer, a writer for the New Yorker, criticizes the school uniform movement for accepting uniforms as a perfect solution without acknowledging their downsides. He claims that uniforms are “yet one more way that the surveillance of the un-powerful—the poor, people of color, and that great unheard group of the young—has become increasingly acceptable.” (Oppenheimer 2017) Uniforms are definitely restrictive on students of both genders, emphasizing order in favor of freedom, especially in low-income communities. This connects to a deeper discussion about whether choice or stability should be prioritized, but it is definitely something to consider when weighing the positives and negatives of uniforms. In general, the issue is so polarizing because of the two valid sides: uniforms help improve stability of the school (as Spencer argues) but they also decrease individuality and freedom (as Oppenheimer and Wallace argue). The true debate is whether school uniforms affect student productivity, which is ultimately the most important aspect of a school beyond safety.

### *Uniform Studies*

Various studies have portrayed uniforms in both a positive and negative light. Ann Bodine uses a meta analysis to argue that uniforms have not been detrimental to academic or behavioral achievement (specifically geared towards high schools, which use uniforms more commonly). This is a rebuttal of two other pieces of research that indicated that uniforms don't help students. This author refutes the claims and indicates that the two authors' own data does not support their claims. Bodine claims, “Brunsma and Rockquemore (1998) found that uniformed students have significantly higher test scores than do non-uniformed students. How, then, did they arrive at their claim of "negative effect of uniforms on student academic achievement?" (Brunsma/Rocquemore 1998) The article referenced is from David

Brunsma and Kerry Roquemore, who in 1998 conducted a controlled study over various schools with 10th grade students, with all other variables apart from uniform use kept constant. Various dependent variables were monitored for, including attendance, behavior problems, and substance use. They found that uniforms had no significant influence on such factors. Brunnsma/Roquemore and Bodine represent two opposing arguments. The latter is part of the group that believes uniforms actively help children and should be implemented, while the former argues that uniforms don't help at all, and thus aren't worth the cost and lack of freedom that go with them.

Due to the aforementioned positive effects, uniforms have continued to be used in various different types of schools to varying effects. For instance, in Ecuador, schools with free uniforms have been shown to have decreased attendance compared to other schools in the country. Diana Hidalgo and her group randomly selected 101 poor urban schools in Ecuador and gave them free uniforms, comparing attendance in them to schools not in that group. The schools with free uniforms have 3.4% lower attendance than the schools that didn't. This evidence is in Ecuador so it may not be relevant to the U.S., but it is still indicative of uniforms possibly leading to more children skipping school. Another type of school that has been researched in this way is Christian schools. This analysis (by Michael Fermin and Suzanne Smith) directly compares two similar Christian institutions, and it is more qualitative than the Ecuador study, focusing on asking students and teachers about how they felt about the uniform policy. Christian schools are known for having strict uniform policies. In this case, they find that "the young people in our study are not nearly as convinced as the adults that uniforms have achieved the goal of eliminating competition among them." (Fermin/Smith 2006) This is an example that is very common: students and adults do not agree on how beneficial the uniforms are. Usually the adults are more positive than the students, and in this case only the adults believe uniforms eliminate competition among students. This is indicative that they *don't* actually eliminate competition, since students would know about this more than teachers or

parents. Unlike Christian schools, charter schools have not been studied so extensively in regards to the uniform issue, so my research will provide a new perspective.

### *The Effect of Uniforms on People*

Uniforms' effect on students and educators is something that has been extensively studied in the past. Sylvan I. Alleyne and Velma LaPoint analyze the views of African-American educators on uniform policies, and compare them to black students in an interview-based study. The research concluded that black educators mostly agree that school uniforms are a benefit to schools due to encouraging better behavior. Younger students usually agree with this, but opinions between students and teachers on the subject differ more as students get older. Alleyne and LaPoint report that "Although there were no differences between grades, students differed significantly from school personnel in the opinion that students who are too focused on clothing or appearance may achieve lower academic grades."

(Alleyne/LaPoint 2003) In the black community, most older students don't see the issue with a loose dress code, but teachers agree that uniforms improve the behavior in the school environment. Additionally, there is a larger picture that can better explain the two sides of the argument. Peter Caruso notes that the main crux of the argument is whether order or individuality should be prioritized. Uniforms increase order in the school, but decrease students' levels of individuality. This study is attempting to fill the gap of outlining the main benefits and drawbacks of school uniforms, using evidence to support both. It analyzes data from schools in different states across the country to get a better idea of the effects of school uniforms in America as a whole. Some of Caruso's pro-uniform arguments are that they improve classroom behavior, create greater school recognition, and increase students' self-confidence. Some of the arguments against uniforms that he found is that they are a tool of administrative power, and they haven't been shown to deter violence in school. In a way this is the extent of the liberty versus equality debate that populates political discussion today.

### *Best Solution*

After all of this, the big debate is what would be the best solution in regards to uniforms? What is the best uniform policy (or lack thereof) that best keeps student behavior and productivity up? Angela Walmsley argues that America should push school uniforms more aggressively, because the United Kingdom required uniforms for every public school, and the students' work ethic was on the rise. She argues that "Even if the policy was voluntary, once students began wearing them, the culture would shift and most students would move toward wearing uniforms, especially if this policy is initiated in younger grades." (Walmsley 2011) Making school uniforms the standard in America will cause it to be integrated in the culture and make the uniforms less controversial once the benefits are realized. Another similar solution is voluntary uniform programs, as advocated by David Kommer. The difference is that Walmsley supports more aggressive push by the government to implement uniforms, while Kommer wants to ease school districts and students into the process. He uses the example of Lake Center High School that had an optional uniform program. During the 1995-96 school year, Lake Center's uniform program was mandatory. Parents did have the right to opt out of the program, but 98% of the 530 students wore the uniform." (Kommer 1999) In this case, the program was "mandatory" but people could opt out of it, so it was functionally voluntary. Despite this, the vast majority of students wore uniforms, showing the effectiveness of the process.

### *Conclusion and Research Question*

The present study attempts to explore the effects of uniforms in comparison to no uniforms in a Connecticut urban charter school. The class's academic and behavioral success will be studied and compared. *Similar things have been done before, but not many have analyzed charter schools or schools in Connecticut. In addition, there will be a study to determine the opinion of the school's students on the*

*current uniform policy. Again, surveys about uniforms have been done before but not as much in a school like this, or as extensively with a high school inner city population. Current literature explains that uniforms have generally positive effects on factors like behavioral performance and a sense of unity, and negative effects on student self-expression and student attendance. The effect of uniforms on grades has not been researched adequately enough, with some people arguing it has a positive effect and others claiming there is no correlation. This study can help shed light on that debate. Specifically, this case study addresses the research question: **First, does the presence of school uniforms have a positive effect on academic performance of high school students (in high schools similar to the urban charter school being studied)? Second, does the presence of school uniforms have a beneficial effect on the behavioral performance of high school students? Third, do students support or oppose school uniform policies?***

### **Methods Section**

I chose a survey, and sent out a Google Form to the senior class of my school. I chose this setting since I am familiar with the school, and it is a template for the schools I want to make conclusions on: urban minority schools in Connecticut. It was convenient since I also attend the school as part of the senior class, and this data was much more easily attainable than trying to conduct data at another, similar school. This school also has mandatory uniforms and strict dress codes, as well as days where students are allowed to dress down. This is important because the students of the school know how the uniform policy feels to experience, and many have strong opinions on it. Also, sending the survey through email makes sense because a lot of people in the senior class are frequently using their email, especially due to the college process.

The participants were the seniors of my school, who voluntarily completed the survey. I chose these participants because I am most familiar with this group and I am able to easily contact most of them. I used one school and grade, which established consistency and prevented other outside factors from influencing the data. I had to design the study and make sure it was safe and reasonable. Uniforms are not a sensitive or personal topic so working with it was not as challenging. I originally planned an observational study where I analyzed how people behaved and performed academically with uniforms in comparison to no uniforms, but ultimately I decided that a survey would be more practical and give more straightforward results. I conducted a pilot study which was a prototype Google Form that I only sent to my Research class. The survey went well, and I released a similar Google Form to the entire class of 2020 with minimal alterations to the questions.

The approval process involved me filling out a form about how the data would be gathered, and if I need approval from the participants to conduct it. Since this is just a survey that people have to opt into, I did not need people's signatures or anything like that. I sent out the revised survey through Google Forms, and emailed it to the entire senior class. A week later I checked the data.

The project was created because it was the best way to get accurate data about students' opinions of uniforms, without being difficult to conduct. There was almost no risk since it was just a survey that people were sure to answer, and the topic was not a sensitive subject. Some of the questions asked were "Do you think uniforms improve academic success in this school?" which helps answer my first research question, "Do you think uniforms improve behavior in our school?" which helps answer my second question, and "How long have you attended this school system?" which gives useful background information on how long they have experienced the uniform policy, and also allows me to group

responses into different categories. This is a very replicable study since someone else can easily conduct a similar survey with similar questions to a school of their choice.

A survey is the most appropriate way to collect data for this topic since the topic is straightforward, and having clear questions and answers is the best way to collect and extrapolate from useful data. I wanted to find out if students thought school uniforms were beneficial to the school, and all of my questions were variations of that core question. Sending the email to everyone in the senior class reduced bias since I am not just getting data from one class or one demographic, and the title of the survey (“Are school uniforms a good thing?”) is general and brings people from both sides of the argument to fill out the form. The different survey questions are used to answer my different research questions (Appendix C), so the answers are found here rather than having separate forms with the potential for disjointed data.

The method for this experiment is very reliable. Sending out a survey to the same group of people would consistently display similar results, with the only variation being who participates in the survey. My results from the pilot study were very similar to that of the real study (most people didn’t like uniforms). Because of this, it can be assumed that doing a similar study or survey on a different school is a fair analysis that can be directly used to compare the student bodies of each. However, doing multiple trials may have further proved the reliability for my study.

Overall, this was a successful study that gave useful data about how students at this school approved or didn’t approve of their uniform policy, or uniforms in general. It is a reliable, replicable, and fairly simple study, though it certainly can be improved in a number of ways.

## **Results Section**

In table 1, there is data from the Google Forms survey to the senior class about uniforms in school. Various questions were asked, including “Does a uniform policy improve academic success?” and “Do you support or oppose the decision to restrict dress down to only college gear?”. The results were compiled into the chart shown below. There were two similar questions about whether uniforms improve academic success, and behavioral success. The same amount of people (67.9%) believed school uniforms do not help academic success, and also don’t help behavioral success. This indicates consistency between the two groups, and a connection between academics and behavior. Also, the 67.9% is higher than the amount of people (57.1%) that said a mandatory uniform policy was a bad idea.

The urban high school in Connecticut has a rule stating that students can dress down (wear non-uniform attire) on Fridays, but it was later changed that only college outfits can be worn. An overwhelming majority (96.4%) oppose the decision to restrict dress down to college gear. This is a very clear consensus and shows that the rule is unpopular among students. Even people who said yes to a mandatory uniform policy opposed this. This would indicate that the plan may not be the best solution for the school. The one person who said “unsure” for the college gear question was more pro-uniform overall than average. He or she answered “yes” for all of the questions about whether uniforms improve schools, including the academic question, the behavioral question and the overall one. This person also only does Friday dress down “rarely” whereas most of the other respondents participate in it half of the time or more. The data shows that many people are consistent in whether they support or don’t support uniforms.

Another inference that can be drawn from this is that there is more research that can be done on the issue for a stronger conclusion. This was a basic survey and more information can definitely be

applied in the future. The reason for this is the amount of “unsure” voters. This was included as an option for most of the questions, and people did vote for it. For instance, 17.9% of students were “unsure” about whether mandatory uniforms are a good thing as a whole. It wasn’t a majority, but it did show that there wasn’t a complete consensus about the advantages or disadvantages of uniforms. This 17.9% is equal to the amount of people that answered “maybe” to whether uniforms improve behavior, which shows a consistency in indecisiveness.

One less specific result is that there was no correlation between when the student started going to the school and whether or not they liked uniforms. In my survey, I included a question that asked how long the person has attended a school in the network (and presumably, how long they have been required to wear school uniforms). I included this to see if the more recent charter school students may be more anti-uniform because they are not used to it. Around 60% of the students who answered had started going to the network in middle school, and only around 10% had started in high school. However, the results were not associated with who agreed with the uniform policy, since all three groups were on average anti-uniform at similar rates. One flaw in the data is that this does not take into account whether the person’s previous school had a uniform policy, and this can be improved in later experiments.

The overall implications that can be drawn from this are that the majority of urban charter school students are against uniforms and don’t see significant benefits in them. Regardless of other factors such as the amount of years spent in the school, there is a general consensus against the uniform policy. This makes sense; it is a controversial rule and one that sets a heavy restriction on students. Academic and behavioral success can be caused by a variety of factors, and just because this urban charter school has high academic achievement doesn’t mean the uniforms helped in that regard. The fact that both old and new students were against the policy could also indicate that the level of exposure to uniform policies does not change people’s opinion on them in any major amount.

## Discussion Section

The results had fairly conclusive answers to my research questions. My first two questions aren't as clear because there is not data directly about actual achievement, but the survey data still reveals a large amount. For the first and second questions respectively, it can be concluded that school uniforms in urban charter schools do not have a positive effect on academic or behavioral performances of high school students. This is because over 60% of the surveyed students agreed that uniforms do not improve their academics or behavior. Also, over 50% of students answered that a mandatory uniform policy is not a good idea for either a public or a charter school. This answers the third question (do students support or oppose school uniform policies) with a clear "no." As mentioned, the survey data led to the answer but a different method of study (such as an observational study) may have been better for the first two questions.

This answer fits within the academic conversation by offering evidence that high school charter students do not agree with their uniform policies, and providing a reason to advocate for less mandatory uniforms in the future. It adds to the arguments against uniforms while also proving that opinions on this are not a complete consensus. Also the data indicates that suddenly restricting the dress code further is not a good idea, as shown by the overwhelming opposition to the Friday dress down change. This answer also fits a gap in the academic conversation by giving the perspective of a charter school, and of a school in Connecticut. Both of these variables have been under researched in the past. Also, high school students' opinions on uniforms have not been studied as extensively as teachers or younger students.

One limitation in the study is that it was a voluntary survey, meaning that the survey data may have been biased towards the people who actually participated. There was no real way to conduct a mandatory survey, however. Also, there were no interviews involved, so the students' perspectives were

forced to be rudimentary and not complex. There was no data that is truly qualitative because all of it was collected through a survey, and more nuanced explanations from people are not the focus of this study. We still don't know why students dislike uniforms, only that they do. The observational study part of the experiment was cut, which could have provided evidence about how students' behavior and academics are actually affected by uniforms, if they are at all. However, a lot of these things have been done before in other research. For example, Brunsmas and Rockquemore (1998) conducted an observational study showing how students' grades and behavior changed with or without uniforms. This survey is meant to be a companion to other such sources for people establishing a broader conclusion about school uniforms.

One delimitation is that it only takes place in one specific school, which as mentioned is a charter school in Connecticut. The research topic is not geography-based, so it being in Connecticut may not influence the data. However, the school's charter status (and subsequently its mandatory uniforms) absolutely have influence on the data. Since all of the students are experienced with uniforms, they would have a different opinion on them than, for example, a suburban public school with no uniforms. Maybe charter school students approve of uniforms more because they are more used to them, or maybe they disapprove of uniforms more because they wish they didn't have them. A future study on a school without uniforms could lead to further conclusions, but since the research question is specifically about an urban charter school, it is an intentional delimitation that focuses the study to one type of school.

In conclusion, despite not being perfect, the survey is a reasonable and useful source of data to add to the argument against uniforms. At the very least, it proves that high school students in schools with uniforms generally do not like them. This is not surprising but having actual evidence is important. Also, the study opens the door for future research in different types of schools, or the observational study of the charter school that was originally planned for this research. It also may alter the understanding of uniform

policies for people within the school system, both primarily principals and others in positions of power in education. Knowing that most students do not agree with the program may lead to looser restrictions in the future, if that is what students in the corresponding school want.

### **Conclusions**

Uniforms in the United States are a controversial topic, but one that could be studied a bit more in a greater world context. Many people in the US want aspects of Europe implemented here, and uniforms are no exception. In particular, people view the United Kingdom's mandated uniforms as beneficial to its students, and a potential role model for America's system (Walmsley 2011). This study serves as a counter point suggesting the UK uniform policy is a bad idea for America since it is more regulation for little to no benefit. It isn't concrete proof, but it does strengthen the argument around the world that school uniforms are largely unnecessary. Speaking of other countries, this study also complements an Ecuador study that suggests school uniforms harm attendance (Hidalgo 2010). Attendance was not a part of my own study, but taken together the two studies prove uniforms' ineffectiveness since they don't help academic achievement and actually hurt in other areas, such as attendance.

Prior studies have focused mainly on younger students, and concluded that they have mixed opinions on the topic, but the older a student gets, the more negative their opinion on school uniforms becomes (Alleyne/LaPoint 2003). This study brings that line of thinking to its conclusion by focusing on high school seniors. This belief is likely true because the vast majority of the seniors in this study had a negative opinion of uniforms. This also strengthens and builds off another study about urban students who actively resisted their uniform system (DaCosta 2006). The most useful aspect of this study is its analysis

and collecting of the general opinions of these seniors on the uniform policy. These opinions can be used by other researchers with the assumption that most high school seniors don't like their school's uniform policy if they have one.

In relation to that, one delimitation of the study is that only high school seniors were surveyed. This is a useful delimitation because other researchers can connect that to their studies about middle school students, younger high school students, and even adults and deduce a general trend between age and opinion of school uniforms. Also, the study was only in Connecticut. Similarly, other researchers should compare the data to similar data from other states, to see if there is any trend in that regard.

While the location of Connecticut is a delimitation, one limitation is that we only studied one urban charter school inside Connecticut. This gives us less context on the entire situation and leaves open the possibility that our high school is an outlier. Future researchers can minimize this side effect by studying multiple schools of the same type in a location. Another limitation was that the response rate was low for the survey, showing that most people did not answer the questions, creating a nonresponse bias. Related to this, the sample size was low for this kind of survey. For instance, Alleyne and LaPoint's study had over 300 students, whereas my study is mainly using only around 30 responses. Future researchers can emphasize one-on-one interviews to combat this bias, or schedule a time for a number of people to answer a survey. Despite these limitations, this survey has a purpose as a supplement to other conclusions or surveys. It can be used to strengthen the argument against school uniforms and provide a data point for a larger meta analysis. Researchers in the future can improve the survey and research design for a more effective urban charter school study.

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### Appendix

Table 1:

Question	Answers by popularity
How long have you attended the school network?	Since middle school (60.7%) Since elementary school (32.1%) Since high school (7.1%)

<p>Do you think uniforms improve academic success in this school?</p>	<p>No (67.9%)          Maybe (21.4%)          Yes (10.7%)</p>
<p>Do you think uniforms improve behavior in this school?</p>	<p>No (67.9%)          Maybe (17.9%)          Yes (14.3%)</p>
<p>Do you support or oppose the decision to restrict Friday dress down to only college gear?</p>	<p>Oppose (96.4%)          Unsure (3.6%)          Support (0.0%)</p>
<p>Overall, is a mandatory uniform policy a good idea for a public/charter school?</p>	<p>No (57.1%)          Unsure (17.9%)          Yes (17.9%)          Only for charter schools (7.1%)</p>

