Running Head: THE EFFECTIVENESS OF UNIFORMS IN SCHOOLS

Uniforms in Schools: Investigating the Effectiveness of Uniforms in Schools on Behavior, Academics and Graduation Cohort

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Abstract

Over the years, there has been much controversy and studies on the effectiveness of uniforms in public schools. The general attitude seems to be that wearing school uniforms does, indeed, have a positive effect on the behavior of students, their academic performance and a decreased drop-out rate. This type of policy does have its drawbacks and thus, many dissenters across the country. Opponents tend to argue that the use of uniforms in public schools infringes the individual rights of students. The intent of this study is to gauge the current effectiveness of a mandatory school uniform policy in North Carolina based on six public high schools in the Charlotte region that have already enacted such a policy. We will take two samples from the suburban area, two from the urban area and two from the rural area. We will use qualitative data to measure the perceived effectiveness as well as the actual effectiveness, based on quantitative data. This data will come from previous studies, in a historical context as well as current data acquired through interviews and empirical data acquisition. Ultimately, we hope to determine if the use of uniforms is an effective strategy to curb the behavior issues in schools and encourage better academic performance, subsequently increasing the graduation cohort.
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Background

Although there is no universal uniform code, this does not mean uniforms are something recent in our society. Contrary to popular belief, school uniforms have been around the United States dating back to the nineteenth century. At that time, Indians and Blacks were targeted concerning what to wear and when to wear it (Dussel, 2005). School uniform issues continued with Federal Indian Boarding Schools. Due to the uniform requirements, Indians were unable to wear tribal attire and moccasins and uniforms were required down to the underwear (Dussel, 2005). During the 1950’s and 1960’s, there was a campaign launched to deal with juvenile delinquency that used the motto, “Dress right, act right” (Anderson, 2002). There were also instances where school administrators regulated the length of girls’ skirts, forbade them to wear slacks, prohibited leather jackets for guys and banned students from wearing blue jeans and motorcycle boots (Anderson, 2002). However, on the whole, uniforms were put aside during most of the Civil Rights Movement. Furthermore, in the 1960s, society as a whole began to promote diversity in students; therefore, school uniforms were pushed aside.

Brunsma and Rockquemore (1998), suggest that most ubiquitous application of school uniforms can be traced back to private and Catholic schools. Students in these, predominately white, elite private and Catholic schools were required to wear uniforms that have been termed the “preppy look”; this look consisted of khaki trousers and a button down Oxford shirt (Dussel, 2005). Brunsma and Rockquemore (1998) assert that past research on the effectiveness of private schools led many to attribute at least part of the success to the use of uniforms, although the successes of the private schools was not necessarily ascribed to the use of uniforms. Regardless,
some public school officials took it as such and decided to pursue the idea to help alleviate some of the problems their schools were having (Brunsma & Rockquemore, 1998).

Ultimately, over the last two decades, the debate about school uniforms has sparked much controversy and gathering many proponents and challengers to the idea (Brunsma & Rockquemore 1998). Unfortunately, there has not been a large pool of empirical data to review about the effectiveness of school uniform policies.

Proposed Benefits and Drawbacks of Uniforms

There have been several supporting views put forth about the use of uniforms in public schools. Perhaps one of the most significant was in the endorsement by President Bill Clinton in 1996 and later, at the request of Clinton, the U.S. Department of Education (Brunsma, 2004). According to Dussel (2005), “Clinton stressed that they would help promote security in schools and would be safe attire for children.” In 1996, Clinton urged the U.S. Department of Education to put out a manual on how the benefits of uniforms in public schools and how to implement such a policy (Anderson 2002). The Manual of School Uniforms stated that the use of uniforms is a strategy that intends to help curb violence and theft in schools, prevent gang members from wearing their colors and logos, help students concentrate on work, mitigate peer pressure and for overall safety in the schools, in terms of helping administrators and faculty recognize intruders (US Dept of Ed, 1996). Kaplan and Maeher (as cited in Pate, 1999) suggest that if schools are structured as a safe and disciplined environment for learning, the academic achievement and student discipline are increased. Supporters also claim that the use of uniforms can reduce the differences in socioeconomic status and enhance self-confidence and self-esteem when students don’t have to worry if they are wearing the newest clothes or shoes (Anderson, 2002; Valentine, 1987). Some proponents also argue that the use of uniforms can effectively cut costs for low to
moderate-income families (Valentine, 1987). Dussel (2005) reports that in 1996, the National Association of Secondary School Principals conducted a survey of 5500 principals that showed 70% support of the use of uniforms. In the same year, a Gallup Poll of Public Attitudes reported 50% support by parents (Dussel 2005). In a study done of 64 high schools in Ohio dealing with the use of uniforms, there were reported increases in student performance as well as the graduation rate (Draa, 2005).

Willis (as cited in Anderson, 2002) offers that opponents of school uniforms suggest an infringement on the First Amendment rights of students, all for the sake of a stopgap solution. There have also been several court cases that have either dealt with student expression or with the issue of uniforms in schools and the possible infringement of student rights.

Morris and Wells (2000) present a court case that precedes the school uniform debate, Kelley v. Johnson (1976). This case involves Suffolk County police officers in which the U.S. Supreme Court concluded that an individual’s appearance cannot be infringed upon unless there is a rational basis specifically related to a justifiable government interest. This put the burden on the government to show a need for regulation. Ultimately, this decision outlined how student discipline cases were viewed.

As previously mentioned, there are very few long-term empirical studies conducted to evaluate how effective school uniforms are (Morris & Wells 2000). This also supports the oppositional view that most of the data is anecdotal, leaving the issue virtually unproven. “Uniform policies don't curb violence or behavioral problems in schools. They don't cultivate student self-esteem and motivation. They don't balance the social-status differences that often separate students. And they don't improve academic achievement. (In fact, uniforms may even be associated with a small detrimental effect on achievement in reading, his [Brunsma] research
shows.)” (Viadero, 2005) Student test scores, socioeconomic statuses and the student race are also looked at closely in studies concerning school uniforms and controlled. However, Brunsma continues to “come up empty-handed on any evidence that school uniform policies are effective.” (Viadero, 2005).

Past and Present Policy Implementation

The first instance of uniforms in public schools in the United States was in 1987 at Cherry Hill Elementary School in Baltimore, Maryland (Anderson, 2002). About 360 K-5th graders participated in this “experiment” (Valentine, 1987). In 1994, the Long Beach [California] Unified School District (LBUSD) became the first public school system to implement district-wide school uniform policy (Anderson, 2002). In the first year of inaction, the district reported a 50% decline in fights as well as the number of students that brought weapons to school (Jet, 1996). President Bill Clinton mentioned in his State of the Union address in 1996 that the nation’s 16,000 public schools should consider a mandatory uniform policy and all schools were sent one of the aforementioned manuals on uniforms by the Department of Education (Brunsma 2004; Anderson 2002). Some past policy implementation all in 2000, with the exception of the New York City schools includes: 72% of New York City’s 675 elementary schools (1999), district-wide in Philadelphia’s, 60% in Miami, 80% in Chicago, 30% of public schools in San Francisco, 50% in Cincinnati, 65% in Boston, 85% in Cleveland and 95% in New Orleans (Anderson 2002). There have also been 23 states that have authorized the implementation of school uniforms in schools and districts (Colasanti, 2008). Overall, there has been a 2% increase in the amount of schools reporting the use of school uniforms from 1999-2000 to 2005-2006 and an 8% increase in schools reporting that their school had a strict dress code (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008).
Purpose

The purpose of this research is to determine whether the use of uniforms is an effective strategy to improve behavior and academic performance by studying six public high schools in North Carolina. We will use qualitative as well as past and current empirical data to determine the effectiveness of a school uniform policy. Graduation cohort will incidentally be examined since student behavior and academic performance seem to be directly linked with the dropout rate. Students who feel more included and/or perform better academically are less likely to drop out.

Research Questions

There are two questions this study aims to address: Is the use of school uniforms an effective tool to improve student behavior in North Carolina public high schools? Will the use of school uniforms improve academic performance and increase the graduation cohort in North Carolina public high schools?

Research Hypothesis

The goal of this research is to determine the overall effectiveness of school uniforms in public high schools, as it relates to student behavior, academics and graduation rate. We have formed two directional hypotheses to address the research questions.

It is hypothesized that uniform policies in public high schools will effectively improve student behavior. It is also hypothesized that school uniform policies will improve academic performance and subsequently increase the graduation cohort.

Literature Review

From a historical context, we will gather examples from a variety of sources ranging from viewpoints that advocate the use of school uniforms and those that do not. Our final study
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will also include some empirical data gathered from an extensive longitudinal study. Over the years, many researchers have taken on the task of identifying the effectiveness of uniforms in public schools. While the issue has many proponents, the data from a decade long empirical research study by David Brunsma has essentially concluded that the use of uniforms in schools do not have any significance, in terms of behavior and academic performance (Brunsma 2006). However, there are those that would argue with Brunsma, even if only through anecdotal evidence (Anderson 2002). Parents, students and administrators have touted the positive effects of school uniforms, even amongst those who decry such a policy for its infringement on the rights of the individual (Anderson 2002). The intended and supposed positive effects of a school uniform policy have definitely reduced violence in some schools, in some areas (Jet, 1996). So, even amongst the rhetoric that the civil liberties of the students are being negatively affected, there are still many proponents that believe that the use of uniforms does, indeed, "make schools safer, improve attendance, and raise academic achievement" (Yeung, 2008). There still looms a larger question; however, where is the empirical data to back up the notion that uniforms in schools has this profound positive effect (White, 2000)? Brunsma and Rockquemore (1998) presented some of the most known quantitative data on the issue, based on their study using The National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS: 88). In 2006, Brunsma asserted that there was no real correlation between school safety and school uniforms (Boutelle, 2008). Others have suggested that if there were positive effects of uniforms in schools, that it would be hard to isolate the causes if there were other policies and procedures in effect at the same time (Draa, 2005). However, Boutelle (2008) maintains that administrators who are in the school buildings everyday seem to notice a difference. Those who seem to oppose school uniforms on
the basis on an infraction of civil liberties seems to be those who do not spend the time to conduct empirical testing to determine the true effectiveness of school uniforms (White 2000).

Methods

Selection of Subjects

For this study, we will interview administrators from six different North Carolina public high schools. We will also collect data from those schools in regards to discipline, academic performance and graduation rate of the students. The interview questions will help determine if the administrators feel that a uniform policy has been beneficial for their school and, if so, to what extent. We will use stratified random sampling in selecting the administrators for the interviews and surveys. To this end, we will stratify the high schools in North Carolina based on schools that have had a uniform policy in place for at least four years; this will allow us to gather data about graduation cohort. Two high schools will be chosen from three geographical areas in and around the Charlotte region, which include: rural, suburban and urban. This approach will allow us to effectively reduce sampling error in that we would be choosing schools and grade levels in North Carolina that correspond with the study of uniforms in schools. Data collection will extend through a three-week period.

Research Design

We will choose a variety of past and current studies that illustrate the over-arching successes as well as drawbacks of implementing a school uniform policy. Specifically, we will use schools in North Carolina that currently implement such a policy and employ the data from these schools to analyze the policy’s effectiveness within a specific region of the state. The study will be exploratory in nature to determine if a uniform policy would be beneficial to public high
schools in reducing behavioral problems and improving academic performance. The sample will come from six different public high schools from the Charlotte region of North Carolina.

*Instrumentation*

We will acquire quantitative and qualitative data specifically percentages of increase or decrease of certain behaviors in the school as well as academic performance, overall satisfaction of students, parents, administrators and teachers of the school uniform policy, the percent of increase of decrease in testing scores and the general feelings on the school uniforms. We will use this information from past studies to compare to our interview questions and empirical data gathered from the six respective schools in order to gauge the effectiveness of school uniforms and the overall climate at those schools. The quantitative data we will examine and gather will relate to discipline at the six high schools before and after a uniform policy was implemented. Data will also be examined and gathered with respect to academic performance on state tests and graduation cohort both before and after a uniform policy was implemented.

The interviews will involve questions that ask how the policy is working in their school and how things were before the policy was implemented. Interview questions will include, but are not limited to, How long have you had the dress code policy in place?, What percent have your discipline problems decreased or increased?, Have you noticed any kind of specific behaviors that have disappeared? If so, what? How has the academic performance been affected in your high school? How would you compare the percentage of those on grade level before uniforms to those on grade level after uniforms? The empirical data from the six schools will be from the year prior to implementing a uniform policy and the year of the first cohort graduation. This data will provide a basis for comparison in the areas of student behavior, academic
performance on state tests and subsequent graduation cohort between the two sets of data for each of the six schools.

_Procedures and Data Analysis_

The procedures will include creating interview questions for administrators of the six high schools chosen for the study to determine their opinions about the effectiveness of a school uniform policy with respect to the two main variables of this study, student behavior and academic performance. As mentioned before, we will also gather empirical data for those variables from the six high schools to determine what real effect the uniform policy has on the schools, beyond anecdotal evidence. We will put our data into a one-way ANOVA in order to determine the effects of the uniform policy as related to positive behavior. As mentioned above, some of the interview questions will consist of:

1) How long have you had the dress code policy in place?
2) What percent have your discipline problems decreased or increased?
3) Have you noticed any kind of specific behaviors that have disappeared? If so, what?
4) How has the academic performance been affected in your high school?
5) How would you compare the percentage of those on grade level before uniforms to those on grade level after uniforms?

The interview questions will be designed to gather adequate data as to the perceived effectiveness of uniforms in schools from the school administrators. Administrators will be interviewed to assess their opinion, in terms of the effectiveness school uniforms on behavior, academics as well as the overall effectiveness on the climate of the school, with respect to school safety and student inclusion.
This information, compared with similar qualitative and quantitative data gathered from past studies, will hopefully provide a framework to determine the overall effectiveness of uniforms in the six public high schools, in terms of improved student behavior and academic performance as well as an increase in the graduation cohort.

Results

From this study and the review from past studies, we anticipate finding that in a majority of the schools, a uniform policy will be effective in improving student behavior and academic performance, while incidentally increasing the graduation cohort.

In assessing the interview questions given to administrators, we anticipate finding a positive response. Administrators will also see the policy as a foundation responsible for the decrease discipline problems, improvement in academic performance and a subsequent increase in the graduation cohort. Based on interviews with administrators, students will have initially responded negatively to the adoption of a uniform policy. It will be perceived that many students do not want to give up their trendy styles and individuality for the bland look of a uniform. However, the students and parents who are at an economic disadvantage will be in favor of the uniforms because it will be harder to identify the economically advantaged or disadvantaged students from clothing alone. The students will likely not see a link between uniforms and the discipline policy.

Administrators will give mostly positive responses for uniform policy implementation for its ancillary advantages as well. They will note an improvement in their school’s overall climate, with respect to a heightened feeling of student safety and an increased feeling of belonging, which is likely to increase the graduation cohort. This will be attributed, in part, to the possibility that alleged and professed gang members will not be able to “represent” their gangs through their
attire and use that affiliation to intimidate other students. The ability to recognize intruders will also be noted as an improvement in school safety due to a uniform policy.

Five out of six administrators will likely note that with a uniform policy, there is less emphasis on the gap between socio-economic statuses among students, which has increased the feeling of belonging among students who are typically alienated.

These two incidental benefits of a uniform policy will likely be a large contribution to an increased graduation cohort. Based on the interviews from the six high schools, 10% of the schools noted increased performance in tested areas and 25% felt the behavior problems had decreased. Because this was only a few months after the implementation of school uniforms, we are likely to still see improvements from school to school based on academic performance and behaviors.

Discussion / Conclusion

As a result of our study, we will have concluded that a uniform policy does work a majority of the time in improving student behavior and academic performance in public high schools in the Charlotte region of North Carolina. The rural schools will have a slight improvement in all areas, suburban schools will show a moderate improvement in all areas and urban schools will show the greatest improvement in all areas.

One of the drawbacks would be that studying implementation of a uniform policy just on the high school level does not take into account that some of the students may have been previously exposed to a uniform policy in either elementary or middle school.

In comparing our study with previous studies, we will find that the empirical data we gather will reinforce the anecdotal evidence about the positive effects of a uniform policy. These results will contradict with the Brunsma and Rockquemore (1998) article, which concluded that
uniforms were not effective at all and may actually hurt. The primary difference between our study and the study from the Brunsma and Rockquemore study was that they looked at a large sample. The study by Draa (2005) seemed to suggest that when focusing on a smaller area, there are more clear results. We are focusing on samples in a specific region in North Carolina, on a school by school basis, which will be on a much smaller scale that Brunsma and will perhaps have clearer results and indications as to what aspects, if any, uniforms effectively improve in public schools.

Our study on uniform policies would add another dimension to the current literature out on uniforms because there is a supposed lack of empirical data about positive effects of uniforms. This study incorporates positive and negative data from administrators in both a quantitative and qualitative fashion, using stratified random sampling of two high schools from rural, suburban and urban areas in the Charlotte region of North Carolina. These schools will be those who have had a uniform policy in place for at least four years. This will allow us to determine the overall effects of uniforms in public high schools in North Carolina and hopefully lend credence to the larger argument against the lack of empirical data involving this issue.

Practical implications could be that schools should see a positive impact of implementing a uniform policy in relation to behavior and discipline issues. Administrators will state that this policy will also increase academic achievement due to less distraction within the classroom environment. Since our study focuses on a school-by-school basis, we are seeing more positive results than had we used a larger scale. Administrators at three schools will note that local businesses were willing to subsidize part or all of the cost of uniforms. This is another practical element of the study, in that the uniform policy will be cost effective for low to moderate income families (Boutelle, 2008).
References


