

[HOME](#) > [NEWS](#) > [BOSTON GLOBE](#) > [MAGAZINE](#)

PERSPECTIVE

The Boston Globe

Stay Out of Their Closets

Why politicians should scrub their vision for school uniforms.



Left to right, Renee Noreiga, 15, London Walker, 17, Erik Mendoza, 16, and Elisabeth Paige, 18, represent Brighton High School.

By Tom Keane | November 26, 2006

One can understand the impulse. The kids get out of line, and a frustrated adult lays down the law: "From now on you will always. . ." Of course, the decree is probably unenforceable and too extreme and doesn't do much to help them grow up, but for the moment, it feels good. That seems to be the misguided impulse driving the City Council's new effort to bring uniforms into Boston's public schools. These teenagers, you know. They show too much skin; their pants are so baggy; their waistlines creep ever lower. Combine these with teen violence, our hypersexualized society, and the general feeling that there is something uniquely wrong with this generation of children and – damn it – it's time to clamp down. It may be, as one of the councilors sponsoring the measure admits, "only a Band-Aid," but, hey, that's sometimes more than kids these days are wearing!

Lamentations about the state of children's dress – or undress – have probably been around since the first toga, reaching their apex during the 1960s and '70s, when hair and clothing became the overt symbols of rebellion. Back then, they were burning bras. Now they wear them, but the straps are showing. The issue

ARTICLE TOOLS

- [PRINTER FRIENDLY](#)
 - [E-MAIL TO A FRIEND](#)
 - [MAGAZINE RSS FEED](#)
 - [REPRINTS & LICENSING](#)
 - [SHARE ON FACEBOOK](#)
 - [SAVE THIS ARTICLE](#)
- powered by [Del.icio.us](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

BOSTON.COM'S MOST E-MAILED

SEARCH THE ARCHIVES

- Today (free)
- Past 30 days
- Yesterday (free)
- Last 12 months

[Advanced search / Historic Archives](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

pops up regularly because of the nature of adolescence. Having lived in the cocoon of their parents' protection for 10 to 15 years, teens

MORE:
[Sunday Globe Magazine](#)

want to break free. The sweet things who once so admired Mom and Dad suddenly become obnoxious, adopting their own styles of clothes, music, politics, and communication. They don't obey our commands, refuse to listen to our good advice, and engage in all manner of activities – some genuinely dangerous – that worry their elders sick. So why not try uniforms?

Ask those who are actually running schools, and they'll give you the equivalent of rolling one's eyes upward. Boston and other districts in the area already have rules that allow individual schools to establish dress codes or even require uniforms. Most have put common-sense requirements in place. "Transparent blouses and shirts are not permitted," reads one of the rules at Brockton High School. Belmont High School prohibits "clothing depicting references to alcohol, drugs, sex, tobacco products, violence, hate groups, [and] other harassing categories." And Brighton High forbids "T-shirts that are visually or verbally offensive." The general attitude of them all, as Boston Latin School puts it, is that "students should dress appropriately for the business of education." And they do. "In general, kids show wonderful judgment," says Jocelyn Meek, a spokeswoman at Brockton Public Schools. "We don't have a lot of problems." Peter Holland, superintendent of the Belmont Public Schools, says, "It's not an issue." School officials, quite frankly, worry far more about tight budgets and crumbling buildings. Of course, there are kids who cross the line – but when that happens, schools don't go running to politicians for a solution. "We believe we're able effectively to deal with those issues on a case-by-case basis," says Toby Romer, headmaster at Brighton High. That's a sentiment echoed by other educators. Most of the time, they don't elevate bad dress to the level of some epic clash between adults and teens. Rather, it's a disciplinary issue best managed in the same way teachers and administrators manage other behavioral problems. (Schools don't always get it right, however. Last month, for example, Boston Latin Academy went way overboard when it suspended students for wearing costumes on Halloween.) That's not to say that stricter dress codes or even uniforms are never warranted. The key task of every school administrator is to create a culture that encourages learning. If for whatever reason student dress is interfering with that task, then perhaps a new policy is appropriate. Still, that's an issue of pedagogy, not politics. Brighton's Romer certainly has the authority to require uniforms, but, he says, "I'm not pushing for it." He doesn't think it would be worth the effort. Rather than making his job easier, he fears uniforms would become a "distraction." Or, as Belmont's Holland notes, "Kids would see it as an overreaction – a punishment of all for the sins of a few." It's a punishment that is neither needed nor deserved.

Tom Keane, a Boston-based freelance writer, contributes regularly to the Globe Magazine. E-mail him at tomkeane@tomkeane.com. ■

MORE:

[Sunday Globe Magazine](#) | [Globe front page](#) | [Boston.com](#)

SIGN UP FOR: [Globe Headlines e-mail](#) | [Breaking News Alerts](#)

 [PRINTER FRIENDLY](#)

 [E-MAIL TO A FRIEND](#)

 [AVAILABLE RSS FEEDS](#)

 [MOST E-MAILED](#)

 [REPRINTS & LICENSING](#)

[feedback form](#) | [help](#) | [site index](#) | [globe archives](#) | [rss](#)

© 2006 The New York Times Company