

Uniforms the rule at Plainfield High

By **MARK SPIVEY**
STAFF WRITER

PLAINFIELD — The first half of the message on the Plainfield High School marquee on Park Avenue last week no doubt drew groans from passing students.

"School opens September 3rd at 7:50 a.m.," the sign reminded them.

The second half of the message, though, likely drew double takes from the select few who hadn't yet heard the news.

"We are proud," it read, "to be a uniform wearing school."

The facility of about 1,800 students is becoming one of the first public high schools in the state to implement a uniform policy, drawing alternating bursts of praise and criticism for a move district officials said they are committed to enforcing as a permanent shift.

"It's not an experiment. We don't believe in what we call pilot programs, and this is not a pilot," said second-year Plainfield Public Schools Superintendent Steve Gallon III.

"It's not an easy move in terms of what many



Rubye Hickerson, co-owner of the BUS Shop, displays one of the shirts.

INSIDE: Most public schools in N.J. don't require uniforms for students.

STORY, A5

students with many various opinions, going through a transition from adolescence to adulthood, are going to think," Gallon admitted. "... But it's being done in the best interests of our young people."

Strict enforcement

According to district officials, phone calls about

the new uniform policy went out to parents of every Plainfield High School student on July 18 and 19, with letters mailed to corresponding home addresses less than two weeks later.

The letters outline the uniform policy, which includes separate requirements for boys and girls. Those requirements cover shirts, pants, shorts and sweaters for both sexes, plus belts for boys and tights and skirts for girls. Throughout the school

See **Uniforms**, Page **A5**

REACTION: Mostly positive, administrators say

STUDENTS: Some praise move, others angered



STAFF PHOTOS: ED PAGLIARINI

Shirts emblazoned with the Plainfield High School cardinal logo, part of the school's new uniform, await sale at The BUS Shop on Leland Avenue in Plainfield.

Uniforms

FROM PAGE A1

year students will be required to wear either khaki or navy bottoms with red, white or blue tops emblazoned with a stylized logo depicting the school's mascot, a cardinal. According to the policy, seniors also will be permitted to wear black polo shirts, black hooded sweat shirts or white or navy sweaters.

Plainfield High School Principal Brian Bilal said that while the policy will be enforced strictly, compliance will come with its rewards. According to Bilal, the school plans to hold "dress-down days" throughout the school year, during which uniform requirements will be suspended.

"The more compliance we get, the more days we can do something like that," Bilal said.

Violating the uniform policy will result in varying degrees of penalties, according to Bilal, with every violation resulting in a parent being called and asked to bring a uniform to school. The first violation of a marking period will result in a warning, he said, the second will result in detention and the third will result in a parent meeting and another detention.

If a student has four or more violations in one marking period, he or she will be excluded from all after-school activities, including athletics, during the next marking period.

Bilal said implementation of the policy "trickled down" from the district level to the school. He added that reviewing research studies covering the concept of uniforms in public schools convinced him that the pros of the plan would far outweigh the cons.

"It lessens distractions. It has an effect on improving behavior. It aids in academic performance. . . . It helps with school violence, and it builds school pride," Bilal said. "But the one thing that I really like is that it levels the playing field, socioeconomically. There are kids out there

that are disadvantaged, and now they come to school looking like everyone else."

Bilal said a group of about a dozen students, representing sophomores, juniors and seniors, worked with school and district officials hammer out the uniform policy earlier this summer. About "90 percent" of a large group of parents who attended a July meeting with district officials supported the plan, he said.

Students speak out

Few people boast a better perspective on student and parent reaction to the new uniform policy than Ernestine Cash, co-owner of The BUS (Black University Supply) Shop on Leland Avenue.

The district letter sent to high school students' homes advises that "the only item of the uniform that must be purchased in a particular location is the logo, which can be found at The B.U.S. Shop." The establishment, founded in 1992 to sell apparel bearing the logos and names of historically black colleges and universities, since has grown into a popular embroidery and screening facility that does on-site clothing alterations.

Last week dozens of pre-screened and embroidered Plainfield High School polo shirts hung on racks and sat neatly folded on shop shelves, with dozens of blank shirts being brought in to be stamped with the school's logo. Cash said that sales have been "increasing quite a bit" since the school announced its new policy, with opinion on the matter mixed.

"The parents seem to be very pleased with the idea," Cash said. "Some of the students are OK with it, but others, the idea does not appeal to them as much. I think they'll get used to it, though."

Incoming freshman Korina Loayza, 14, who arrived at The BUS Shop Tuesday to pick up several uniform tops, didn't sound so sure.

"I was like, 'What? What is this! Oh my God, I can't believe it!'" Loayza said of her initial reaction to the news. "My mom said, 'Yes! Now I don't have to spend \$300 (on back-to-school

clothes)" She was jumping around."

"I don't like the colors," Loayza said when asked about the uniforms, adding that, among her friends, "everyone's disappointed."

Football players and seniors Osmond Muhammad, Luis Vazquez and James Williams said the new policy didn't bother them, and even noted that it might have a few key benefits.

"It helps you practice for job interviews," Muhammad said. Vazquez said he

thought the policy could help students academically, although he admitted that he'll miss wearing sweats, adding that "most (students) don't like them (the uniforms)."

Junior Tyrone Johnson, the football team's starting quarterback and a high-profile Division I basketball prospect, said he felt that upperclassmen looking to save up to buy a car might appreciate the policy.

"Basically," he said, "it saves us money."

Senior Alfonso Lyles, who plays tenor drum in the school band, said the policy has "good and bad parts," but added that he feels a particular benefit will be its ability to eliminate a certain type of distraction.

"Clothes that show a lot of body . . . that's kind of a problem in school," he said.

Junior Brittany Fuller, the vice president of the Class of 2011, agreed, saying "with the way our

generation dresses now, I don't think I can always focus in school." But Fuller added that school officials should be "prepared for rebellion" — particularly during the first few days of the school year.

"What if 300 kids come without uniforms? What are they going to do?" she asked.

Mark Spivey: 908-243-6607; mspivey@MyCentralJersey.com.