

More schools turn to uniforms to instill pride, discipline

ALEXANDRA PAIG/
FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

At the Bus Shop in Plainfield, Juan Alpapucha buys his son Geman, 16, uniforms for Plainfield High as his daughter Silvia, 13, gets a sweater for her school, the Central Jersey Arts Charter School.



BY TRACEE M. HERBAUGH
FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Could decreasing crime in schools and improving attendance be as simple as getting students to wear khaki slacks and polo shirts? Nearly two dozen New Jersey school districts already think so and this year, more districts are instituting and expanding dress code policies.

Advocates say school uniforms foster school pride, allow for easy identification of students, lessen peer pressure and promote a safe and positive learning environment.

"One of the things that a uniform does, it allows the principal to walk out

in the hallway (and) if they see anything other than a sea of blue, they notice somebody in the hallway who isn't supposed to be there," said Joe Longo, school board president for Belleville, which is extending a uniform policy to its middle and high schools this fall.

Elementary and middle school students in Newark have been wearing uniforms for a year, and the results pleased district administrators enough to expand the policy to high school students.

"It decreased peer pressure of wearing designer clothes, they instead wore the color scheme," said Angel Juarbe, ex-

ecutive assistant to the superintendent. "The staff even started wearing the uniforms. It promotes school pride."

The color scheme dress code, instituted by Linden, Belleville, Plainfield and Newark, requires students to wear khaki pants or skirts with tops that match school colors. In some cases a logo of the school mascot must be worn on the top as well.

Plainfield and Newark, districts that have long battled gang activity, low test scores and truancy, have latched onto the uniform idea, hoping to improve the academic and social climate in their

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public schools.

"We want to be clear that youngsters need to come to school dressed appropriately and ready to learn," Plainfield Superintendent Steve Gallon III said.

The uniform code in Asbury Park is stricter. Students must wear black or tan slacks or a skirt, with a light blue top tucked in. The policy outlines a litany of do's and don'ts for students: Pants cannot touch the ground and must be free of tears, logos, holes and insignia. Shorts and skirts may not be more than 2 inches above the knee. Hats, flip-flops, slippers, scarves and sweatbands more than 2 inches wide may not be worn.

None of the districts pointed to specific problems that pushed administrators to implement uniform policies. But all argued matching attire increases security and removes the distractions caused by individual outfits.

In 1996, President Bill Clinton brought the idea of school uniforms to the forefront when he suggested in his State of the Union address they be used to reform schools.

"If it means that teenagers will

stop killing each other over designer jackets, then our public schools should be able to require their students to wear uniforms," he said.

The popularity of uniforms surged in 1999 after the Columbine High School shootings in Colorado but waned a few years later. Catholic schools have long had a tradition of uniforms because they are thought to keep order in the school and teach students to dress appropriately.

But even as uniforms become more common, some opponents still aren't convinced.

"Dress codes and uniforms often deny students the right to express themselves," said Jeanne LoCicero, deputy legal director for the American Civil Liberties Union in New Jersey. "Our position is that the Constitution protects students' rights, including what they wear, not just what they say and what they write."

Mike Yaple, spokesman for the New Jersey School Boards Association, said about two dozen of the 611 school districts in New Jersey mandate uniforms.

"Some educators swear by the school uniform and say it fosters a more orderly environment and helps better identify who belongs to the school," Yaple said. "But there's been research that says it doesn't lead to better test scores



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Jade Evans, 16, looks through the skirt racks while waiting to complete her purchase at the Bus Shop in Plainfield.

and reduced violence."

Plainfield resident Deshawne Allen-Jordan said her three high school-age children were upset when they heard about the attire — slacks or khakis and a polo shirt with an emblazoned cardinal logo. She, however, was elated.

"The kids won't be focusing on clothing, they'll be focusing on their books," Allen-Jordan said.

Even though the uniforms at Plainfield High School are not required until fall 2010, the administration strongly encourages students to don the garb now.

Ariella Menjivar, a 17-year-old junior at Plainfield High, was on vacation when she heard about

the uniform policy.

"I don't want to wear them, but I will if I have to, I guess," she said.

Her friend Vicky Rodriguez, 17, also a junior, was succinct in her disapproval of uniforms.

"They are not nice," Rodriguez said. "Not cute."

New Jersey Local News Service reporter Erin Eileen O'Neill contributed to this report. Trocree M. Herbaugh is a reporter for the New Jersey Local News Service. She may be reached at therbaugh@njlns.com or 908-243-6214.