

Ironing out policies on school uniforms

By Carol Motsinger, USA TODAY

As the new school year approaches, more schools are requiring students to wear uniforms or otherwise restricting what they may wear — and parents are objecting.

Their complaint: The policies trample students' right of expression and parents' right to raise children without government interference, says Vickie Crager, founder of Asserting Parental Rights — it's Our Duty, a parents rights group that opposes school uniforms.

Parents Laura and Scott Bell filed suit over an Anderson, Ind., uniform plan that will begin when students return to school Aug. 20. A hearing was scheduled today in federal court in Indianapolis.

The Anderson policy requires black, navy or khaki pants or skirts and a solid-color shirt with a collar.

"As a parent, we felt our rights were being violated," says Laura Bell. They have five children, ages 5 to 17.

The Bells' suit makes two claims: that the uniform requirement violates their children's constitutional right of free expression and that it violates the guarantee of a free public education. The Bells would have to pay \$641 for five sets of pants and shirts required by the policy, Laura Bell says.

About one in four public elementary schools and one in eight public middle and high schools in the USA have policies dictating what a student wears to school, says David Brunnsma, a sociologist who wrote *Uniforms in Public Schools: A Decade of Research and Debate* in 2005.

Private schools first imported the British tradition of student uniforms to mark a student's social status, Brunnsma says. Urban public schools began to adopt uniforms in the late 1980s to reduce social pressure from fashion-savvy students.

The idea spread to suburban and rural schools when President Clinton said uniforms make schools more orderly. As the trend grew, so did the opposition, Brunnsma says.

Charles Rubright, lawyer for the Anderson school district, says the board

expects uniforms to improve academic performance by eliminating distracting clothing and creating an orderly atmosphere.

Cyndi Regis of Congress, Ariz., says her son, Story Stringfellow, 9, doesn't wear anything inappropriate to Congress Elementary School. He wants to wear his Phoenix Suns T-shirts and jeans, she says, but he'll be required to wear a polo shirt and khaki or navy shorts or pants starting today.

"We teach him to be himself and we encourage it," Regis says. "He's not out of line with what he wants to wear."

Toni Wayas, principal and superintendent of the Congress school and district, says parents suggested the policy and most families support it.

Most lawsuits against school uniforms fail, says David Hudson, a First Amendment scholar at the First Amendment Center in Nashville. Judges usually decide that uniform policies are meant to improve schools and not to suppress student speech, he says.

The Supreme Court has not ruled on school uniforms, Hudson says.

Other lawsuits are pending:

- Bayonne, N.J.** A group of parents have appealed a dismissal of their challenge to a uniform requirement of khaki bottoms and navy tops. Their lawyer plans to file a case brief Aug. 13. A judge ruled last year that the suit was not filed in time. School officials have said the uniforms foster school spirit, self-respect and self-discipline.

- Napa County, Calif.** On July 2, a judge temporarily banned the enforcement of a middle school dress code while a suit challenging its constitutionality heads to trial. Under the code, students may wear only solid-color clothing with no logos or stripes. The code was designed to eliminate gang insignia, says Mike Pearson, principal of Redwood Middle School.

Others who object to uniforms and strict dress codes make their case outside the courtroom. Nashville parents created Metro Parents Against Standard School Attire after the school board announced plans for uniforms this spring.

"We perceive it as an educational fad," says Ashley Crownover, the group's spokeswoman. She says research does not support claims that

uniforms increase safety or improve academic performance.

Some members of the group are considering suing or encouraging their children not to wear uniforms when school starts Aug. 13, Crownover says.

"We expect our school systems to do a lot, but this is taking it too far," she says. "That's my job — to help my children learn what is and isn't appropriate clothing."