

The Big Question: Should the Government impose a uniform policy on schools?

By Richard Garner, Education Editor

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Why are we asking this question today?

The Government has just issued new advice governing school uniform policies in the wake of research showing some families could not afford the cost and their children were playing truant as a result.

Does the advice insist all schools adopt a uniform?

No, it leaves the decision up to the governing body – although the thrust of the document argues in favour of introducing a uniform policy. One key factor is that it stops children from wealthier families showing off their designer clothes – thus embarrassing those whose parents cannot afford them. In addition, the guidance says it has a positive effect on the school's ethos. But this is not the major controversy it would have been a few years ago. Research shows 99 per cent of schools have now adopted school uniforms and 89 per cent of parents back the idea that schools should have a uniform policy.

So why the need for guidance?

Because it's not quite as simple as that. Research conducted by the national charity Citizens' Advice showed that school uniforms could cost parents as much as £500 a year. It criticised schools which did exclusive deals with one supplier – which often made the cost more expensive. One lone parent from Wigan said her daughter's secondary school uniform had cost her an entire week's wages. "It is compulsory to have everything with embroidered school logo on purchased at a specific shop," she said. Anti-poverty campaigners have also come across cases where parents couldn't send their children to their first-choice school as a result of its expensive uniform policy.

What does the advice say about this?

It warns schools and retailers they could face prosecution by the Office for Fair Trading if they sign an exclusive deal with just one retailer. Such a move could also be in breach of the Government's new code on school admissions – which insists policies should be fair and non-discriminatory. Insisting on the purchase of an expensive school uniform, it is argued, could enable a school to introduce selection by the back door by favouring the middle classes.

The Schools Minister, Jim Knight, said: "The cost of uniforms must never be a barrier for poorer families. There's an important balance to be struck between developing a smart, comfortable uniform and burdening parents with needless expense by insisting on bespoke designs, for instance. We will take action where schools have a uniform policy that is needlessly and prohibitively expensive while the OFT has already written to schools warning that exclusive contracts with suppliers may contravene the Competition Act."

Should schools adopt a one-size-fits-all approach?

Again, it is not as simple as that. In addition to considering the implications of fair trade legislation and the code on admissions, schools have to consider Human Rights legislation and bear in mind pupils' religious beliefs. The most controversial issue is the wearing of headscarves by Muslim pupils. A secondary issue has been the wearing of chastity rings by Christian pupils. Here the advice says: "A school should act reasonably in accommodating religious requirements. However, schools should note that the freedom to manifest a religion or belief does not mean an individual has the right to manifest their religion or belief at any time, in any place, or in any particular manner." On the question of the headscarf, it says: "Young women are appropriately dressed if they are wearing salwar kameez or jilbaab with headscarf without the need to wear niqaab [which hides the face] in school." On Christians, the guidance says: "For the majority of Christians there are no particular dress requirements. In some Christian sects, such as the Plymouth Brethren, women and girls are expected to wear headscarves and modest clothing."

What sanctions should be used against pupils who refuse to wear uniform?

Here the advice adopts a softly, softly approach, anxious to avoid repeats of earlier confrontations which have seen Muslim children excluded from school. Non-compliance with a school uniform policy should not warrant exclusion from school. In the first instance, the pupil should be sent home and told to change. However, if they refuse to do so or return dressed in the same attire, then exclusion could follow as they have now refused to comply with a legitimate instruction from the headteacher. The Department for Children, Schools and Families is insistent that heads should investigate the background to the non-compliance. "If a pupil is not wearing the correct uniform because their parents are in financial difficulties, a school should be sensitive to the needs of the pupil," it states.

What other issues should schools consider?

The advice says governing bodies should encourage their children to walk or cycle to school. However, for them to be able to do this in safety, there should be consideration given to the colour of the uniform. "School uniforms are often dark, making it difficult for children to be seen by drivers especially during the winter months," it says. "The governing body should consider the benefits of including light colours and reflective materials (and recommend the wearing of high visibility items) as part of the school uniform policy to ensure that children are able to walk and cycle safely throughout the year."

What has been the reaction to the guidance?

Largely positive. Steve Sinnott, general secretary of the National Union of Teachers, said; "This is a great move that goes some way to addressing the inequalities and social exclusion that creep into the education system for children whose parents cannot afford the right school uniforms. For many families living on low incomes the cost of sending a child to school can be the last straw." David Laws, Liberal Democrat spokesman on Children, Schools and Families, added: "All schools should allow parents to buy uniforms cheaply from a variety of shops rather than being forced to buy from one expensive supplier." But many of the groups campaigning against child poverty believe it should be mandatory for local authorities to introduce clothing allowances for families on low incomes. The Government, however, is content to leave this as discretionary. In addition, scratch the surface and talk to headteachers – particularly those serving schools with pupils from a wide range of ethnic and religious backgrounds – and they will tell you the whole issue is a minefield which could land them with court action if they are not careful.

Should schools adopt a one-size-fits-all uniform?

Yes...

- * It helps to instil a sense of pride in the school
- * Providing the deal is not done with an exclusive supplier, it is affordable and does not show up children from poorer homes
- * Schools cannot indulge in backdoor selection if there is one simple school uniform widely available from a number of stores

No...

- * It could offend children's religious susceptibilities if they are not allowed to vary it to take account of their faiths
- * The uniform may not be suitable for children who walk or cycle to school, and needs to be clearly identifiable in winter

* It can lead to discipline problems if children refuse to wear it