

## **Most students flout the uniform rules at Surrey schools**

Fewer than half of kids comply at two public schools, despite majority approval by parents

**Randy Shore**

Vancouver Sun

*Saturday, January 06, 2007*

Fewer than half the students at two Surrey elementary schools that voted to require uniforms are complying with the policy.

When a uniform policy was approved two years ago by parents at Creekside elementary, about 70 per cent of the student body showed up for class in September 2005 in the approved pants, shirt and sweater.

But when school let out in December, only about 40 per cent of students were wearing uniforms, according to Surinder Bisla, one of the parents who campaigned to adopt uniforms at Creekside. The number is in steady decline, she admits.

"It started when just a handful of parents sent their children to school without uniforms," said Bisla, Creekside's parent advisory council president. "When the other children saw this, the numbers started to drop."

Two other schools, Sinclair and Reid, have also voted to adopt uniforms, and at Reid only 20 per cent of students are wearing them.

But that number is rising, said principal Hart Schnee. A new shipment of uniforms arrived at the school in December, said Schnee, adding that there has been some pent-up demand. "We've had some difficulties with supply of pants."

"Also, there is a significant gap between parents' wishes and their ability to convince their children," Schnee said. "Age seems to make no difference."

"But it is definitely growing. We are still optimistic about it."

No one was available at Sinclair on Friday to talk about how many students there were wearing uniforms.

Bisla said the local uniform requirements conflict with provincial government policy that requires mainstream public schools to accept any student within its catchment area.

However, at the same time there is no provincial guideline that restricts mainstream schools from introducing a uniform policy, as long as they don't refuse any students living in their catchment area, regardless of whether those students wish to wear uniforms

or not.

Thus "the success of the uniform requirement depends on the parents' goodwill," Bisla said.

Creekside parent Konch Bakshi initially campaigned in favour of uniforms, to get the ripped jeans and tank tops out of the school. She changed her tune when parents selected traditional-looking "preppy" garments.

Schools supply the articles of clothing that make up a uniform, but parents have to pay for them. Outfitting a child with the basic sweater and two shirts and two pairs of pants costs roughly \$200.

Because Creekside is an inner-city school, the cost was a major factor in her opposition to the project, Bakshi said, who has two children in Creekside.

"It's just not affordable for some parents, and having children wear white shirts when they are playing outside, going to gym class, painting, it's just not practical," she said. "It's too formal. We just need something simple."

Bakshi was outraged when staff heaped praise on the children who wore their uniforms, even rewarding them with sweets.

Bisla said that children who wore uniforms were treated to Slurpees in the first year that uniforms were introduced, but only once.

Surrey trustee Heather Stilwell doesn't believe the cost of the uniforms is the issue, but "rather a few parents who didn't want uniforms have dug in their heels."

"If it were a question of cost, there are ways that schools can help families that cannot afford to buy uniforms," Stilwell said.

She says a few holdouts are the program's undoing. When some children show up in street clothes the effect is viral, Stilwell says, and other students start to balk.

"We have to, in a democracy, grit our teeth and bear with the wishes of a lot less than 80 per cent," said Stilwell, suggesting that parents opposed to uniforms could move their children to another school. "It's not a good example for the children to model that kind of defiance."

Stilwell is annoyed with the parents who voted for the program but failed to follow through, by insisting that their children wear the uniforms.

"We try to honour the parents' voice in schools, but when people ignore an 80-per-cent vote, it makes a mockery of that relationship," Stilwell said.

To adopt a uniform policy, 80 per cent of parents must participate in the referendum (one vote per family) and achieve an 80-per-cent majority. Creekside voted 87 per cent in favour. Reid voted 92 per cent in favour and 88 per cent of households were represented in the process, Schnee says.

Surrey school board policy passed in 2005 advises that school uniforms foster a sense of belonging, a more respectful learning environment, reduce pressure on children to dress in "brand-name clothing" and eliminate inappropriate clothing at school.

rshore@png.canwest.com

© The Vancouver Sun 2007