

## **DRESS FOR SUCCESS:**

### **Implementing School Uniforms and Making Them Free for Children in Need**

Mandating school uniforms has been a debate for decades. The reality is that this simple change in dress code can have vast long-term benefits for students, families, school faculty and the community. Schools should be required to provide free uniforms and shoes to children living in poverty so that all students have equal opportunities and access to education. The uniformity that this creates positively impacts attendance and behaviors, financial barriers, safety and inclusion.

### **ACADEMIC SUCCESS**

School uniforms help students focus on their education, improve attendance and enforce discipline. When students are dressed the same, they are less concerned about their looks and concentrate more on schoolwork. Researchers at the University of Houston found that the average absence rate for girls in middle and high school decreased by 7% and behavioral problems became less severe after the introduction of uniforms. When parents and students spend less time choosing and arguing over appropriate outfits for school in the morning, they can focus more on punctuality. This also saves time in class because teachers do not have to enforce dress codes and send kids home to change. John Adams Middle School in Albuquerque, New Mexico found a 74% decrease in discipline referrals during the first semester of a mandatory uniform program. Teachers experienced less waiting time for classes to start, decreased noise levels in the classroom and increased listening and discipline from students who were not distracted by each other's outfits.

### **REDUCED FINANCIAL STRESS**

School uniforms and good-quality shoes are a significant expense for low-income families in the United States. According to the Shoes That Fit charity, which collects and distributes children's shoes for low-income communities, 1 in 7 U.S. children live in poverty, and worn-out shoes are one of the most visible signs of this. These children experience lifelong challenges and inhibitions to learn that free uniforms and shoes could help mitigate. The American Psychological Association outlines these challenges as behavior problems, low self-esteem, decreased educational readiness, increased risk of school dropout and chronic stress.

When children attend school in low-quality and uncomfortable clothing, their ability to learn, concentrate and remember is negatively impacted. Low-income families also must worry about other school-related costs and personal finances. The pressure to purchase uniforms, or an entire wardrobe otherwise, is another burden that puts anxiety on both the guardian and the child. There are many ways to make free uniforms and shoes for families in poverty a reality. Shoes That Fit collects donations and gift planning, hosts fundraisers and has corporate partnerships to help children go to school with joy and dignity so they can thrive, learn and build friendships.

## **COMMUNITY AND EQUALITY**

School uniforms also break economic and social barriers between children and foster a sense of pride and community. Parenting blogger Aarohi Achwal explains that the uniformity in clothing makes it difficult to decipher a child's economic status, allowing students to interact without bothering one another about social status. Bullying may also be reduced when there is less pressure to wear expensive or trendy clothing. Achwal also shares how uniforms encourage students to feel proud and respectful of their institution because they are constantly reminded of their shared community with their peers. This camaraderie could lead to increased participation in extracurricular and academic activities as well.

One year after establishing a uniform policy, Sparks Middle School in Nevada published police data showing a 63% decrease in police reports including gang activity, student fights, property damage and battery. The uniforms prevent students from hiding weapons under baggy clothes and wearing gang affiliations as well as help faculty decipher who belongs on campus and who is an outsider. The safety aspect of uniforms is part of creating a community that can rely on one another for normal educational experiences.

### **FINAL THOUGHTS**

Requiring school uniforms and shoes for all children, including free access for low-income families, is taking the right step toward inclusive and meaningful education. Creating an equal, safe and less distracting environment pushes students to focus on learning both inside and outside the classroom. When uniformity reduces instigators of bullying, harmful expression, lack of disrespect for others and feelings of otherness, the classroom can nurture a bright future for all children.