

# A Lesson on Dress Codes



Shannon Vail is high school teacher of 5 years and serves as an advocate to the school's administration on behalf of the student government. Her goal is to open dialogue between students and faculty about policy issues, such as dress codes.

Teenage girls are becoming conscious of a subconscious message school administrations have been sending for years. The dangers of sexualizing girls at younger and younger ages are limitless and the consequences exclusively damaging.

Beyond reasonable dress restrictions for all students, underneath the explanations for dress codes that disproportionately affect girls, school administrations engrain sexist ideals and outdated gender roles on America's youth. In school, boys and girls learn that the female body is dangerous and that harassment is warranted. Then they carry these habits into adulthood.

Some of the most valuable social lessons we learn about in school. We learn common courtesy and manners and to respect your elders. In kindergarten we learn to say please and thank you, we learn not to talk while others are talking. These basic lessons stay with us for the rest of our lives. Saying please and thank you is almost instinctive. Unfortunately, the ways girls are treated in school will stay with them and become as instinctive as saying thanks.

The underlying messages of dress codes are so subconscious they often go unnoticed. You don't remember how it started like you don't remember learning the pledge of allegiance, but I promise you would recognize both without thinking about it. Students pass through an educational system that habitually polices the female body; this is where it starts.

What is the real message when a girl is dismissed from class because her shoulders were exposed? Why does her education suffer for the benefit of her male peers, painted as so primal that they cannot be expected to focus when girls are in their view? When will schools begin teaching all students to be responsible for their own actions and their own education, rather than shifting all blame to girls?

Too often I pass girls in the hallway after they have been sent to the office for wearing shorts. In that same hallway, [a boy wearing a shirt](#) that says 'good girls swallow' passes on his way to his uninterrupted education.

Let's think about that girl, who is wearing shorts to school. She has been removed from class because her dress has been deemed 'too distracting' for education to continue. So now that she is gone, the rest of the class can regain their focus and learn. On her walk to the office, where she will be given a baggy pair of sweatpants which no doubtedly mark her with a scarlet A, she begins to feel pressure to maintain a certain appearance. Her education isn't as important as that appearance, or else she would still be in class right now.

Let's think about that boy, who is wearing a demeaning and offensive shirt to school. He thinks saying 'good girls swallow' is his prerogative. Why wouldn't he? His education is never disrupted because of his clothes, he doesn't receive judgmental glares from his peers, he doesn't get shamed in front of his classes for having certain body parts. His educational experience is protected from the inevitably distracting female body. His gaze determines the people allowed to be in class with him. It isn't his fault that he can't pay attention in class, it is because the girl sitting in front of him is revealing her shoulders.

In a culture where [sexual assault](#) occurs every 107 seconds and 4/5 of those attacks are committed by someone the victim knows, it is not hard to speculate where the trend begins. Shifting responsibility from one person, the assailant or 'distracted' boy, to another person, the victim or the girl in shorts, leads to victim blaming.

Shifting blame from the immature high school boy who makes inappropriate jokes to the female target of his jokes is the dangerous precedent to the horrifically common blaming of victims of rape and sexual assault. Why would male perpetrators feel responsible for their actions when he they grew up regulating the female bodies around them? Being the reason behind the restrictions of what girls can and cannot wear gives these young men false entitlement that has tragically avoidable effects. If only we taught personal responsibility.

Countless times I have stayed after school to help students with what they missed in class when they were sent to the office. I have proctored detention where more than half of the students were girls who got dress coded earlier that week. Rather than practicing with their soccer teammates or the brass section of the band, they are paying for not looking the way the administration wants them to look.

I promise that most students don't notice what each other are wearing. Until a teacher [calls attention to it](#). We are the first ones who police the bodies of our female students. We start the trend and we shame the female body for existing in the same room as the male gaze.

We are blame girls for their sexualization when we are the first ones doing it. I try and put myself in the shoes of my female students and think about how I would feel if a teacher stopped class to tell me my outfit is too sexually distracting that I need to leave class and change. Maybe I was trying to [dress provocatively](#) but what if I was just wearing an outfit that made me feel confident about my body? Now I feel like my self-confidence is wrong, my decisions are wrong, my body is wrong. I need to cover myself better next time, I need to hide my body from any and all attention.

I have overheard students telling their friends about the explanations they got as to why their dress was too inappropriate to remain in class. I hear variations of the same thing but it never fails to baffle me. It's always "[too distracting](#)" for the boys.

Our students look to us as examples. What example are you setting when you verbally and symbolically tell a student that her education is being put on pause so her male peers can focus in class? What example are you setting when you call out a student in front of her entire class because of her dress? Is making her change her clothes not shameful enough? Must she be evaluated by you, her peers, and the principle? Do you not see how you are now the one sexualizing this student?

As an advocate for the student government, I ask these questions of my fellow faculty and administrators.

My wish is that we lived in a world where my involvement wouldn't be necessary, where the students were fairly heard and able to enact change. But we aren't there yet.

We aren't in a world where men and women, boys and girls, are seen as equals yet. We aren't in an educational system that emphasizes personal responsibility over blame shifting yet. We aren't in a culture where the abuser is blamed rather than the victim. We aren't in those places yet, but I do believe we are on the way.