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Damaging Dress Codes in American Public High Schools

Dress codes may originate in a variety of places depending on individual districts and counties. School boards most commonly are responsible for the creation and reform of dress codes. State governments may also influence the institution of dress codes. This is the case in both New York and North Carolina, among others. New York State required public schools to include dress codes in a larger code of conduct in 2001 (Zernike). North Carolina similarly ruled that public schools must enforce a dress code in the same bill that allowed schools to post the Ten Commandments (Zernike). Neither the existence nor the importance of dress codes is heavily debated, however, the justifications of the rules and the enforcement of the policy create a variety of issues for students and parents. Dress codes mandated by American public high schools are incredibly damaging to both female and male students. Rather than promote a healthy learning environment, dress codes reinforce sexist ideals; girls are sexualized by sex-crazed boys.

Rules and regulations have their place in education. Without them, there would be no order or organization, and therefore no learning environment. Systems need rules to function, especially one as large as public education. Dress codes are included in this necessity. There is a level of respect that accompanies a place of education, and students should be expected to

dress appropriately. Also, there should be consequences for students who violate policy.

However, many issues arise from this necessity. There is difficulty in differentiating between what is appropriate and inappropriate. Oftentimes, rather than working to make reasonable, fair distinctions, school boards blindly follow sexist norms. Appropriateness is subjective and the people who determine the definitions often do more shaming than protecting. Dress codes are often disproportionately directed toward female students, which is an example of how often society polices the bodies of girls. Adult teachers and staff are forced to inspect the clothing of their underage students, which can walk a fine line between enforcing policy and inappropriate relations. Also, the consequences of dress code violations do not fit the severity of the crime.

Explanations for the items included in a district's dress code vary. Far too many times, the explanation involves a variation of traditional sexist norms. Teacher Jessica Lahey wrote in an article for *The Atlantic* that she is concerned about her female student's skirt length because she is worried that it "will so addle the boys' brains that they will be unable to concentrate in science class." By requiring girls to cover most of their bodies, dress codes tell girls that their bodies are distracting, that as people they are distracting because of their anatomy and that the academic performance of their male peers depends on their clothing. Female sexuality is told to be hidden while boys are given a free pass for any inappropriate expression of their sexuality. Girls are held accountable and punished for the misbehavior of boys rather than boys receiving punishment for their immature actions. Society as a whole tends to blame the female rather than the male; "We tell women to cover themselves from the male gaze, but we neglect to tell the boys to look at something else" (Dockterman). Women are blamed and then shamed for their

appearance and any sexual attraction they receive while men are excused for their behavior because it is believed to be in their nature.

On the surface, dress codes protect the learning environment. Dress code policies often include phrases clearly stating this; Wyomissing Area High School's dress code policy states the dress code is meant to, "provide a positive learning environment for all students that is free from disruption and distractions to the learning process during the school day" (wyoarea.org). It is hard to argue that students would learn as efficiently if they were allowed to wear items such as large hats that block the view of the chalkboard or intimidating gang-rated apparel. And for a time, dress codes addressed only these issues; "While dress codes in the past have revolved around taste (long hair) or safety (hats or bandannas in gang colors) the latest ones try to rein in what schools see as rampant sexualization of teenagers" (Zernike). However, Soraya Chemaly asks, "Now who is doing the sexualizing?" When schools tell students to cover their bodies because they are sexually distracting, they are making students sexual objects. They may be highlighting something that has never crossed the minds of some students. Telling teenage students to not be sexual, to hide their sexuality is the easiest way to make sure that they will be sexual and will express their sexuality. By making high school an unsafe place to do this through shaming, teenagers have difficulty in developing healthy sexual habits and attitudes.

Rather than teaching students to be respectful, the enforcement of dress codes often excuses inappropriate behavior. Instead of teaching young men to be respectful of women regardless of their attire, sexual aggression is accepted and even condoned. This creates a series of problems for both men. Boys are taught that they are supposed to be sexual and if they are

not, something is wrong. Boys are taught that their sexuality is gained through the objectification of women. Boys are taught that they should be incapable of controlling their sexual desires in the presence of women. All of these consequences reinforce false, damaging sexist roles for men:

It implies strongly that girls have responsibility for boys' responses and that boys cannot control themselves. Boys should be insulted. People need to get a super-firm grip on the fact that girls are not sexual thermostats for their male peers. They need to manage themselves and are fully capable of doing so (Chemaly).

High school is a time of learning, both educationally and socially. In their teenage years, people form habits and attitudes that they maintain for the rest of their lives. If inappropriate sexual behavior is accepted in high school, the behavior will be maintained. If the blame for this behavior is deflected off the boys, it will continue to be transferred throughout their lives.

The transfer of blame from men to women happens frequently in society. What is happening in public high schools with dress codes focused on girls' clothing is similar to the trend of the public blaming a rape victim for her behavior or attire, rather than admonishing the aggressor. Lisa Corrigan of the University of Arkansas writes, "the continued assumption that the bodies of girls and women must be surveilled and patrolled to somehow contain the raging sexual desire of boys and men is slut shaming at its worst. Only boys and men are responsible for their aggressive or sexual behavior" (Parker). Although the comparison is extreme, the same reasons are given to explain both situations. Society often blames the clothing of a rape victim, just as high school teachers, administrators and school boards blame the clothing of female

students for the distraction of immature teenage boys. The effects of heavily regulated girls' clothing have a far-reaching impact.

Students and parents are aware of the consequences of policing girls' bodies. They are beginning to fight back against administrations and the sexist ideals that their dress codes and explanations promote. One school in Illinois recently banned female students from wearing both leggings and yoga pants. Once again, the justification for this ban was to prevent the distraction of boys. Several female students protested this new rule and held signs that read, "Are my pants lowering your test scores?" (Dockterman). Parents Juliet and Kevin Bond wrote to the school principal, saying, "This policy clearly shifts the blame for boy's behavior or lack of academic concentration, directly onto the girls" (Huffington Post). Girls should not be held accountable for the actions of anyone but themselves and people of authority. They also wrote, "It's this message across genders that girls have to cover up, and that teachers are saying to girls, the reason for this rule is so that the boys aren't distracted" (Dockterman). The Bonds voice a concern that is common among parents and students. Although the problem originates in the policy, the enforcement causes a more serious issue.

Although teachers are rarely the creators of dress codes, they are the people responsible for their enforcement. This puts teachers in an unfair position where their focus must initially be on their student's appearance. While some teachers quietly enforce the policies, dress codes allow teachers to publically shame their students who are in violation. Soraya Chemaly believes, that this type of enforcement is far more dangerous; "This is of much more concern and

frequently sets harmful precedents.” When a teacher reprimands a student for their clothing in front of a class, a door is opened for the class to make inappropriate, immature and rude remarks toward the student who is being scolded. Students look to their teachers to set an example of how to act. If a teacher, who is seen as a role model and a person of power, acts in a way that shames a student for their appearance, it makes it okay for students to do the same. These actions of teachers reflect a common action in greater society. The responsibility is thrown onto women to present themselves in a modest, conforming, covered way or accept the consequences of their deviation. The constant criticism and shaming of women’s bodies is starting younger and younger which creates more significant negative effects.

Students are shamed, not protected, when they are scolded in front of the class for any violation. Millburn High School, in New York, stated that their reformed dress code, “aims to raise standards and self-respect” (Zernike). Equating dress code violations to lack of self-respect is extremely problematic. Self-respect is reflected through many things, but it is not determined by appearance. The misconception that girls who dress nonconservatively have low self-respect reflects the opinions of the beholder. Gender roles dictate that respectful women are modest and conservative so women who dress otherwise must have little respect for themselves. It is impossible to determine by appearance only whether someone has high self-respect or low. People have their own ideas of beauty, promiscuity and respect, which may or may not be expressed through their clothing. It is hubristic to assume that all girls who have different definitions of these qualities than their observer have low self-respect. Women should have the

freedom to determine in what manner they feel most attractive. They should not be told how to be attractive by anyone but themselves.

Being told how to be attractive, by covering themselves, is not the place of the school. It is easy for girls to make the connection of being covered is the only way they are attractive, especially when their bodies are being policed daily. When a girl has to choose an appropriate outfit before school, she must think about how she will be judged by her peers and teachers. Girls must evaluate themselves as sexual objects when choosing what to wear to school. High school can be challenging enough for girls who are beginning to define their sexuality. Adding an unnecessary layer of scrutiny makes this process more difficult. It is comparable to sexual judgment and harassment experienced by women on the street. When girls walk into school, they are immediately judged for their bodies, like the common harassment women on the street receive from strangers. They are scrutinized from head to toe before a judgment is passed. Both situations are public critical reviews of their bodies which have the potential to effect their self-image and sexuality (Chemaly). On the streets, there is no explanation for the stranger's behavior, but in schools, parents demand reasons behind the rules that affect the lives of their children.

School boards are often the governing force that justifies dress codes to the public. Although, the school's administration may also explain changes made to the student body. This was the case at Lakeland Senior High School in Lakeland, Florida. New principal, Arthur Martinez, explained the changes of Lakeland's dress code using the phrases, "Modest is hottest,"

and “Boys will be boys” (Trenkmann). Both phrases were meant to encourage female students to dress accordingly to the changes in the dress code. Like many students who found Martinez’s comments offensive, junior Marion Mayer, took her reaction to her blog where she explained the many things wrong with her principal’s word choice.

There are many things wrong with administrators explaining the dress code in this way. The first phrase, “modest is hottest,” is hypocritical by the definitions of modest and hottest. Modest, meaning “placing a moderate estimate on one’s abilities or worth; neither bold nor self-assertive” cannot be hottest, meaning “sexually excited or receptive” (“modest,” “hot,” Merriam Webster). If girls are told to be modest in terms of their clothing, meaning conservative and covered, they cannot be sexually receptive. Likewise, they cannot be sexually receptive if they are told to be non self-assertive. Principal Martinez is telling his female students how to be attractive which is extremely inappropriate coming from both an older male and a school administrator. He is wrongly defining “hotness” when he has no place doing so. His words were both offensive and inappropriate. He is telling girls that they are most attractive when they dress according to standards that disregard their personal expression and tell them to cover their bodies.

He is also blatantly excusing inappropriate behavior by male students because they are boys. As Mayer explained in her blog, “Being a boy refers to your gender. That’s all.” Children are not born knowing that how they are supposed to act, people learn to be sexual, like all other behaviors, through social conditioning. Excusing behavior based on false ideas of naturality due

to gender only reinforces the behavior and maintains sexist roles. Mayer blogged her concerns with her principal's comments:

When the people who do sexually harass other people happen to be male and you use the excuse "boys will be boys," you are not only excusing their behavior, you are condoning it. It's this "boys will be boys" mentality, culture and attitude that condone sexual assault. Whenever the excuse "boys will be boys" is used, it's just an exercise of male privilege. You are telling them that it's okay for them to be sexually violent. Sex needs to stop being about "no - it's bad dirty gross shameful," and start being about, "yes - let's have consenting sex because I want to." It needs to be about consent. *That's* what you should be teaching. Not, "well, you know how they are... boys will be boys!" (Mayer).

Martinez called her into his office to discuss her blog post. During this brief meeting, almost every one of Mayer's arguments was disregarded or attributed to misunderstanding. Martinez retorted, "That's your opinion" to one of Mayer's points (Mayer). He frequently mentioned that boys and girls are different in his defense of his remarks. But to him, boys are girls are different because boys "misbehave more" and girls are more "reserved." Again, these differences are learned behaviors, not natural gender differences. Martinez refused to apologize for his offensive words, instead offering, "I'm sorry you feel that way" (Mayer). The meeting ended and Mayer was sent back to class. The school board later issued a statement supporting the principal rather than the legitimate concerns of a student; "The district supports principals

enforcing the dress code according to school board policy” (Parker). The unwillingness of Principal Martinez to understand his errors and the support that the Polk County School District gave to sexist comments show common beliefs held by school administrators across the country.

Another high school principal in Minnesota emailed parents to explain the ban of leggings, encouraging parents not to let their daughters wear leggings because their “backsides” are too defined, and therefore “highly distracting” to other students (Dockterman). When highly impressionable teenage girls are repeatedly told that their bodies are distracting, they begin to believe and internalize it. If the system of education, in which they are legally required to participate, condones an atmosphere where following restrictive gender norms is expected, girls will internalize these norms. Through this internalization, sexist norms will remain in the culture. Administrators are simply pandering to the current culture that transfers blame from men to women rather than challenging the norms to better society (Docketman). The freedom of self-expression is already limited for students in high school and the internalization of gender norms eradicates the possibility for it in the future.

These roles are maintained throughout the lives of the students, and reappear in society outside of education. Dress codes perpetuate the idea that girls are sexual objects and boys are entirely sexually driven. Rather than accepting and condoning sexist gender roles, high schools should use the opportunity to educate students with new way of thinking. Instead of continuing to transfer blame, students should be taught to take responsibility for their own actions. The explanations for specific dress code regulations should never include the performance or mentality of anyone but the individual. Instead of turning students, especially female students,

into sexual objects by defining attractiveness, dress codes should return to their origins and focus on safety. Students who violate the dress code should be punished, but not in the way that commonly occurs today. Teachers who shame their students are abusing their privileges as teachers and encouraging sexist treatment of both girls and boys. Administrators should use their authority to better the lives of their students and create an environment where gender norms are not forced upon them and where students are free to express themselves.

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