

Administrator Considerations – Student Dress Code Updates 2020

The purpose of this document is to assist administrators in responding to questions and concerns voiced by staff, parents, or students regarding the Student Dress Code updates.

Administrators who require further support in navigating these conversations are encouraged to connect with the Safe Schools team and/or the Equity team.

General Considerations

Policy & Procedure

- All DDSB policies are subject to revision on a regular basis. The *Policy Student Dress Code* was last updated in 2014.

Social Context

- Student Dress Code issues have been a “hot topic” in the media over the last few years, with most high-profile incidents involving discriminatory, disproportionate and harmful impacts on girls and racialized students.
- In the context of movements such as #metoo and #blm, we have become more aware of the ways systemic sexism and racism can be reflected in seemingly innocuous policies and practices.
- The Student Dress Code, therefore, needs to:
 - o consider and honour the diverse identities and needs of the school community
 - o recognize and address the harmful discriminatory and disproportionate impacts of dress codes on certain students because of their identity(ies)
 - o reflect the principles of human rights, equity, diversity, wellness, safety and inclusion, including legal obligations under the Human Rights Code.

Paradigm Shift in Education

- This updated policy reflects a wider paradigm shift in education that recognizes the connection between well-being and achievement, as well as the essential role of relationships, human rights and equity in well-being. In response to these shifts, we must reflect upon the degree to which our policies uphold these priorities and prevent harm.
- In the current educational context of Big Ideas/Learning Goals/Success Criteria, CRRP, Global Competencies, and Inquiry Learning, it is imperative to ensure that students understand and buy into the “why” of our pedagogical choices. We are accountable for creating learning opportunities that are meaningful to our students and reflective of their identities and needs as 21st-century learners.
 - o Bias-Aware Progressive Discipline, including the enforcement of this revised Student Dress Code, is designed in part to apply this commitment to discipline. Students must feel that they are being treated fairly in the discipline process in order for meaningful learning to take place in disciplinary interactions.

- By removing rules that can easily be characterized as unnecessary or discriminatory, staff will have one less impediment to building positive classroom environments based on healthy relationships. When it comes to discipline, this will allow them to focus their interventions on behaviours that actually have a negative impact on the school climate (e.g., racist/sexist/homophobic slurs; bullying; conflict).
- It is exceedingly important to be able to defend our arguments with concrete evidence and sound logic – and also to hold one another accountable for weak or harmful arguments. We must know who our students are and what strengths and experiences they bring. We must find ways to detect structures or patterns of behaviour that may negatively impact student achievement and well-being in order to begin to identify barriers. (Ontario's Education Equity Action – 2017)
 - o The existing Student Dress Code could sometimes be difficult to apply, uphold or defend without relying on subjective or moralistic arguments (e.g., that's inappropriate; it's polite to take off your hat indoors) or calls to authority (e.g., because it's the rule; because I said so). It also did not fully consider (or meet our obligations to prevent) potential discriminatory, disproportionate and harmful impacts on certain groups.
 - o When it came to objective arguments such as "it helps us identify intruders and also to identify people on the cameras," it was difficult to defend the trade-off: Kids could easily see how the utility of the hat rule for administrators was being weighed more heavily than the impact on the rule for students. This sometimes led to pushback from students, which could sometimes escalate to outright opposition to authority.

Ministry Pillars: Equity and Well-Being

- Dress code violations represent a significant proportion of office referrals, taking up significant time and energy from staff. A majority of these referrals have been girls, racialized students, and students who are otherwise marginalized in school. Among girls, historical dress code guidelines disproportionately impact girls who are more developed, curvier, and taller.
- Dress code enforcement can significantly impact student *and* staff well-being. For example,
 - o A struggling student sleeps in, and throws on a hat to avoid being late. As he rushes in right before the bell, the VP stops him and takes his hat. Now he is late for class and he feels self-conscious about his hair. This negative interaction sets the tone for his whole day.
 - o A student gets angry at her teacher for asking her to put on a sweater over her top, and the situation quickly escalates. The student is now suspended, and the teacher is upset. Her lesson was also derailed by this situation, so she will need to start again tomorrow.
 - o A teacher politely asks a student to take off his durag. He begins to explain why he is wearing it, but she is in a hurry and cuts him off. He is angry, but doesn't say anything. This becomes a distraction for him as he tries to write his math test after recess.
 - o A student is asked to put a sweater over her tank top in June. She is sweating and has trouble concentrating in class.
 - o A student is confronted about her "inappropriate" outfit in the hallway. Other students snicker upon hearing this. She already feels self-conscious about her growing body, and now she feels even more embarrassed.

Anticipated Questions/Concerns

If someone raises a question or concern, you may wish to (non-judgmentally, non-confrontationally and from a place of curiosity) inquire further before responding. For example,

- What is your primary concern re: xxx?
- What do you think will happen as a result of this change?
- How do you think this (old) rule contributes to a positive school climate?

Professional Environment

Going to school is a student's "job" - They should be dressed accordingly.

- This is a false equivalence, as jobs are chosen and school is compulsory.
- Schools are professional environments for staff, not students.
- Dress codes do not really exist in post-secondary settings, which are much closer to professional environments than elementary/secondary school.

Aren't we supposed to be preparing students for the workforce?

- This assumption originated with the development of the western industrial model of education in the late 19th century. In the context of industrialization and growing urbanization, the public(ly-funded*) education system was originally designed to produce workers for a growing industrial workforce with "factory-like" efficiency. **Note that high school and post-secondary institutions – the path to professional employment - were not initially publicly funded or subsidized at all.*
- Today, the answer is "Yes and also..." - Preparing students for the demands of an ever-evolving job market is an important component of education, but so is well-being, social-emotional learning, relationship-building, and the cultivation a myriad of transferable skills. Modern schools should provide students with tools to flourish in *all* aspects of life.
- However, even a singular focus on preparing students to enter the modern workforce requires a significant shift in practice from previous generations:
 - o Just as well-being sets the conditions for students to reach their potential in school, so does it set the conditions for people to reach their potential in life (whatever that looks like).
 - o Relationships are an important component of one's overall well-being.
 - o Emotional intelligence and relationship-building skills have been shown to be more highly correlated with success than knowledge and job-specific skills – especially when it comes to leadership.
 - o As outsourcing and automation increasingly fill jobs that do not require creative or critical thought, global competencies are becoming more and more important.
 - Problem-solving skills, communication skills, and the ability to think independently have always been important in the trades as well.
 - o Modern workplaces are becoming more collaborative and more diverse, as the value of collective efforts across various dimensions of difference have been shown to bring great value to institutions and corporations alike. Workplaces also have a strong focus on (and legal requirements for) maintaining environments free from discrimination.
 - o Many of the most innovative companies, such as Google and Microsoft, have developed corporate cultures that prioritize well-being, employee voice, inclusion, meaningful collaboration, creativity, and work-life balance *because that's what generates the best results.*

Safety and Security

The hat/hood rule helps us to identify intruders, and it makes it easier to identify faces on the security cameras.

- This basically admits that the purpose of the rule is to make the adults' (specifically, administrators') jobs easier.
- Rules against hats/hoods were in place long before the arrival of security cameras.
- The notion that vandals will follow the hat rule while committing mischief because "it's the rules" is predicated on faulty logic.
- It's important to consider the trade-off – Does the benefit of having this rule as a security tool outweigh the negative impact it has on school climates and student well-being? Our research suggests "no".

- Note that durags do not obscure the face, so the “security” argument is faulty when it comes to this type of headgear.
- While a hood that **completely** obscures the face (i.e., similarly to a mask) would violate the dress code, most hoods would not. Note that the DDSB has a legal duty to accommodate face/head coverings that are required for Human Rights Code related reasons (e.g., creed/religion).

What about classes that require special attire and equipment, like Science and Construction Technology?

- As per the updated policy, students shall wear program-specific attire and personal protective equipment that is required for their safety, e.g., closed-toed shoes, safety goggles. Note: This is subject to Human Rights Code related needs that must be accommodated short of undue hardship (which includes considering health and safety risks that cannot be reduced or mitigated).

Age-Appropriate Language Concerns

How can we avoid the use of sensitive terms such as nipples, groin and buttocks?

- Whenever possible, it is best to not only use these terms, but to normalize them. This is important for the development of body-positivity, but also as a [protective strategy](#) - Children who do not know/use the proper terms for their body parts will not be as capable of articulating instances in which their bodily autonomy has been violated.
- This approach is upheld by the [Ontario Curriculum – Health and Physical Education, Grades 1-8](#), beginning in Grade 1:
 - o [Strand D1.3](#): Identify body parts, including genitalia (e.g., penis, testicles, vagina, vulva), using correct terminology and body-positive language.

Modesty/“Respect for self and others”

What kind of message are we sending to young girls if we allow them to show so much skin at school?

- The message we’re sending is “Your body is not inherently sexual, and your value is not tied to your physical appearance or clothing choices.”
- The association between “showing too much skin” and immorality or promiscuity is a harmful message that should **not** be part of our discussions with young women about their clothing.
 - o This message does not have to be explicit in order for it to be received that way – When women are told to cover up, the implication is that their bodies are shameful and that their outfit is “slutty”.
 - o This association is often internalized by students, which can impact self-esteem and lead them to shame *one another* for their clothing choices.
- Creed (religious, spiritual) belief systems that connect to modest clothing are to be respected in schools, but dress-related decisions that reflect such beliefs must be left to families.
- Clothing choices should **not** be framed as disrespectful of others, unless...
 - o They include hateful or otherwise problematic symbols/images/language that are discriminatory (e.g., racist, homophobic, etc.) or that promote bullying, violence, substance use, etc., or
 - o The outfit could be characterized as cultural appropriation (*for considerations re: Halloween costumes, see the final section of this document).

High Expectations

We should maintain high expectations for all our students. This dress code is the opposite of high expectations.

- According to the literature re: Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy (CRRP), having high expectations for students relates to the *perceptions we hold of students' abilities and potential*. The research is clear – When we look at our students through an asset lens, they have a much better chance of internalizing that perspective. This has been shown to contribute meaningfully to student achievement.
- Given the Ministry's focus on Equity and Well-Being in recent years, it should go without saying that "high expectations" should also relate to how students treat one another, and how they contribute to a positive school climate. Rules against racial, homophobic and other discriminatory slurs and bullying are clearly related to these expectations.
- "High expectations" that are rooted in the expectations of adults (e.g., "appropriate" appearance, performance in school, behaviour) without regard for the needs and abilities of individual students will set some students up to fail. Quite often, these are students who are already marginalized in some way(s).
- Some families cannot afford to pay for extensive wardrobes for their children, so sometimes, all a student might have is what they have been handed down. Furthermore, standards of dress are different in different communities. Imposing "high expectations" in this manner can therefore have a classist implication as well.

Distraction

Showing too much skin at school is a distraction for others.

- This is a dangerous argument, as it places the responsibility for preventing sexual harassment (and by extension, sexual assault) on the shoulders of women.
- The unintended consequences of this argument include body shaming, slut shaming, and victim blaming (e.g., if someone experiences sexual harassment or unwanted touching while wearing something "distracting").
- If a student's body seems to genuinely be distracting another student, the conversation should be with the distracted student (e.g., staring is rude; you're making her feel uncomfortable).
- As hormones rage, teens experience LOTS of distractions, and learning to manage them is not the responsibility of peers.

Staff Discomfort

"Immodestly-dressed" teens can make some staff feel uncomfortable.

- While this discomfort can be a real problem for some individuals, it is not the responsibility of students (or anyone) to change their personal style to accommodate this discomfort. It is the professional responsibility of the individual to interrogate and regulate their own responses to the way students are dressed.
 - This is very much like the "distraction" argument. See above for additional response ideas.
- When dress code violations do occur (e.g., a student in a swimsuit), it would be ideal for the intervening staff person to be of the same gender as the student.
 - If staff are unsure whether or not an outfit is a violation, they should be encouraged to speak to an administrator.
- Discomfort based on the implications and impacts of a symbol or message on clothing (e.g., MAGA hat, Confederate flag) is certainly valid, and such concerns should be brought to administration.
 - These clothing choices warrant a conversation, and possibly a wider learning opportunity for all students.

- o School communities should make collective decisions on what constitutes this type of infraction (and what doesn't), and this list should be revisited yearly as new symbols and messages become relevant in public discourse **See the end of this document for more information.*

Status Quo

This is the way it has always been.

- This is just not a valid argument – As society changes, the rules should change with it. Laws also evolve along with societal shifts (e.g., human rights, marriage equality; cannabis legalization), as do norms such as acceptable speech, gender roles, values, etc.

It's polite to take your hat off indoors.

- This social norm comes directly from the British imperial tradition, but it is not nearly as prevalent today as it once was. It is specifically British, too – French-Canadian communities and schools, for example, tend not to observe a “hat rule.”
- Cultural traditions and religious requirements that relate to headgear or head coverings vary significantly, which is why this policy places the responsibility for guiding headgear or head covering choices with families.

Rules and Authority

Rules are important in a safe, well-ordered learning environment, just as they are in the real world. If you don't like a speed limit, you can't just complain to the officer who pulls you over. This sends the message that rules don't matter.

- Well-chosen and consistently enforced rules *do* keep everyone safer and help to keep the school running smoothly. However, this mainly applies to rules that are objectively legitimate, e.g.,
 - o Fire alarm procedures
 - o Rules relating to allergies
 - o Safety considerations in shops and labs
 - o Rules against fighting
 - o Rules relating to hateful speech (e.g., racist, homophobic slurs)
- While it is true that young people need structure and limits, rules that are either perceived as arbitrary or that have discriminatory impacts are counter-productive to these goals. Such rules can cause harm, affect well-being, diminish trust in authority and weaken the perceived validity of other rules.
- Rules and laws are not the same thing, and this equivalence can be challenged by pointing out the objectively valid reason for speed limits – They are meant to keep drivers and pedestrians safer on the road. The argument that strict dress codes do the same is much more subjective.
- Citizens have various channels through which they can voice their opposition to laws. They can write to their MP or MPP, organize a protest, distribute a petition, write an editorial, and vote for representatives that share their views. This has not generally been the case with our Student Dress Code until now.
- Rules that are perceived as arbitrary will not be followed or enforced wholeheartedly. As we all know, there is a certain proportion of students who will simply accept that “rules are rules,” but there are others who must understand and accept a rule in order to be (intrinsically) motivated to follow it.

Dress Code rules help to maintain the authority of the adults in the building, which helps to keep the school running smoothly. For students, they're about having high expectations.

- Are we comfortable sending the message that unquestioning obedience to authority is a virtue? In the context of our current political climate and the prevalence of social media, critical thinking (even with regard to the actions of societal leaders) has never been more necessary.
- Styles of leadership are changing, as are the power structures in many industries. Top-down, hierarchical power structures led by (mostly) unquestioned leaders are giving way to more collaborative decision-making models. As research in the areas of emotional intelligence and the value of diversity in leadership has grown, our image of what leadership looks like is changing. In this context, what makes a leader isn't simply a title – leadership is something that is earned, and relationship-building is the primary means through which this is achieved.
- “Leadership by consent” (collaboration) simply yields better results. As we know, some students (and adults!) won't do something “just because you told me to.” Those who will may not do it as wholeheartedly if they don't believe in it. If we earn people's respect and explain the (justified) reasons for our choices, they will be much more likely to follow us.

My classroom, my rules. I don't allow hats in my classroom.

- The implementation of any new policy can be a challenge, and it is important for administrators to be sensitive to the concerns of teachers as they navigate what may be a difficult transition for some.
- The new Student Dress Code requires a Whole School Approach to be successful. That means that all staff must adopt and consistently enforce it in all classrooms, with the exception of specialized classes in which some dress code guidelines would present a safety issue (e.g., Construction Technology) and may be subject to Human Rights Code related accommodation needs.

Slippery Slope

If we allow kids to wear whatever they want, what's next? Allowing them to do whatever they want? It will be chaos.

- This statement suggests that the speaker doesn't fully recognize the negative impact of some aspects of the old Student Dress Code, so you may want to begin by asking what they are specifically concerned about. Build your response from there by focusing on...
 - o The connection between well-being and achievement, as well as the connection between human rights, equity and well-being
 - o The potential harm caused by dress code enforcement (specific examples)
 - o The negative impact of dress code enforcement *on staff*
- Removing harmful, discriminatory, or simply unnecessary rules is not about “letting kids do whatever they want.” It's about removing barriers to success in school and fostering safer, more inclusive, and more welcoming and respectful environments for all students. It's also about meeting our legal obligations to identify, address and prevent discrimination.
 - o Explain how dress codes can create barriers to success if needed.
- This same argument was used when Walkmans came into vogue in the 80s, and then again when Ipods and smartphones came out in the 2000s.
- Re: chaos, the evidence we have from the TDSB and from individual schools who have already begun to liberalize their Student Dress Codes is that these changes make everyone's jobs easier. After an initial period of excitement, it becomes business as usual – except with far fewer unnecessary conflicts.

If we don't have much of a dress code, kids will show up at work in a few years expecting to wear whatever they want.

- This situation is **very** unlikely to occur, because this is not how learning works. Human beings are capable of adapting to different contexts – especially when the consequences of non-compliance are as dire as getting fired. This is not the same as getting suspended from school.

- This statement creates a false equivalence between school and work, and also suggests that students will not mature by the time they enter the adult workforce. It may be helpful to remind the speaker how different the teen brain is from the adult brain.
- Their clothing choices at work will be a reflection of them and the work culture they are entering, and not a reflection of the DDSB student dress code.
- Who we are as relational educators is a much stronger predictor of how our students will be in their work environment/ their future/ their engagement in school than our implementation of the dress code policy.

Concern for Modestly-Dressed Students

What about our students who dress modestly for religious reasons? Shouldn't they be protected from seeing half-naked peers?

- It is not appropriate for publicly-funded, secular institutions to impose moral standards re: dress on the members of those institutions.
- Families for whom modest dress is important enter public spaces and consume modern media, just as everyone else does. They also have conversations with their children about how to navigate situations in which they encounter "immodestly-dressed" people.

Concern for "Immodestly-Dressed" Students

When some girls show more skin, it's an expression of their insecurity and desperation for positive attention. I'm worried that these new guidelines will lead to more pressure on girls to dress sexier in order to "fit in."

- It is not appropriate for publicly-funded, secular institutions to impose moral standards re: dress on the members of those institutions. This responsibility lies with families.
- While this concern is valid for *some* students, maintaining stricter dress codes is not the answer. All this would do is move the problem outside the school walls, beyond the responsibility of staff. Young women who may feel this pressure will simply make such clothing choices outside of school. Instead, it is important to seek out the root of the problem (e.g., self-esteem issues), and find ways to address *that*.
 - How? Empower young people and build their self-esteem through classroom activities, assignments and co-curricular programs. Take the time to invest in relationship-building practices both *with* and *among* students. Engage students in meaningful discussions around gender norms and expectations.
- Do not assume that this is the case for every student whom you think is "immodestly dressed" - it is very common for young people to explore their style as part of their general exploration of self in adolescence.

Foreseeing Consequences

I can see how a conflict with a VP about dress code could impact a student negatively, but if they didn't want that problem, they shouldn't have broken the rule in the first place. Kids need to understand that actions have consequences.

- Children and teens simply do not have the same capacity to foresee consequences as they will in adulthood. The teen brain is particularly wired for impulsivity, risk-taking, greater difficulty with emotional regulation, pleasure-seeking, and difficulty with forethought.
- Many of our students are navigating a lot in their worlds. For some, it may include having a job (maybe because they have to and not because they want to), conflicts at home and in other close relationships,

housing and food security concerns, and many other stressors. Keeping the dress code top of mind may not be their priority; and in reality, we should not expect it to be. Students do well if they can, if something is off, this should not lead to a conflict but rather an *invitation for a conversation* to get to know your student better and understand what is going on for them.

- Breaking rules is rarely as simple as “just breaking the rules,” therefore consequences to actions needs to be considered through a holistic lens that includes mitigating factors and sees students as more than “rule breakers” with consequences to follow.

Cultural Issues

Durags shouldn't be allowed at school because they make some staff feel uncomfortable.

- Durags are quite simply a hair preservation device – They protect the hair after brushing or styling (e.g., cornrows), especially while sleeping. Discomfort upon seeing someone in a durag is based on racist biases, assumptions and stereotypes, and it is the professional responsibility of the individual to interrogate, challenge and manage that discomfort.
- Whether or not durags should be worn outside the home is an individual or family choice and people who are not members of that community have no business in that debate.

What if...

What if a student wears _____ (creative interpretation of the dress code or purposeful attempt to challenge authority, e.g., mesh top with a bra underneath; male student with only his nipples covered).

- Challenging authority is a universal feature of adolescence – especially when it comes to restrictions that are seen as extreme or arbitrary. A certain proportion of students may look for ways to actively defy authority figures, which underscores the importance of relationship-building (as “trolling” a teacher you like is not much fun). However, with these new guidelines, such instances will be exceedingly rare.
- The examples above are indeed infractions, specifically:
 - o Wearing underwear as outerwear – Full view of the bra means that you're essentially wearing it as outerwear.
 - o Failure to wear a **top** and a bottom – Covering only the nipples (e.g., with tape) does not qualify as a “top”.

What if a student wears a racist or otherwise problematic costume for Halloween? (e.g., blackface, Pocahontas, geisha)

- Cultural appropriation is a valid concern, and one that should ideally be approached proactively prior to Halloween. The Indigenous Education Department has resources to support such conversations. There is also a multitude of resources on cultural appropriation available online.
- Responsively, this situation requires quick intervention and a meaningful conversation. It is important to use this conversation as a learning opportunity, rather than simply imposing a punishment. It could be that the student a) didn't realize that their costume was problematic or the impact that it could have, b) understood the implications of their costume, but chose to wear it in order to “be a troll,” or c) understood the implications of their costume, but didn't think it was a big deal. These require very different interventions - potentially including educational activities for entire classes, or even the whole school.
 - o Refer to the Bias-Aware Progressive Discipline document and contact the Safe Schools Department and/or the Equity and Inclusive Education Department for assistance if needed. If the costume specifically reflected Indigenous identity, you may wish to consult the Indigenous Education Department.

What if a student wears a Confederate flag and denies that it has anything to do with racism?

- Racist/sexist/homophobic/transphobic, or otherwise problematic symbols and messages on clothing can be tricky to address. It is important to engage students wearing such symbols and messages in meaningful conversation regarding the implications and potential impacts of what they are wearing.
- Any decisions made regarding such items should be supported with school-wide messaging about the implications of each, and *why* the school community has decided they should not be worn. Where gaps in understanding are identified, the Safe Schools Department, the Equity and Inclusive Education Department, and the Indigenous Education Department can assist with the development of learning activities and resources for staff.
- Best practice would be to proactively facilitate an open dialogue with all school community stakeholder groups, and to make collective decisions about what is acceptable and what is not. School communities are encouraged to make these decisions collaboratively with a focus on maintaining safe, respectful school environments. For example, should the following items be allowed or not?
 - MAGA hat (Make America Great Again)
 - Indigenous mascots (e.g, Redskins, Black Hawks, Indians, Seminoles)
 - Confederate flag
- o This list should be revisited during the student dress code policy review each year, as new symbols and messages become relevant in public discourse.
- o An additional consideration is whether or not the chosen symbols are relevant enough for your school community to include them in your policy (e.g., if no one is wearing MAGA hats, then it may not be useful to include them in the policy).

Considerations when working with your School Community Council (SCC)

The DDSB is committed to ensuring that school-level student dress codes:

- consider and address the disproportionate and negative impacts that dress code policies may have on specific groups of students based their identities
- are progressive and honour the diverse needs and identities and safety of all students and staff
- consider and address any safety issues related to the dress code
- consider the role/responsibilities of the SCC as outlined in section 3.0 of the procedure
- follow the guidelines as outlined in section 4. 0 of the procedure
- follow the procedures as outlined in section 5.0 of the procedure

Please refer to specific details in the Student Dress Code [Policy](#) and [Procedure](#)

Please contact our Safe Schools team kenneth.macNaughton@ddsb.ca or our Equity team merrill.mathews@ddsb.ca if you have additional questions.

May 2020