

More public schools try out student uniforms



Suzanne Kreiter/Globe staff

School uniforms have been the rule for four years at the Huntington School in Brockton, where officials say they have been well received. Above from left, fifth-graders Ricardo Rodrigues, Brian Brandao, Marcelino Veiga (seated), and Giovanni Matos (at rear).

By [Emily Sweeney](#) Globe Staff February 20, 2014

At the Huntington School in Brockton, students arrive to class each morning dressed smartly in navy blue, khaki, and white. The uniforms make for a familiar scene, now for the fourth year.

Thirty miles south, Wareham school officials are considering introducing uniforms next year, joining the Huntington and a smattering of others around the state that require students to dress the same when they show up to learn. No decision has been made, said Schools Superintendent Kimberly Shaver-Hood of Wareham, but officials are in serious discussions.

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“Would this be a viable option for our school district?” said Shaver-Hood. “We’re looking at what our options are.”

Uniforms, which have long been a fact of life for students at private and parochial schools, are gradually making their way into more public schools across the country. Between the 1999–2000 and 2009–2010 school years, the percentage of public schools that require students to wear uniforms increased from 12 to 19, according to the US Department of Education.

Advocates of uniforms say they boost school pride, relieve peer pressure, and help students stay focused on learning. Critics say there is no conclusive evidence of the benefits of uniforms, and they needlessly infringe on the students’ rights to express themselves and learn in a diverse environment that is reflective of the real world.

In Massachusetts, public school students wear uniforms in cities such as Springfield, [Holyoke](#), Lawrence, Revere, Worcester, and Fall River. Uniforms are also required in some charter schools, such as Foxborough Regional Charter School and the Advanced Math & Science Academy Charter School in Marlborough.

The state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education does not track how many public schools require students to wear uniforms. “We don’t keep data on this,” said department spokesman JC Considine. “Individual districts determine their policies on uniforms.”

Some districts, such as Springfield, require all students, from elementary grades through high school, to wear them. Others leave it up to the individual schools to decide.

The Huntington School, a K-5 elementary school on Warren Avenue in Brockton, is the only school in the city’s public school system that requires uniforms. Students follow a straightforward dress code: Pants, skirts, and jumpers must be khaki or navy blue; shirts must have a collar and be either navy blue or white. They can be any brand, and purchased at any department store, as long as they adhere to those guidelines. Many of the boys and girls wear navy polos and khakis to school. Some girls wear navy blue or tan jumpers with white blouses.

Students also have the option of buying school logos that they can add to their uniform. The logos have been a hit with the youngsters, said June Saba, principal of the school, which enrolls 500 students. It has been nearly four years since uniforms were introduced here.

“Overall, I’d say it’s been a tremendous success,” said Saba. Now “I can’t imagine not having a uniform [policy] in place in school.”

There are no hard data to show that students are doing better in uniform than they were before, but Saba says that, anecdotally, the overall effect has been “overwhelmingly positive.” She says she has been approached by other principals interested in bringing uniforms to their schools.

“Our students are very well dressed. They look great,” said Saba. “We get a lot of positive feedback from the community. Some parents want it to go to the whole district.”

There are teachers who say the uniform program has improved school culture, and parents are supportive because it saves them time and money, she said. “There’s no worry about what their kids are going to wear in the morning,” she said.

Saba says if a student shows up in street clothes that do not meet Huntington’s dress code, there are spare uniforms in the main office they can borrow. But so far, the students have been following the rules, she said.

Parental involvement has been key, she said. Before introducing the uniform policy in 2010, Huntington school officials conducted surveys, discussed the issue with parents, and held fashion shows to get the students and families more involved in the selection process, according to Saba.

In Revere, uniforms have been so successful that they have spread to other schools. Revere’s school superintendent, Paul Dakin, said the uniform policies in his district have been “driven by each school” and all six elementary and three middle schools in the city have them.

“I don’t hear any complaints about school uniforms,” said Dakin. “Parents are telling us it’s saving them a lot of money.”

In Malden, students at the Linden STEAM Academy began wearing uniforms for the first time this year. The school, which enrolls 900 students in grades K through 8, is the only public school in Malden that has uniforms, according to principal Rich Bransfield.

“We had a lot of parental input,” said Bransfield. “There were people who did not agree [at first]. School uniforms in public schools . . . they didn’t think that was the way to go. There were a lot of questions.”

Students at the Linden STEAM Academy wear polo shirts that are navy blue, pale yellow, or white, along with khakis or navy blue pants. There is also a T-shirt option.

“Six months into it, I think we have overwhelming support,” said Bransfield.

“It’s a work in progress,” he said. “The kids have been fantastic. Everyone’s been real cooperative. What we’re finding is that the kids are OK with the uniforms.”

Bransfield likes the concept of school uniforms because “it lets kids know that when you’re in school, it’s time for business; it’s not a fashion show,” said Bransfield, who has worked in the Malden public school system for 31 years.

There’s also less of a chance of a bully making fun of someone by saying, “You’re wearing the same shirt all week,” he said. Because everyone is wearing the same thing.

“It makes school more businesslike,” said Bransfield. “I think it also helps with school spirit, by showing we’re all in this together. . . . There’s camaraderie. That’s why athletic teams wear the same shirt.”

But although there might be advantages to school uniforms, it is not a policy that should be taken lightly. The American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts does not hold an official position on the issue but encourages families to ask questions about the claimed benefits.

“We’d encourage those opposed to or not sure about the policy to ask questions about the claims that supporters make about the beneficial effects of school uniforms,” said Christopher Ott, spokesman for the ACLU of Massachusetts. “It’s especially important to weigh those claimed benefits against the benefits from other options, like reducing class sizes or making other changes. Requiring uniforms can also raise questions about how the policies get enforced and what the punishments for breaking the rules might be.”

For some, it is a philosophical question. For Shaver-Hood, it is about being practical. The Wareham superintendent says she wants to provide parents with an easy, affordable way to outfit their children that will also “level the playing field” for students when they’re at school.”

“Our goal is to make it very cost-effective,” she said. “Our goal would be to have little stores where people can trade in uniforms. We all know kids grow extremely fast.”

Shaver-Hood said she has heard a lot of positive feedback so far. But according to [published reports](#), some students have not been as receptive to the idea; one high school student said a mandatory school uniform policy would be “terrible” and only cause more problems.

Shaver-Hood acknowledges that “being a kid is very difficult, and everyone wants to fit in.” But she says she hopes uniforms would help reduce bullying and the peer pressure to wear the latest top-of-the-line brand-name clothing. She says she is not looking to hinder students’ individuality; she simply wants to make life easier for both the students and their parents and guardians.

“We’re going to look at what options exist and put together some sample uniforms,” she said. As far as colors and specific styles go, “that’s still up in the air.”

Dress codes by the numbers

Percentage of public schools in the United States that required students to wear uniforms:

11.8

1999–2000

13.8

2003–2004

13.8

2005-2006

17.5

2007-2008

18.9

2009–2010

In 2009-2010 school year:

10 percent of high schools in the United States required uniforms

19 percent of middle schools

22 percent of elementary schools

In 2009-2010 school year,

higher percentages of city schools reported requiring students to wear uniforms:

35 percent of city schools reported requiring students to wear uniforms

19 percent of suburban schools

10 percent of schools in towns

9 percent of rural schools

SOURCE: US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics

Around the state

A sampling of Massachusetts public schools that require uniforms

Holyoke: Four schools

Revere: Elementary and middle schools

Springfield: All schools

Fall River: Elementary and middle schools

Lawrence: All schools

Worcester: One middle school and seven elementary schools have adopted voluntary uniform policies

Brockton: One school

Malden: One school

Marlborough: One charter school

Foxborough: One charter school

Examples of school uniforms

Huntington School (Brockton)

Uniforms can be purchased at any store.

BOTTOMS: Khaki or navy blue pants, skirts, and jumpers

TOPS: Shirts must have a collar and be navy blue or white.

Foxborough Regional Charter School

School colors are navy blue, tan, and white. Uniforms are supplied by School Pride Uniforms Inc. on Route 18 in Weymouth.

BOYS: solid navy blue or khaki/tan dress pants or shorts; solid navy blue, white, or tan school logo polo shirt or oxford; solid navy blue, white, or tan school logo sweater or sweatshirt (T-shirts and turtlenecks may be worn underneath, but they must be solid navy blue, tan, or white).

GIRLS: navy blue or tan dress pants, skirt, shorts, or school logo jumper (no higher than 2 inches from the knee); solid navy blue, white, or tan school logo polo shirt, oxford, or collared blouse; solid navy blue, white, or tan school logo sweater or sweatshirt (T-shirts and turtlenecks may be worn underneath, but they must be solid navy blue, tan, or white).

Linden STEAM Academy (Malden)

The uniform can be purchased at Walmart, Sears, Burlington Coat Factory, Lands' End, and Sparks Department Store in Malden.

BOTTOMS: khaki or navy blue; long pants, knee-length shorts, skirts, jumpers, or skorts (shorts that resemble a skirt); skirts and skorts must be worn with white or navy tights, leggings, or knee socks; sweatpants (solid navy or STEAM Academy style).

TOPS: Navy blue or yellow; long- or short-sleeved polo shirt (with collar; no logo); T-shirt (navy or yellow with logo); sweatshirts (solid navy or STEAM Academy style).

Advanced Math & Science Academy Charter School (Marlborough)

Uniforms supplied by Donnelly's School Apparel and Lands' End

BOYS: AMSA logo polo shirts (white, light blue, pink, gray, and yellow); AMSA logo white oxford shirt; navy blazer and tie are optional; khaki or navy blue pants or shorts (shorts must be no more than 3 inches above the knee; no cargo shorts/pants); AMSA logo cardigan, crewneck sweater, fleece jacket or fleece vest (navy or burgundy); solid-colored shoes.

GIRLS: AMSA logo polo shirts (white, baby blue, pink, gray, and yellow); AMSA logo white blouse; navy blazer and tie are optional; khaki or navy blue pants, shorts, skorts, or skirts (skirts and shorts must be no more than 3 inches above the knee; no cargo shorts/pants); AMSA logo cardigan, crew neck sweater, fleece jacket or fleece vest (navy or burgundy); solid-colored shoes.

SOURCES: Linden STEAM Academy; Huntington School; Advanced Math & Science Academy Charter School website; Foxborough Regional Charter School website

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