

School uniforms

School uniforms: some people love them; some people hate them.

Their desirability has been discussed at length, with cost, practicality and their ability to influence [academic performance](#) traditionally at the centre of the [debate](#).

While these issues still feature in contemporary discussions, evolving concerns about student health, safety and wellbeing, social inclusion and [student behaviour](#) have refocused the school uniform debate.

Children and young people have the right to express themselves freely, provided they do not harm or offend anyone else in doing so.

Article 13, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*

Getting the balance right

South Australian students spend almost 200 days at school every year.

Wearing the same uniform week after week, for such a large part of every year, can become extremely tedious. It can also cause quite a lot of misery, particularly if students feel as though they are being forced to wear something ugly, unflattering, impractical, uncomfortable or unjust.



Although children and young people are entitled to be [listened to](#) and taken seriously, their opinions must be balanced with competing perspectives: [parents' opinions](#), broader community expectations, legal and policy obligations placed on schools and their need to develop a [marketable ethos](#).

Reaching consensus is no easy task!

CASE STUDY

Abolishing gendered uniforms

Student concerns about their uniforms' practicality and equality prompted a New Zealand school to [abolish](#) its gendered uniform rules and allow all students to wear any item on the [approved uniform](#) list, including shorts, long shorts, pants, culottes or kilts, regardless of their gender.

Promoting health, safety and wellbeing

In South Australia, school uniforms are designed to promote student [health and safety](#) – with more casual uniforms recently introduced into the state system.

PROS

Encourage [participation](#) in school activities.

Promote student [wellbeing](#) by reducing [socioeconomic disparities](#) and the resultant bullying, [harassment](#) and [pressures](#) based on what students wear or look like.



CONS

Restrict students' [physical activity](#) – one quarter of Australian children are [overweight or obese](#).

Trigger [body image](#) concerns if they do not suit [diverse](#) body shapes and sizes – a big [concern](#) for young Australians.

Are school uniforms inclusive or divisive?

School uniforms can **alienate** some students.

But a comprehensive review of the Department for Education and Child Development's school **dress code policy** has contributed to a more 'inclusive environment', by allowing students to wear certain **religious or cultural adornments** and by allowing transgender students to choose the uniform of the **gender they identify with**.

Foster a sense of shared identity where students feel they belong to **something bigger** than themselves (like wearing sporting club colours when **barracking** for teams).

Special additions to the uniform, like Year 7 or Year 12 leaving jumpers, can create further unity amongst select groups of students.



Create extreme anxiety for students forced to balance the **competing expectations** of their school and religion, despite them being **legally entitled** to wear certain religious items or adornments to school.

Add to the **education costs**, especially for households with multiple children.

Student behaviour: creating leaders or followers?

Like most people, clothing, hairstyles and jewellery are often ways for children and young people to express their individual personality and **preferences**, tastes or beliefs. But this can be stifled during the school year if they have to wear a uniform or follow a strict **student dress code**.

Some students report that being able to choose what to wear to school makes them feel **empowered**, helps them enjoy school and encourages learning. It can also help prepare them for 'real life' by teaching them to take responsibility for their decisions and encouraging them to grow into the next generation of **independent, critical thinking** leaders.

But others suggest it is equally important to **accept and follow rules** about appropriate dress standards. They note that some professionals (including firefighters, nurses and athletes) must conform with strict uniform requirements, while others (like school teachers, accountants and retail staff) are expected to dress according to guidelines.

Both arguments have merit. Perhaps it is less about whether school uniforms create leaders or followers, and more about whether students can embrace the parameters set by their school uniform or dress code, and find other innovative ways to **express themselves**?

CASE STUDY

Perceived injustice

In one recent case, male students in the UK were so disgruntled by the inflexibility of their school uniform that they protested about the **perceived injustice** by wearing skirts to school. Their actions prompted a reconsideration of summer uniform options for male students.

Another school replaced its traditional girls' and boys' uniforms with 'trouser' and 'skirt' uniforms, opening both **options** up to all students

Key points

- Reaching consensus about school uniforms is difficult – there are so many competing perspectives to be considered.
- But it can be done. Schools that have successfully implemented uniforms that appeal to the school community (while adhering to legal and policy requirements) have responded to students' opinions, involved them in the decision-making processes and focused on empowering them to choose the best option for them.
- These schools have also been open to new ideas, and have not been afraid to **think laterally** about the purpose of education and whether uniforms help or hinder their end goals.