Fact Sheet
School Uniforms

UN Convention on the Rights of a Child

'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

Introduction

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.

Freedom of expression

Article 13 of the _Convention on the Rights of the Child_ says that children and young people have the right to express themselves freely, provided they do not harm or offend anyone else in doing so.

Like most people, clothing, hairstyle and jewellery choices often provide a way for children and young people to express their individual personalities and to represent some of their preferences, tastes or beliefs.

But, for school-aged children and young people, their ability to express themselves in this way can often be stifled during the school year if they are required to wear a school uniform (the standard set of clothing that must be worn to school) or adhere to a student dress code (which describes a range of acceptable clothing options that students may choose from).

Getting the balance right

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

Wearing the same thing 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 that is ugly, unflattering, impractical, uncomfortable or unjust.

In one recent case, male students in the United Kingdom were so disgruntled by the inflexible nature of their school uniform that they chose to protest about the perceived injustice by wearing skirts to school. Their actions prompted a reconsideration of summer uniform options for male students.

Although children and young people are entitled to be listened to and taken seriously (Article 12, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*), their opinions must be balanced with numerous competing perspectives. For example, schools must comply with health and safety legislation, as well as laws that aim to promote equal opportunity or prevent discrimination on the grounds of disability, race or gender. Parents' opinions; broader community expectations; and the need for schools to be able to develop an ethos upon which they can market themselves can also heavily influence the decision-making process.

Reaching a mutually acceptable position on school uniforms is no easy task!

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.

– 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.

Cons

– Restrict students' physical activity – one quarter of Australian children are over-weight or obese.

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

– 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.
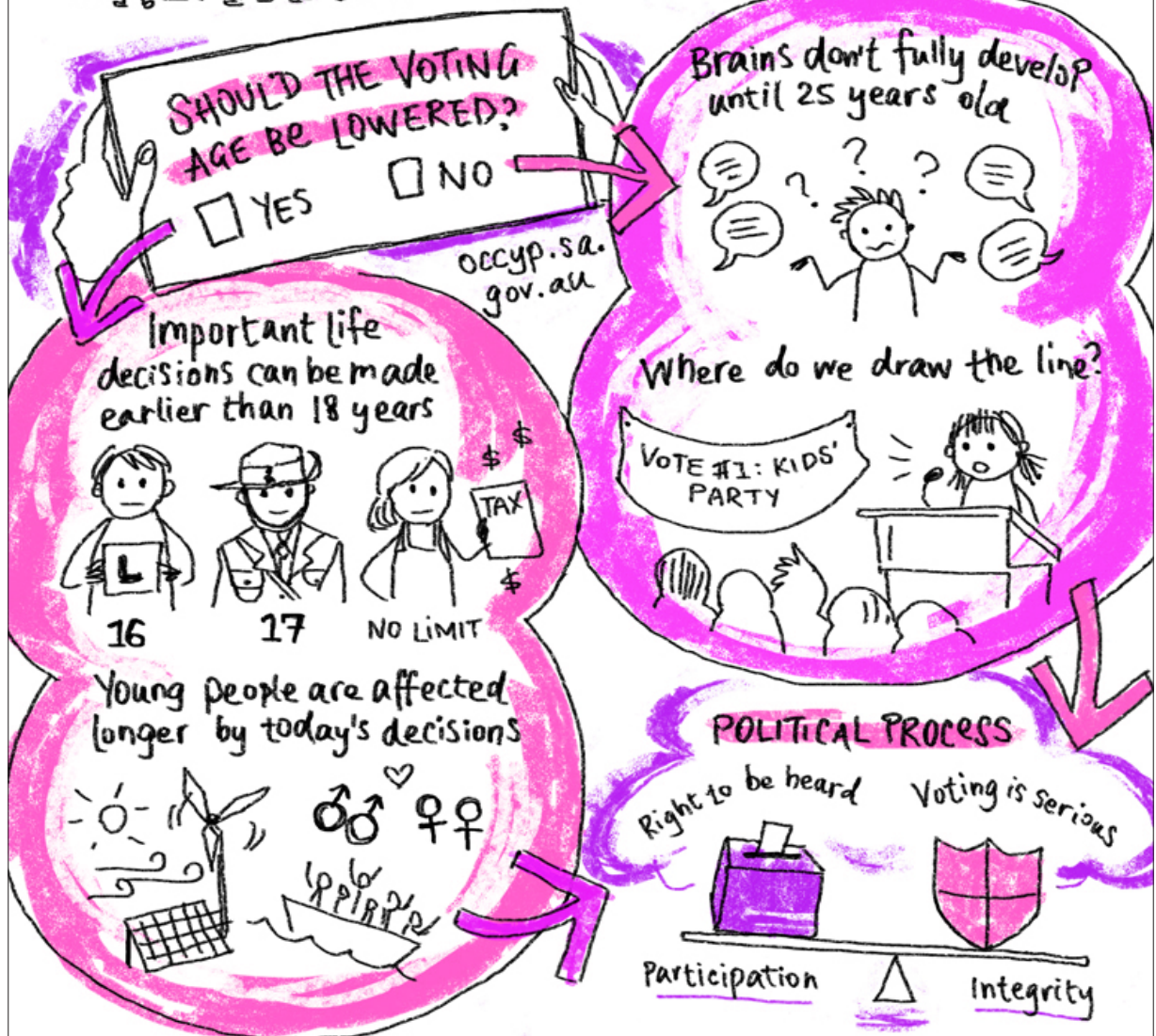
Promoting health, safety and wellbeing

In South Australia, school uniforms are designed to promote student health and safety.

They also seek to encourage full and active participation in all school related activities. Despite the recent introduction of more casual uniforms, particularly in the state system, some commentators claim that school uniforms still restrict students from being physically active; an issue that is of increasing concern when a quarter of Australian children are overweight or obese.

School uniforms further aim to promote student wellbeing. Some people claim they help to provide a level playing field by reducing socioeconomic disparities. In turn, they may minimise some of the bullying, harassment or other pressures placed on students in relation to what they wear or how they look.

But others disagree. They feel that school uniforms can trigger serious body image concerns, particularly if the approved uniform items do not flatter a diverse range of body shapes and sizes. For the sixth year in a row, young Australians have identified concerns about body image as one of their top three personal concerns.

The South Australian Department for Education and Child Development has attempted to reduce the risk of this type of alienation by updating its gender diversity procedure. The procedure is mandatory for all public schools and aims to foster an 'inclusive environment' by allowing, amongst other things, students to choose the uniform of the gender they identify with.

Are school uniforms inclusive or divisive?

This then begs the question: are school uniforms *inclusive* or *divisive*?

Some people argue that school uniforms can foster a sense of belonging or a shared identity that allows students to feel like they 'belong to something bigger than themselves'. They often liken it to barracking for a sporting team, where supporters can show their allegiance by wearing club colours or apparel.

Special additions to the standard school uniform, such as Year 7 or Year 12 leaving jumpers, can create a further sense of unity amongst select groups of school students, such as those embarking on their final year of school.

But not all students get that same sense of belonging from a school uniform.

Despite being legally entitled to wear certain religious items or adornments to school, some students experience extreme anxiety from having to balance the competing expectations of their school and their religion.

The anguish that one transgender student described after his school forced him to wear the girls' uniform further demonstrates how alienating school uniforms can be.

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Case Study: Abolishing gendered uniforms

Student concerns about the practicality and equality of their school uniform prompted a New Zealand school to abolish its existing gendered uniform requirements and provide all students with the flexibility to wear any item from the approved uniform list, including shorts, long shorts, pants, culottes or a kilt, regardless of their gender.

Similarly, schools in the United Kingdom have substituted the traditional notion of girls' and boys' uniforms for 'trouser' and 'skirt' uniforms, opening both options up to all students, regardless of their biological gender.

Student behaviour: creating leaders or followers?

Some students report that having a choice about what to wear to school leaves them feeling empowered. It helps them enjoy school and encourages them to learn. It can also help prepare them for 'real life' by teaching them the importance of taking responsibility for personal decisions and encouraging them to grow into the next generation of independent, critical thinking leaders.

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

Both arguments have merit. So perhaps it is less about whether school uniforms themselves create leaders or followers and more about whether students can embrace the parameters set by their school uniform or dress code requirements 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

Summary

Reaching consensus about school uniforms is difficult; there are so many competing perspectives that need to be considered.

But it can be done.

Schools that have been successful in implementing uniforms, which appeal across the broader school community while still aligning with the legislative and policy requirements, have been responsive to their students' opinions and have involved them in the decision-making process. The focus has been on empowering their students by offering a range of options and encouraging them to choose the best option.

These schools have also been open to new ideas and have not been afraid to think laterally about the purpose of education and whether school uniforms help or hinder them achieving their objectives.

Key Points

— Reaching consensus about school uniforms is difficult – there are so many competing perspectivesto 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 thebest 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.