

Scottish Youth Parliament submission of 4 March 2022

PE1914/E - Ban school uniforms in secondary schools

Overview

As education reformation remains an important topic, all aspects that affect children and young people's experiences within education are rightly being looked at, either through adaptations or as a complete overhaul of traditional approaches. It follows that looking at how uniforms can either positively or negatively affect learner performance or whether they are necessary to learning or irrelevant altogether.

Therefore, in early February SYP met with various MSYPs to discuss whether they believed school uniforms should be banned or not.

Ultimately, the MSYPs did not reach a consensus either for banning uniforms or against. There was no even split, but a mixed reaction to the topic, with many having their own personal and constitutional reactions differ.

The MSYPs brought up many important issues regarding the practicalities of wearing a uniform and the affect it has on themselves as learners, of which we have included in our recommendations below. We believe these could improve the experience of young people in education.

It's important to note that consistent consultation with wider organisations that support children and young people will most likely yield a clearer picture of where they stand on uniforms continuing to be a requirement or not. Additionally, we also believe that in conjunction of further consultation with children and young people, legitimate data gathering should also be done on the affects wearing or not wearing a uniform has on learners in relation to performance, comfortability, confidence, and various other factors listed in our recommendations.

Should school uniforms be banned?

As mentioned above, this question was put to numerous MSYPs, none of which came to an exact consensus. As always, MSYPs come from a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences and because of this there is often a split on these issues depending on the ways it either positively or negatively impacts their day-to-day lives.

This open consultation of views was conducted over Zoom and a survey (with 10 MSYPs, who consulted with a wide range of constituents) and a variety of questions were asked in conjunction with banning school uniforms, of which were:

- What are the advantages of banning school uniforms?
- What are the disadvantages of banning school uniforms?
- Who might this impact?
- Any other proposals [around school uniform bans] that should be considered?

The responses have been collated and summarised in the below section that provide an outline of how MSYPs feel about the ban in general, as well as consultation provided by the MSYPs conducted with their constituents on this topic.

Responses and Data

Outlined earlier, MSYPs did not come to one solid consensus on whether or not uniforms should be banned. Instead, with various responses from themselves and their constituents, response varied greatly and included a number of issues on why or why not school uniforms should be banned.

For those that believed school uniforms should be banned:

Issues initially brought up were around comfortability. MSYPs and their constituents felt that wearing their own clothes were “comfy” and would make them feel better. A few MSYPs mentioned that because the design of the uniforms was “old-fashioned” it made the style uncomfortable and at times inaccessible, especially for those who were transgender or gender non-binary as it was difficult to wear a shirt and tie in these circumstances. One MSYP made the point that some learners can afford to buy binders (tightened clothing garment) and others can’t, which can be especially obvious in a shirt and tie. This can have a negative impact on the mental health of students.

Additionally, it was brought up that those who had sensory issues (particularly those who are neurodiverse) often have issues with their clothing regarding texture and feel and that uniforms aren't adapted to accommodate that. This can mean that the uniforms can be scratchy and distracting for those who have high sensitivity to clothing and potentially create further distractions to their learning.

One MSYP said on the issue of comfortability: "Young people should be given the respect to choose clothes that make them more comfortable". Trust was a major factor, with other MSYPs agreeing, making the point that expression and comfortability should be left up to students to decide as it can positively impact their self-esteem and also help define who they are through their sense of style.

Overall, comfortability played a major factor, however, so did the issue of accessibility and whether or not uniforms were actually that accessible when they tend to be seasonal and can often cause a lot if the price isn't mitigated. Various MSYPs agreed with this, highlighting as well that having to buy two different wardrobes (personal clothing and uniforms) is quite expensive and not easy for many people.

For those that believe school uniforms shouldn't be banned:

MSYPs made the initial point that uniforms were a great equaliser, as you can't see someone's economic situation when they are in the same uniform as everyone else. Some MSYPs mentioned that their constituents were worried about banning uniforms for this reason, as wearing your own clothes would let everyone know what economic background you come from and that could lead to bullying and further safety issues.

Some MSYPs noted as well that there were school grants at their schools that helped mitigate the costs of uniforms, something that wouldn't necessarily be provided to those who couldn't afford a nicer wardrobe if uniforms were banned.

Additionally, MSYPs brought up those who have religious affiliations and tend to wear more modest dress. This could negatively impact them as their religion may not be as apparent when wearing a school uniform versus when they have to wear personal clothing.

One MSYP also noted that there was a noticeable change in behaviour when school uniform rules for lax from the start of COVID until now, with

behaviour becoming better now that everyone is back to wearing their full uniforms versus the flexibility before.

Another factor mentioned was what would happen to tailors and companies that specifically supply uniforms? MSYPs mentioned that they could potentially be negatively impacted if school uniforms were banned, leading to a lot of lost jobs and money.

SYP's Recommendations

Because the MSYPs that were consulted and the constituents they consulted all came to different conclusions and reasons for or against banning school uniforms, we cannot take a stance on either side of this argument. However, it is clear that young people believe that uniform policies do need to be reviewed. We therefore offer a variety of recommendations that we believe could improve the experience of school pupils:

1. If uniforms are to remain, we believe the Scottish Government should continue to looking at how they can be covered by either school grants or government financial support. This support should also allow families to access the best quality of uniforms would help address inequalities.
2. Consideration should be given to how school uniforms policies can become more flexible to help with self-expression and feeling comfortable. An example of allowing hoodies to be worn (as they are allowed in physical education) throughout the day would make a lot of MSYPs and their constituents feel better and feel like they have slightly more control of their expression and wardrobe.
3. The uniform offered at schools should be reviewed to allow for more flexible style and comfortability (polo shirts, t-shirts, trousers, etc.). Having softer fabrics can address the issues of those who are neurodiverse and those who have skin sensitivity issues and provide a less-distracting environment for them.
4. Updating the uniforms to be more gender-neutral would benefit pupils experiences at schools. As mentioned above, polo shirts and t-shirts that do not require button-up tops and ties can help those experiencing gender dysphoria and who are non-binary and transgender. Additionally, added more options instead of skirts (various options of comfortable trousers that are appropriate to wear) from a safety point of view and a gender-neutral point of view.

5. Making uniforms adaptable for all seasons and providing options that are either non-uniform options or uniform options included that allow for colder and warmer weather would go a long way in help families save money and having a uniform set that lasts throughout the year.
6. Exploration should be given to methods that would allow for self-expression of students that does not necessarily categorise their economic situation but allows them flexibility to express who they are and make getting dressed and wearing their clothes to school more enjoyable.

About SYP

The Scottish Youth Parliament is the democratically elected voice of Scotland's young people. Our vision for Scotland is of a nation that actively listens to and values the meaningful participation of its children and young people. Our goal is to make this vision a reality, in order to ensure Scotland is the best place in the world to grow up