



## GUEST EDITORIAL

### *Uniform City, USA!*

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New York City—the world capital of individualism and non-conformity—is about to enact a dress code for the students in its public schools. The very place where everyone comes to “be their own person” and “do their own thing” is imposing uniforms on its children. And guess what... our parents love the idea.

After several years when the idea of public school uniforms was something nervously discussed, deep in the caverns of power at the system's central administrative offices, NYC Board of Education President William Thompson finally stood up recently and said out loud what everyone had been thinking: it's time we adopted school uniforms as a matter of Board policy.

Of course, kids would never go along with the idea, critics pointed out. They would have to be wrestled into white shirts and blouses and strangled with their own ties to get them to school. After all, what kid would want to advertise where he or she goes to school?

The critics, apparently, have never stood next to the cash register at any university bookstore or visited a bar in a multi-college town; many a school is making a handsome profit on everything from notebooks to boxers shorts emblazoned with the school name, and an impolitic remark about a college's jacket or T-shirt has put many a young man in an ER with deep impressions of college rings in his face.

The idea of school uniforms isn't new. In fact, it predates national military uniforms. For centuries one could immediately tell a scholar's home university, and his field of study and rank of degree, simply by the way he was dressed. Oxford scholars wore mortarboards, resembling today's master's gowns; at Cambridge, the uniform was the velvet tam and a robe similar to our doctoral garb; Sorbonnes' graduates wore colored

fabric over their left shoulders to show their rank and “major”; while Louvain's scholars bore the weight of heavy overcoat-like frocks.

As the years passed, the medieval uniforms that marked almost all the professions began to disappear, to be preserved only for ceremonial occasions, or as quaint anachronisms. (At Oxford, students are still required to wear their gowns to meals in their college's dining hall, to tutorial sessions, and, at least until very recently, whenever they ventured into town.) Yet, as the uniforms of everyday life became the regalia of secular liturgy, other academic uniforms took their place. The Eton jacket and collar marked the young lads of England's finest prep school, German university students wore caps to indicate the student alliance to which they belong; in America, private school students have been wearing uniforms for more than half a century.

The arguments in favor of uniforms are

legion, and oft-recited: uniforms eliminate competition between students over fashion, and save poor students the heartache and embarrassment of not having “the latest” uniforms, saving parents expense and time. (Albert Einstein wore the same suit every day so he wouldn't have to waste brainpower on picking out clothes!) Uniforms add a sense of special purpose to school in a way that separates this endeavor from the rest of one's activities. Uniforms also create a shared experience among peers.

However, it is the ability of a uniform to be a symbol of pride, a badge that marks one as set apart, that may be its most positive characteristic. Because of this, uniforms, if used in the right way as an educational tool, may be quite the opposite of a restriction on students: they may be a means to energize and inspire students to be part of a team.

Won't uniforms crush the creative energies of our young people? The greatest creativity is often born of the tightest structures. William Shakespeare was limited to the 14 lines of iambic pentameter in *abab* rhyme scheme, yet he managed to use the strict form of the sonnet to write over one hundred poems, some of which are the finest poetry ever written in English.

New York City begins this bold experiment with the cooperation of parents—although the parents at every school will have the right to opt out of the uniform program. Thanks to the innovative leadership of Mayor Rudy Giuliani and Chancellor Rudy Crew, we expect public school uniforms will let kids be their own persons in the fullest possible way, and set them on the road to making contributions to society as unique individuals.#