

KCSS ISSUES BRIEF #2

KCSS Dress Code/Uniform Survey Results

Executive Summary, February 2000: Surveys were sent to 1451 schools in Kentucky. Those returned were filtered to remove responses from schools that were not included in the Kentucky Safe Schools Data project as well as those that were incomplete. This gave a response rate of 581 (41.8%) based on the 1389 schools included in the Kentucky Safe Schools Data Project. Some key findings follow.

Time Policy Had Been In Effect

- 153 schools had dress code/uniform policies in effect 1-3 years.
- 93 schools had dress code/uniform policies in effect for more than 10 years.
- 64 schools had policies in effect less than one year; most were in elementary schools.

Policy Development

- Elementary schools were most likely to use a group of administrators, teachers and parents to develop policies.
- Middle and high schools were most likely to include students in the development of policies.

Rationale for Developing the Policy

- Promotion of school safety and health was the most frequently cited rationale.
- Establishment of order in appearance and behavior was the second most frequently cited rationale.
- Promoting a learning environment was the third most frequently cited rationale.

Acceptance of Policy

- The majority of schools indicated that the policy was accepted by both parents and students.

Dress code or uniform policies were submitted by 169 schools and formed the basis for an analysis of the level of restrictions in Kentucky dress codes or uniform policies. Four levels were identified on the basis of restrictiveness:

- Standard Dress Code - a statement of basic guidelines for a selected number of appearance characteristics with no reference to color or length.
- Moderately Restrictive Dress Code - a statement of basic guidelines for a selected number of appearance characteristics (more than a standard dress code) as well as a reference to length.
- Restrictive Dress Code - a statement of basic guidelines for a selected number of appearance characteristics (more than a moderately restrictive dress code) as well as a reference to length and a reference to color.

- Uniform policy - the most restrictive policy which prescribes appearance characteristics, length and color, as well as requiring the use of selected vendors or school approved colors and logos.

A moderately restrictive dress code was used by 63 (37.3%) of the schools who submitted dress code policies. Given the low number of policies submitted for evaluation, generalizations to all the schools in Kentucky is inadvisable.

Conclusion

This was the first survey of all Kentucky schools regarding the development and use of dress code or uniform policies. Similar to the Kentucky Safe Schools Data Project, it provides baseline data that may be of use in future analyses and program development.

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Kentucky School Dress Code/Uniform Survey Results

February, 2000

Introduction

The recent focus on school safety has placed an emphasis on the responsibility of school officials and school boards to provide safe learning environments for students. Many methods have been suggested, including the use of school uniforms or school dress codes. The resurgence of interest in school uniforms or dress codes dates back to the 1980's when public attention focused on students wearing designer clothing, punk styles, and T-shirts with certain types of messages (Kaiser, 1997, p378). Concerns were expressed then about the use of clothing to foster competitiveness; to symbolize gang membership; or to characterize lifestyles condoning drugs, alcohol, disrespect for authority, and even violence (Elliott, 1984).

Methodology

In response to a request from State government officials, the Center for School Safety conducted a survey of principals in 1,451 Kentucky public schools regarding their experience with the use of school uniforms or dress codes as a method to increase school safety. A follow-up survey was sent to schools that did not respond to the first mailing.

The surveys returned were filtered to remove any schools that were not included in the Kentucky Safe Schools Data Project. Those schools removed included primary schools and group homes. While the Kentucky Safe Schools Data Project is a separate database of 1389 schools, it would provide a basis for further analysis of the returned dress code/uniform surveys. Therefore, the schools included in the dress code/uniform analysis were made consistent with those included in the Kentucky Safe Schools Data Project.

Additional filtering removed 75 surveys with no responses leaving a total of 581 surveys in this analysis. These represent a response rate of 40.1% of the original schools surveyed, or a response rate of 41.8% of the schools included in the Kentucky Safe Schools Data Project database. The results presented in this report, where appropriate, will be based on the latter response rate.

The survey sent to schools had six topic areas for which information could be provided. These were: (1) school grade level information, (2) length of time a dress code/uniform policy had been in effect, (3) development of the dress code/uniform policy, (4) school uniform policy information, (5) school dress code information, and (6) perceptions of the effect of the policy on school safety. These topic areas provide the outline for presentation of the survey results.

Results were tabulated in each topic area, and appropriate totals and percentages are reported. A descriptive evaluation of actual school dress code/uniform policies was conducted on the policies returned with the completed surveys. Those schools that did not initially include a copy of the policy were contacted and given an opportunity to submit a copy to be included in the evaluation. Slightly more than one-quarter of the

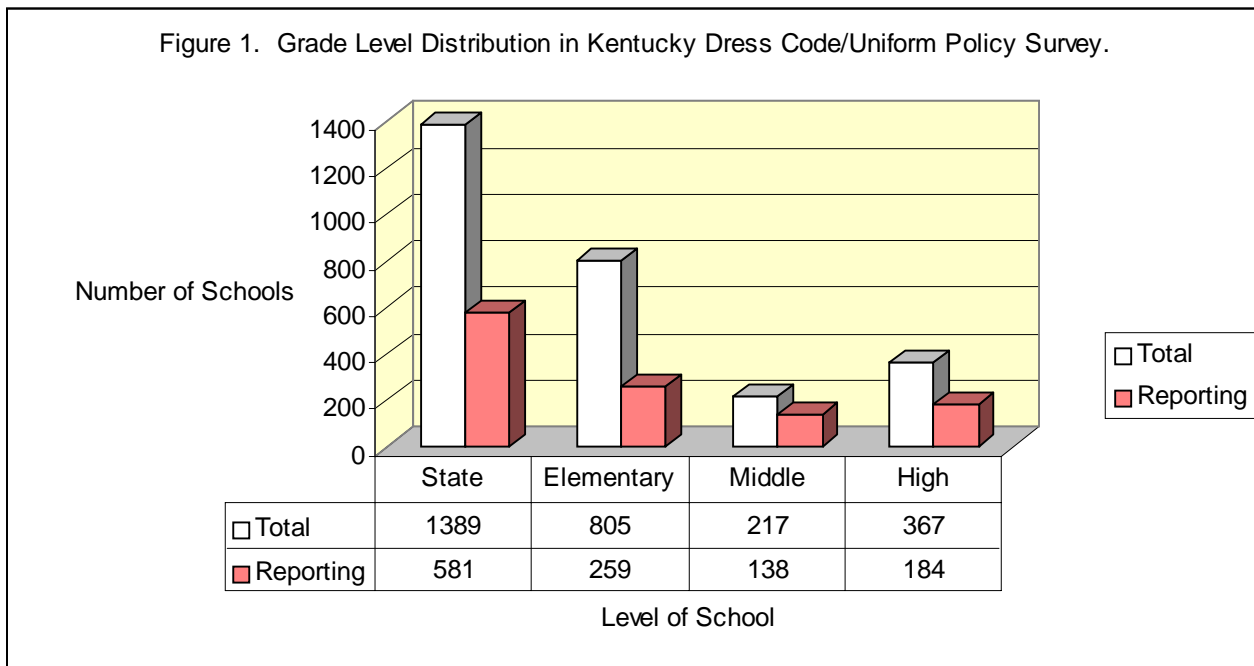
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schools responding to the survey (29.1%) submitted copies of policies distributed as follows: 62 elementary policies (23.9% of elementary schools completing the survey), 47 middle school policies (34.1% of middle schools completing the survey) and 60 high school policies (32.6% of high schools completing the survey).

The findings on specific dress code/uniform policies presented in this report are descriptive of the schools providing policy copies, and generalizations can be made for those participants. However, in the context of all Kentucky schools, the relatively low response rate of schools providing policy copies (12.2%) suggests it is inadvisable to generalize the policy findings presented in this report to all schools in Kentucky.

School Grade Level Information

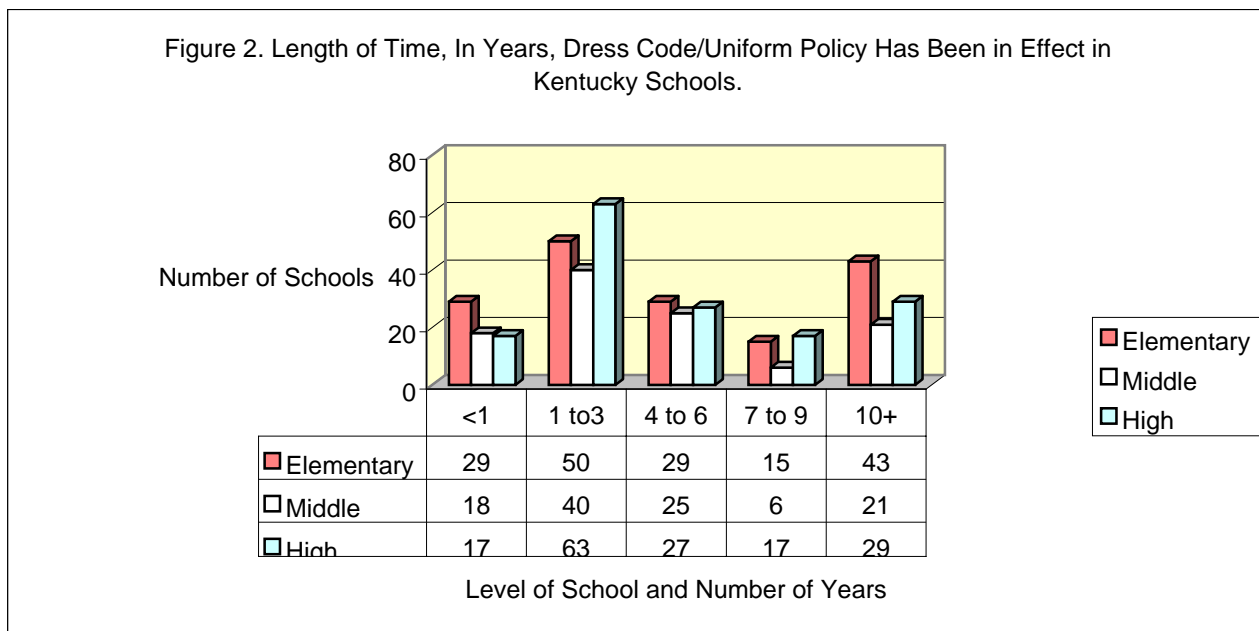
The surveys were grouped according to grade level distribution, that is, elementary, middle, and high school. An explanation of the basis for such grouping can be found in *Statistical Analysis Report 3, Kentucky Safe Schools Data Project: 1998-1999 Grade Level Distribution Totals*. The total number of schools responding at each level was as follows: 259 elementary schools (32.2% of the 805 elementary schools in the Kentucky Safe Schools Data Project), 138 middle schools (63.5% of the 217 middle schools in the Kentucky Safe Schools Data Project), and 184 high schools (50.1% of the 367 high schools in the Kentucky Safe Schools Data Project). These are shown in comparison with the total number of schools in Kentucky and the total number of schools at each level in Figure 1.



Length of Time Policy Had Been in Effect

Respondents were asked to indicate the length of time the dress code/uniform policy had been in effect. Nearly three-quarters (73.8%), or 429 of the 581 respondents, provided a length of time that was recorded in intervals as shown in Figure 2. The largest percent of schools responding, 26.3%, had policies in effect from 1 to 3 years. This was followed by 16.0% of the schools having policies in effect for 10 or more years.

Sixty-four (11.0%) of the schools responding had policies in effect less than one year and would, therefore, represent schools with newly instituted dress code/uniform policies. Of that group, elementary schools represented the largest percent (45.3%) of the 64 schools instituting dress code/uniform policies in the 1999-2000 school year. This was followed by middle schools at 28.1%, and high schools at 26.6%.

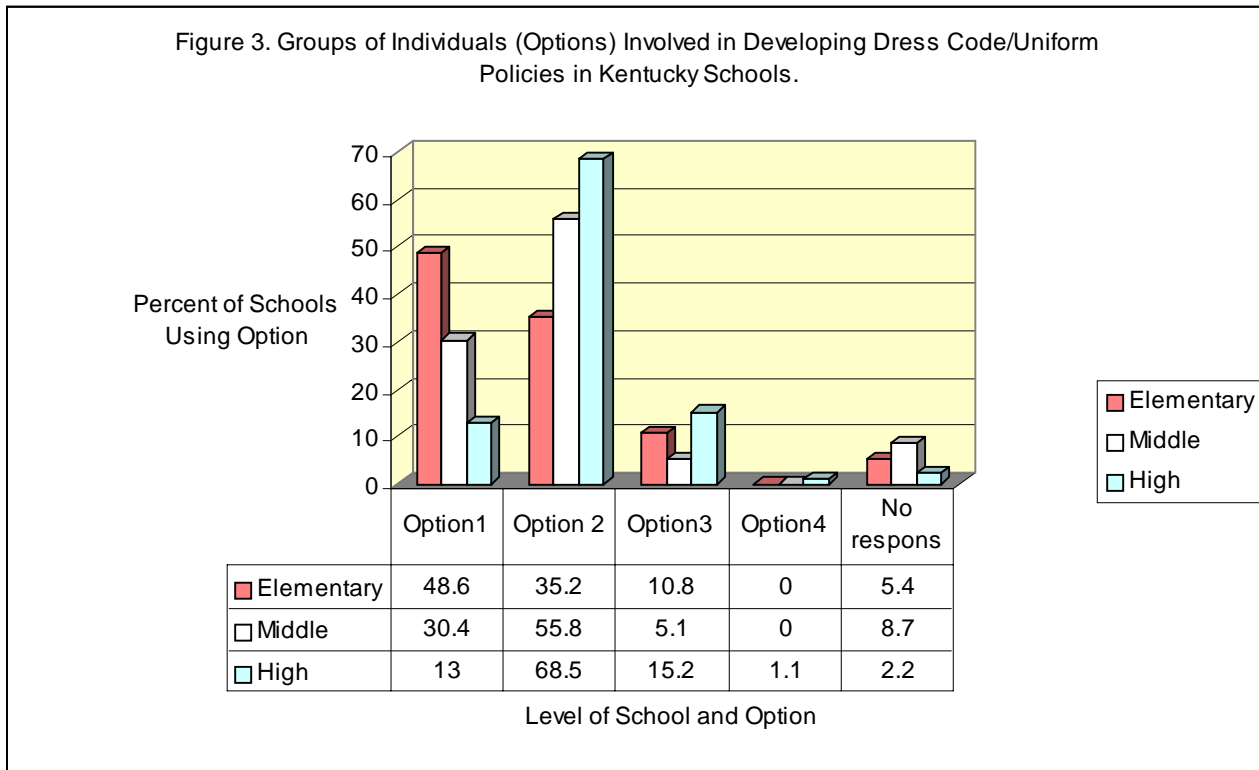


Development of the Dress Code/Uniform Policy

This topic area had three subsections: (1) identification of the individuals involved in the development of the dress code/uniform policy, (2) identification of the rationale for developing the policy, and (3) level of acceptance by parents and students. Results were tabulated for each grade level.

Individuals Involved in Policy Development. The response rate to this section of the topic area by grade level distribution was as follows: elementary school level, 94.6%; middle school level, 91.3%; and high school level, 97.8%. Respondents identified one of the following options for individuals involved in development of the school's policy: (Option 1) a group of administrators, faculty and parents such as school boards, parent-teacher organizations, discipline councils, or site-based councils; (Option 2) a group of administrators, faculty, parents, and students including members of the groups identified in option 1 as well as

students who were members of the site-based council, the student council, or who contributed through surveys or interviews; (Option 3) a group of staff which included administrators and faculty; and (Option 4) a group of faculty and students. These are shown in Figure 3.



Elementary schools were the most likely to use a group of administrators, faculty and parents (Option 1) in the development of the policy. This was indicated by 48.6% of the elementary schools responding. Only 30.4% of the middle schools and 13% of the high schools chose this option. Several of the respondents noted that the age of the students in elementary school made their understanding of the considerations involved in developing a dress code/uniform policy difficult.

Option 2, a group of administrators, faculty, parents and students was used by the largest percent of middle schools (55.8%) and high schools (68.5%). Only 35.2% the elementary schools used this option. Respondents indicated that student involvement ranged from committee membership to conducting surveys and interviews, to presenting fashion shows of suggested clothing items for parents. Involvement of students at the elementary level was described often as being through the parents' participation in the group.

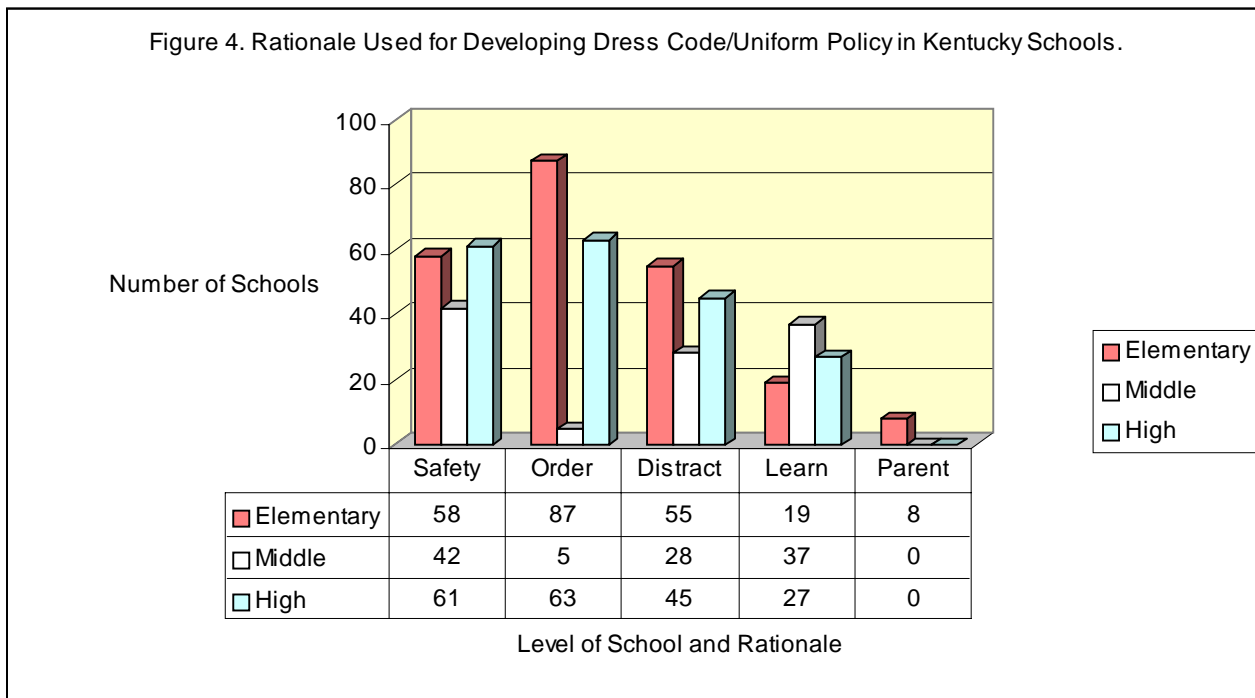
Policy development by a group of administrators and faculty only (Option 3) was used by 10.8% of the elementary schools, 5.1% of the middle schools, and 15.2% of the high schools. There were several alternative high schools that used this method, which may account for the relatively high percent.

None of the elementary or middle schools indicated use of Option 4, which was a group of faculty and students. Only 1.1% of the high schools responding indicated this as the method used to develop dress code/uniform policy.

Rationale for Developing the Policy. Responding schools also indicated the rationale for developing the policy. Schools listed more than one reason, so the results represent multiple responses in some cases. Rationale for developing the policy was organized in the following categories: (1) to promote school safety and health, (2) to minimize distractions and disruptions to the educational process, (3) to promote a learning environment, (4) to establish order in appearance and behavior, and (5) to respond to parent requests. It should be noted that category 5 was a rationale given only by elementary schools and that the requests were related to economic concerns and ease in getting students ready for school in the morning.

Promotion of school safety and health was the rationale identified by a total of 161 schools. This was followed by the establishment of order in appearance and behavior (155 schools), minimization of distractions and disruptions (128 schools), promoting a learning environment (83 schools), and responding to parents' requests (8 schools).

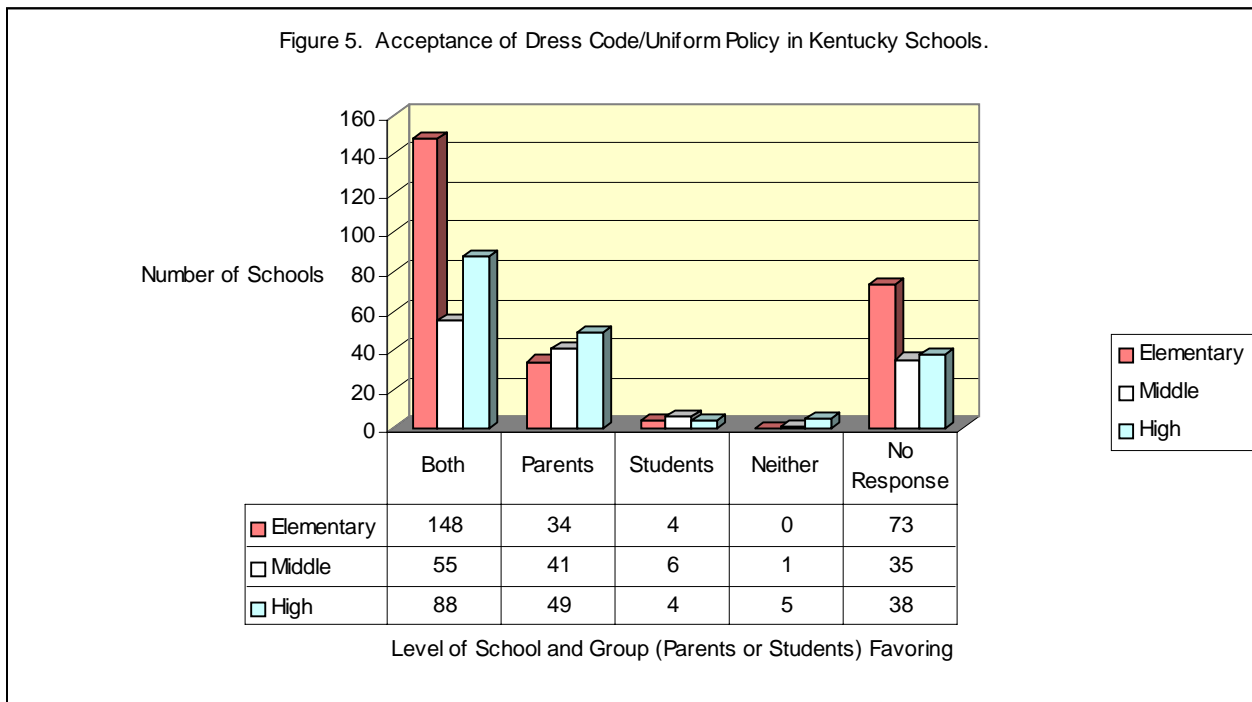
Figure 4 shows the distribution of rationale categories by school grade level. Establishing order in appearance and behavior was cited most often by elementary schools (33.5%) and high schools (34.2%). Promoting school safety and health was cited most often by middle schools (30.4%). The use of a dress code/uniform policy to promote a learning environment was cited as least important by high schools (14.6%). It



was second to last in importance for elementary schools (7.3%) and middle schools (3.6%).

Acceptance of the Dress Code/Uniform Policy. Schools responded to the question of acceptance of the dress code/uniform policy in one of the following categories: (1) parents and students are in favor of the policy, (2) parents are in favor of the policy but students are less likely to be in favor, (3) parents are less likely to be in favor of the policy while students favor the policy, (4) both parents and students are not in favor of the policy.

Of the schools that responded to this question, 79.6% of the elementary schools indicated both the parents and students approved the policy. Middle schools (53.4%) and high schools (60.3%) also indicated parent and student support. However, 39.8% of the middle schools, and 33.6% of the high schools indicated that parents were in favor but the students were less likely to be in favor of the policy. Only 18.3% of the elementary schools indicated parental favor and student disfavor with the policy. Figure 5 shows the distribution of levels of acceptance by school grade level.



School Uniform Policy/Dress Code Policy Information

As noted earlier, only 29.1% of the schools responding to this survey included copies of uniform policies or dress codes with their responses. While this low rate of return would make generalizations to all of Kentucky schools inadvisable, the policies returned can be used to develop categories based on restrictions that may provide a framework for future analysis of policies.

One definition that has been offered to distinguish between dress codes and uniforms can be found in Kaiser (1997, p378). *Uniforms* prescribe a certain standard or style of clothing to be worn, while *dress codes*

proscribe or prohibit clothing or grooming practices considered objectionable. An examination of the policies submitted by Kentucky schools showed that that distinction was generally apparent.

However, the examination also showed that there were levels of policies based on the number and type of references to categories of appearance characteristics. Based on the evaluation of the submitted policies, the following categories were identified: (1) garment i.e., items of clothing, (2) body exposure, (3) body decoration, (4) garment decoration, (5) shoes, and (6) accessories. Color and length were additional appearance characteristics that could be applied to more than one of the appearance categories.

The appearance categories, in addition to color and length, could be used to establish a continuum of dress codes on the basis of level of restrictiveness. At the least restrictive level, for example, dress codes could suggest only basic guidelines for a selected number of appearance characteristics with no reference to color or length. More restrictive levels would include additional appearance characteristics as well as a reference to length, or a reference to length and to color. The most restrictive level would be considered a uniform policy in which appearance characteristics, and color and length are prescribed, as well as requiring the use of selected vendors or school approved colors and logos.

Based on this continuum, four levels of policies relating to school dress were identified as shown in Table 1. Each level has an associated group of appearance characteristics. The appearance characteristics shown at each level are not necessarily inclusive of all the appearance characteristics included in the policies examined in this study. Those shown are for the purpose of illustrating the increasing control over appearance characteristics as policies become more restrictive.

Table 1 shows that 63 (37.3%) of the policies submitted were Level 2, i.e. a moderately restrictive policy which included a reference to length. Slightly more than half (51.6%) of the high school policies were at Level 2. This was followed by 60 (35.5%) policies in Level 1, the least restrictive policies. Elementary school policies were approximately half (48.3%) of this group. Elementary school policies were also nearly half (46.7%) of the uniform policies which are the most restrictive.

Table 1. Levels of Policy Relating to School Dress in Kentucky Schools.

Policy Level	Appearance Characteristics	Number of Schools		
		Elementary	Middle	High
1. Standard Dress Code	Body Exposure Such As Garment Holes Sagging Pants Revealing Designs Such as Tight Fit Garment Decoration Such As Offensive Messages Drug/Alcohol Logos Garments Such As Inappropriate Use of Garments Tube/Tank/Halter Top Accessories Such As Hats, Bandanas, Sunglasses Shoes Required			
	Total Schools With Standard Dress Code	29	12	19
2. Moderately Restrictive Dress Code	All Appearance Characteristics in Level 1 Body Decoration Such As Piercing (except ears) Additional Garments Such As Sportswear Additional Accessories Reference to Length			
	Total Schools With Moderate Dress Code	15	17	31
3. Restrictive Dress Code	All Appearance Characteristics in Level 1 and Level 2 Additional Garments Such As Skirts, Pants, Shirts, Jumpers, Coats, Jackets Reference to Garment Color Reference to Fabric Design Such As Stripes, Plaids			
	Total Schools With Restrictive Dress Code	4	10	2
4. Uniform Policy	All Appearance Characteristics in Levels 1,2, and 3 Reference to Accepted School Colors, Logos Reference to Specific Vendors			
	Total Schools With Uniform Policies	14	8	8

Perceptions of Policies and School Safety

Most of the schools indicated that they had not collected any data on the impact of dress code/uniform policies on school safety. Safety, in this context, would refer to local board policy violations such as defiance of authority or disturbing class. Even with no data, there were two opposing perceptions of the effect of dress codes on safety. On the one hand, some individuals thought that the use of dress codes or uniform policies did not increase the level of safety in schools. Some suggested that the incidence of local board policy violations would show similar levels with or without a policy.

The opposing perception was that the use of dress codes or uniform policies did increase the level of safety in school. Some respondents indicated that there were more problems with disruptions on 'dress down' days when policy restrictions were lifted.

A theme that appeared in both perceptions was that the issue of school safety includes many variables, of which dress codes or uniform policies would only be one. Clearly, more data is required to support or refute the impact of dress codes or uniform policies on school safety.

Conclusion

This was the first survey of all Kentucky schools regarding the development and use of dress codes or uniform policies. Similar to the Kentucky Safe Schools Data Project, it provides baseline data that may be of use in future analyses and program development.

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