

Soquel School Leaders Debate the Merits of Uniforms

Dress codes

by Michael Thomas

School uniforms — for most school-age kids, just mentioning those two words is sufficient to start a fight, no matter how underdeveloped a teen's sense of fashion may be. Still, school officials say that a uniform dress code may actually provide relief from peer pressure for some students. However, they are going to have to convince more parents first.

In response to parent inquiries, the Soquel Union Elementary School District will hold an open discussion of school uniform policy at the district's board meeting on Oct. 3. If there proves to be sufficient interest among parents and school administrators, it's possible the board will change district policy to allow each school to decide for itself whether to require uniforms.

Superintendent Kathleen Howard pointed out that should the board make such a decision, it wouldn't force any school to adopt a uniform policy.

"It really is intended that the school community would say whether this is really good for the community," Howard explained.

She said the issue emerged as a result of parents approaching board members and asking about uniforms. She noted that the topic pops up at soccer games and the like.

Though the issue is on the agenda as a discussion item only, it has already spurred a reaction at some schools.

At Main Street Elementary, students independently organized a survey of their peers, according to Principal Brenda Payne. The results: 156 students opposed and 16 in favor of uniforms.

The district sent a letter home with students to notify parents of the Oct. 3 discussion, and Payne has since heard from parents both opposed to uniforms and in favor of them. "I have parents asking me what caused the issue to come up," she said. "[In society], there are different issues around clothes that kids wear to school and peer pressure — what's stylish to wear and what's not. At the elementary level we don't see a lot of that."

Middle School Parents Started Debate

Board president Ted Donnelly said the discussion was initiated by middle school parents, in large part because of concern about clothes that denote gang

affiliation. Numerous schools in the Pajaro School District require uniforms for that reason, and not just for older students.

Allianza Charter School requires them and even elementary schools like Freedom School have specif-

icity to allow site-level decisions about uniforms.

"Definitely," he said. "Down the road if things got worse and a school site wants to have uniforms, that's the school site's decision."

Though gang activity is extremely rare at Soquel schools, there are other reasons schools have chosen to put students in uniforms.

"It's just easier to dress someone in the morning," Donnelly said. "You don't have to worry about what they're going to wear."

Board member Judy McGooden hasn't formed an opinion about uniforms yet.

"I will be very interested to hear what parents have to say," McGooden said.

Principal Says Problems are Rare

Though district officials say interest emerged from the New Brighton Middle School community, Principal Rob Martin said he hasn't heard from parents who are intent on seeing students don uniforms.

"I haven't had parents coming in or teachers coming in and saying 'Hey, we need to have school uniforms here,'" he said.

Nevertheless, there have been some problem incidents in which student attire may have played a role in a problem situation.

"Last year, we had to come down a little more strictly around gang colors and gang symbols," Martin said.

Parents take note: the numbers 13 and 14, the colors red and blue and the term Norcal all carry gang associations.

Martin said some students were being pressured by gang members off campus last year. "There was some intimidation that was happening off campus and some of our kids were caught up in it," he said. "A little of that overlapped at school in that there were some kids that were getting harassed by other kids because they weren't wearing certain colors."

In such cases, Martin contacts parents directly to work on the problem and the student can be put on an individualized "clothing contract."

"There are some kids that sort of model that [gang] behavior but we don't have gang-related fights and harassment here," he added.

For the most part, Martin is confident that the school's existing dress code is effective.



This New Brighton student said he would be in support of uniforms if they included fuzzy purple hats.

ic dress requirements.

The uniforms are not necessarily identical, manufactured outfits like those common in private schools. Many schools have uniform policies that are more general, such as requiring white shirts with green or khaki pants and a green sweatshirt or jacket. Colors such as blue and red are usually prohibited because those colors are associated with Hispanic gangs operating in California.

Donnelly pointed out that uniform policies can be as flexible or as specific as the individual school deems appropriate.

"Some parents have come to me thinking that girls are going to have to wear skirts and the boys will have to wear pants and that's really not the case," he said.

Donnelly said he might support changing the pol-

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New Brighton's rules prohibit tank tops or tops with shoulder straps less than an inch wide.

Visible underwear is not allowed, which means boys have to put a belt on and leave the baggy pants at home. Blouses and shirts must be modest, not low-cut or revealing. Clothes must be free of logos that refer to alcohol, tobacco or firearms. Excessive jewelry is a no-no.

For safety's sake, shoes with pop-out wheels aren't allowed.

Students at New Brighton who were asked about the possibility of uniforms were unanimously opposed to the idea. One student said she could learn to live with a uniform if she personalized it with buttons and accessories that expressed her character.

What Do Parents Think?

If the board opens the door to more stringent dress codes, decisions about whether they are needed will likely fall to site councils and administrators. Bonnie Keith, a member of the site council at Main Street School, said she has been thinking critically about uniforms recently.

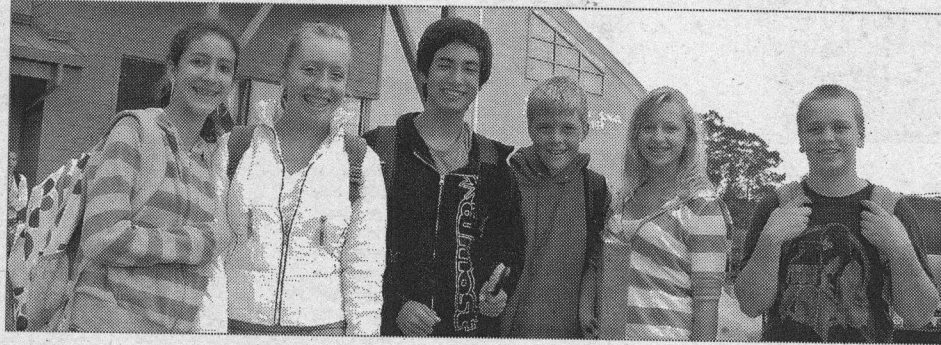
"I wouldn't want to see a policy that affected all students," Keith said.

However, she recognizes that gang-related apparel is an issue for a handful of students.

"I would like to see all that effort

doing it would be gang stuff or if schools are having a real problem with the way girls dress."

Superintendent Howard said that changing styles can raise concerns about young students wearing provoca-



Uniforms get an unanimous thumbs-down from these New Brighton students.

Left to right: Tara Piryaee, Alex Baker, Jesse López, Kevin Payne, Savannah Toshikian and David Meyer.

going into working with those kids in a direct way," she added. "I would rather see kids really helped and I don't think uniforms are going to do that."

Terri Chambers has a son at Main Street School and a son at New Brighton Middle. She doesn't think the debate over uniforms will go very far.

"They are going to get a lot of resistance from parents," Chambers said. "The only reason that I can think of for

tive clothes. Increasingly, styles intended for older teens are being adapted and marketed towards young children.

"Parents are finding that some of the clothes popular in malls are over-sexualizing kids at a young age, especially girls," she said. "We are probably having a little bit less of a problem this year because the fashions for girls have shifted away from your belly button showing and the shortest possible top."

Howard recalled being suspended from school once in middle school because of what she was wearing, but at that time the rules were a little different.

"I was wearing a floor length granny dress," she said with a laugh. "It was hippie attire."

Ironically, she said she wore the dress after being admonished for an inappropriate skirt the day before.

There is also peer pressure to consider.

"Middle school kids can be very difficult with each other about what they are wearing and if they have the right shoes and all of that," she noted.

Howard will report on the various state laws governing school attire at the Oct. 3 meeting. Among the requirements, she said, is that any school which requires students to wear uniforms must provide options to assist low-income parents. Since schools can't pay for uniforms out of their regular budgets, parent clubs are often called upon to set up donation programs.

If the board institutes a policy that allows for uniforms, any plan developed by an individual school would be subject to the final approval of the board. ■