

Board puts teeth in dress code

Policy would prohibit gang colors on campus

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STAFF WRITER

Baggy pants and over-sized T-shirts are the garments of choice for 14-year-old Eric Miller. He likes to coordinate colors, wearing a single shade of yellow, purple, maroon.

For the E.A. Hall Middle School teenager, stylish clothes are a source of pride. Among his peers, he was chosen best-dressed for the year.

"You see, I'm outgoing. That's why I dress like this," Eric explained.

Some colors, though, he admits, can incite violence. And there is at least one color he won't wear often. At E.A. Hall, where dress codes are designed to thwart any hint of gang activity, a suit of solid red is prohibited.

"We don't ban colors. We ban gang-related graffiti or monikers," said E.A. Hall principal Murry Schekman. "Gang-related clothes are banned."

He stood on the grassy school field among students bustling in a lunchtime flurry, where he nabbed eighth-grader Tony Rodriguez to explain.

"If this (shirt) were red and he had a red jacket with it and a red

coming up to the office," Schekman said, pointing to the popular name-brand shirt worn by Rodriguez.

Dress codes, such as the one enforced at E.A. Hall, will have more authority now that a district-wide policy bans garments typically worn by gang members, school officials say.

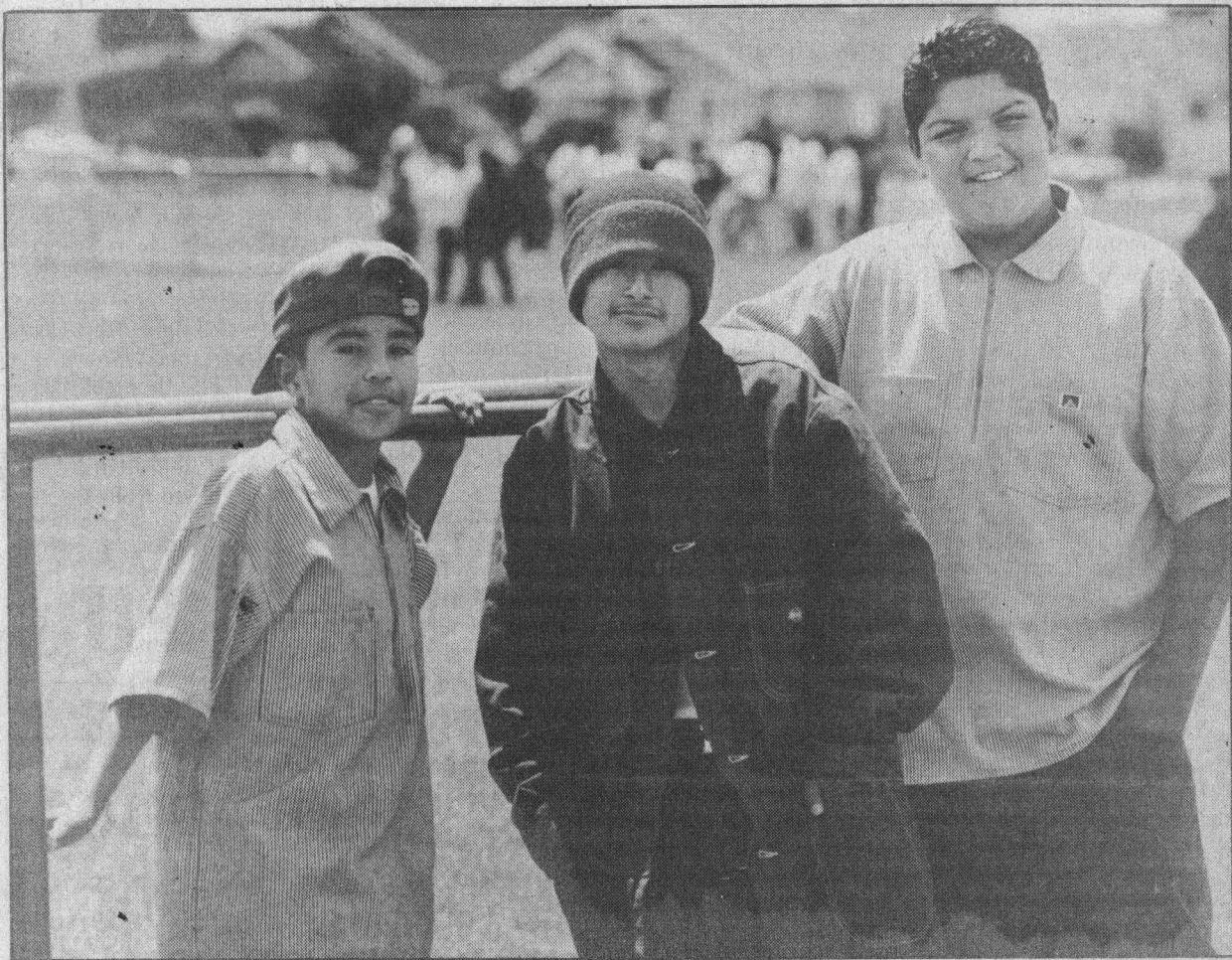
The Pajaro Valley school board gave final approval last night to a sweeping discipline policy that includes provisions that allow schools to prohibit certain clothing in the interest of student safety.

"We're opening up some opportunities for schools to do something bold," trustee Jamie Marks said. "To address some of the problems they're seeing."

School administrators say the policy will bolster current dress codes.

"Now we're getting some direction from the district office," said Rolling Hills Middle School principal Luis Carrillo said. "Now we'll have (school) board support. When we want to enforce these policies ... then we can fall back on it and say we have the support of the district administration."

At Rolling Hills, the "no caps, no colors" dress code now in place



Kurt Ellison

E.A. Hall Middle School students, from left, Mark Cornejo, brother Alfred Cornejo and Tony Rodriguez model current fashions at the school, some of which might be outlawed under tougher new rules governing dress approved last night by the school board.

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has a few exceptions.

"We're not saying students can't wear certain clothes," Carrillo said. "We're saying when students can't exhibit certain behaviors or postures, or congregate in large groups because of the potential, that when they congregate in groups and just begin to walk around in groups — I interpret that as intimidating and I encourage them to do something positive instead."

In 1993, California legislators deemed "gang-related apparel" hazardous to student health and safety and passed a law to put safe schools in the same company as dress codes.

Besides red, students at E.A. Hall know that "Daisy Duke" shorts, shirts worn above the midriff or below the cleavage, and clothes depicting alcohol or drug products will prompt a call home to parents, who are asked to bring a change of clothing to school.

Many students there object to restrictive dress codes and are skeptical about its impact on safe-

ty. "They say it will stop the violence, but I don't think so," Mariela Renteria, 14, said. "They'll still know who's a gangster and who's not. The other gangs already know who's a part of their crowd already."

"We can't change the people who make trouble," said Anna Nevarez, 14.

Nacho Arteaga, 13, thinks the current dress code does not go far enough. Some brand name shirts and pants, popular among gang members, should also be banned because they promote gang violence at school, he said.

The overhauled discipline policy also reflects board approval of school uniforms, an idea Rolling Hills parents will soon be surveyed about.

"If the interest is there, we'll pursue (school uniforms)," Carrillo said. "If it's not there, then we'll stop."

School policies on uniforms must secure board approval before they are enforced. Also, parents, staff members and students must be surveyed and a committee formed to determine the uniform style, according to the policy.

Earlier this month, the state Senate approved a bill that would allow schools to make uniforms

mandatory at public schools. The bill, SB1269, is expected to go to the Assembly floor in about three weeks.

The policy approved last night and the proposed legislation have a few differences between them.

Pajaro Valley schools must now accommodate students who refuse to wear or cannot afford to buy uniforms, according to the new policy.

When parents do not comply, the school district "has two obvious choices," Assistant Superintendent Bert Post said. "One choice would be that we have to accommodate them by letting the student come to school whether they wear a uniform or not. The other possibility would be to move the student to another school, close to their home, that does not wear uniforms."

SB1269 would require schools to give parents a six-month notice about new uniform policies and attendance agreements with other school districts to ensure students who do not wear uniforms are taught.

Because it would take about a year to put uniforms in Pajaro Valley schools, parents will probably receive a six-month notice of the policy approved last night, Post said.