

What dress codes?



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

San Lorenzo Valley students, from left, Gideon Enz, Jeremy True, John Rowland, Heather Wallen and Jennie McGarr support freedom of expression.

Rules unfashionable here

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SANTA CRUZ — Dress codes are coming back into fashion across the country, but area students and educators say such codes would never fly here.

In Texas and Georgia, boys are getting sent home from school if their hair touches their collar.

In a New Mexico school district, no one can wear shorts or mini skirts higher than five inches above the knee.

But, "This town's too far off on its own trip to have that happen here," said Keeli Blackman, a 15-year-old

sophomore at Santa Cruz High School.

Blackman cuts a distinctive picture, clad in a black leather jacket, black tights, lime green spandex shorts and a long black T-shirt, with her hair partially "buzzed," with the rest long and dyed black, pulled back in a headband.

"I would fight whoever I would have to to wear my leather jacket," she said.

Blackman's friend, Meghan Radford, also 15 and clad in black cotton fashions, said fashion shouldn't matter. "I don't think the way you dress has anything to do with learning."

Most Santa Cruz County school officials agree, and the few dress and hair

policies that exist are related to safety, hygiene and "decency."

"We try to look at the kid, not the clothes," said Dave Weiss, principal of SLV High. "Some kids run around with blue hair — well, so what? It's OK. It's one of the few times in your life where you can dress the way you want, in your costume."

Administrators in county's three high school districts — San Lorenzo Valley, Santa Cruz City, and Pajaro Valley — reported that they require students to wear shoes and shirts, and to wear closed shoes in classes where heavy equipment is used.

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Students must change their clothes after physical education, for health reasons.

All the schools ban T-shirts with foul language or messages judged to be obscene. All the administrators said they ask students to change if they are wearing an outfit that is so revealing that it is "too risqué" or "disruptive."

"It's not much of an issue here," said Terry Pearman, assistant principal of Santa Cruz High School, which has one of the most diverse student populations in the county, fashion-wise.

Surfer fashions are OK, as long as they wear shirts and shoes. The "death look" — where students dress all in black and put white pancake makeup on their faces to create a post-life look — is all right, too.

Even the punk fashion of mohawks and wildly spiked hair is fine, Pearman said. However, he has forbidden spiked leather bracelets because they are dangerous and can be used as weapons, he said.

'If students are trying to get a message across, it should be allowed.'

— Jeremy True

San Lorenzo Valley High School prohibits any T-shirt or other clothing promoting beer, spirits or drugs, including beer company advertisements such as the "Spuds MacKenzie" Budweiser beer gimmick.

Pearman said he wishes the City Schools District would ban those T-shirts, but he's not sure the district could win a civil rights battle with the large group that would likely resist such a policy.

Tony Calvo, principal of Watsonville High, said his school only discourages messages that clearly

promote use of alcohol and illegal drugs. But some designs, such as Corona beer T-shirts, have become a teen-age "fashion statement," he said.

Calvo said his school also prohibits obvious displays of gang affiliation "colors," but only if they are certain of the symbol, as in the case of a colored bandana.

Each of the administrators estimated that he sees only a handful of students each year about dress code violations.

Jeremy True, a 16-year-old junior at SLV High, said he thinks students should be allowed freedom of expression. On a typical day, he wears a black mod suit with a felt hat. His hair is cut short, except for his long, long bangs, which are dyed light blue and silver, and drape over one eye.

The district shouldn't ban T-shirts unless the message is truly vulgar, promotes illegal drug use, or "degrades people, like racially," he said.

"If students are saying something, trying to get a message across, it should be allowed," True said.