Black Educators' Views on Middle School Students' Dress and Uniforms: Addressing Challenges from Commercialism*

Sylvan I. Alleyne, Velma LaPoint, Jennifer Lee, and Harold W. Mitchell

Youth dress, influenced by commercialism, impacts students' attitudes and behaviors in public schools. This article reports quantitative data and qualitative data on Black educators' views on student dress and behavior, including the use of uniforms. Findings indicate that educators support the use of school uniforms because they believe that uniforms reduced the risk of both psychological harm and school related problems. Younger students (sixth graders) agreed with the educators while the older students disagreed. These findings generally reflect the views of many educators who are grappling with effective strategies to reduce dress-related problems among youth in public schools.

Children and adolescents are socialized around dress across several settings such as the family, school, marketplace, workplace, and others. Research has been conducted on dress socialization and its influence on children's development and has identified many dress-related challenges and problems within these various contexts (LaPoint, Alleyne, Lee, & Mitchell, 2003). Many public schools, especially at the elementary and middle school levels, have begun to implement student uniforms in an effort to promote student health and safety (Lopez, 2003). Very little empirical research exists on the effectiveness of school uniforms on student achievement and social competence. Moreover, little research exists in educators' views on the nature of dress-related problems at school, especially the views of educators of color (LaPoint et al., 2003).

This article reports qualitative and quantitative data on Black educators' views on dress and behavior in a public middle school in a large Northeastern city. It is part of a larger study on youth dress and behavior and includes data collected from students (LaPoint et al., 2003). The article includes a literature review, a description of the study including the sample and methods, analysis and findings, and implications for further research, policies, and programs relating to the use of uniforms in public schools.

**Literature Review**

While literature on student dress and behavior in public schools often cites educators' views on youth dress and behavior in public schools, it is often anecdotal (LaPoint et al., 2003). The literature generally focuses on educators' (e.g., teachers, administrators, staff) views of challenges of youth dress to classroom and school behaviors and the solutions

---

*This manuscript was prepared from data from the Youth Dress and Behavior Project funded by the Howard University-Sponsored Faculty Research Program in the Social Sciences, Humanities, and Education.*
to theses challenges, including the use of uniforms (King, Walker, & Minor, 2002; King, 1998; LaPoint et al., 2003; Lopez, 2003; Mitchell & Knechtle, 2003). Research and reports are inconclusive about the positive impact of uniforms on various academic and academic-related behaviors (Brunsma & Rockquemore, 1998; LaPoint et al., 2003). Moreover, some research indicates mixed support for the use of uniforms in public schools (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1998) even though the federal government issued guidelines encouraging the use of uniforms in public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). Finally, the literature, generally does not relate commercialism influences on youth dress in schools to broader commercialism influences in other settings (LaPoint & Alleyne, 2001; LaPoint et al., 2003). The present study provides empirical data, both quantitative and qualitative, on educators’ views on the use student uniforms in one public middle school. It also provides data on educators’ views about commercial influences on students’ attitudes and dress in the school and other socialization settings.

The Research Study

The study used two approaches to obtain educators’ views on student dress and behavior in a public middle school in a northeastern U.S. city. The first was a survey that examined Black educators’ attitudes toward dress and behavior among students. These data were compared with the data obtained from all students in the school (grades 6, 7, and 8). The second approach was a focus group to explore the perceptions of teachers and staff on the implementation of school uniforms. The school was selected because it had implemented, the prior year, a school uniform policy. Like many schools implementing uniform policies, the school’s student body was middle school students—where it is often easier to implement a school uniform policy at the lower grades than at the high school level in public schools (LaPoint et al., 2003).

The school had 343 students—295 African American students (86%) and 48 Hispanic American students (14%). There were 151 girls (44%) and 192 boys (56%). The majority of students were low income as defined by 243 students (71%) receiving free and reduced lunches. There were 24 Black teachers, counselors, administrators, and other staff.

Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers administered an instrument, the Teachers and School Personnel Survey: Dress and Behavior among Students, which was developed by the first two authors of this article. It was a self-administered questionnaire completed by 16 teachers at the same time that the students completed their surveys at the school (LaPoint et al., 2003). The questionnaire has four sections: (a) demographic background; (b) knowledge about dress and behavior; (c) attitudes about dress and behavior (i.e., subscales on personal harm, status due to dress, school-related issues, gang-related behavior); and (d) personal experiences and practices. This article focuses on a comparison of teachers’ and students’ attitudes toward the four subscales mentioned above. Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) with chi-square tests to establish differences between the educators and students.

Survey Findings

Educators reported that students experienced taunting, fights, or a combination of problems at school that may be related to the way in which they dressed. Approximately half of the 16 educators (e.g., teachers, counselors, staff) interviewed felt that parents and other adults, who set rules and guidelines for the students in grades 6–8, were most
influential in how students dress for school. The majority (93.8%) of the 16 school personnel agreed that dress codes and uniforms are being used increasingly to reduce or prevent dress-related problems at school. Eleven (68.8%) of the 16 school personnel agreed that students are judged by their dress and appearance. Also the majority (87.5%) of these school personnel agreed that the way students dress for school set the pattern/teaches them how to dress for work.

We also compared students' and educators' views on the use of uniforms (see LaPoint et al., 2003, for a more detailed analysis of students' attitudes towards dress and behavior). Fourteen of the 16 school personnel agreed that dress influenced overall behavior at school. In general, students in the lower grade (6) agreed with the school personnel's views more than students in the higher grade (8). There was a significant difference ($p < .05$) between grade status on this view; students in 6th grade were more in agreement with the school personnel than those in the 7th and 8th grades.

The data on attitudes about dress and related problems were analyzed in the following categories: (a) personal harm; (b) social status—in the form of idolization for wearing nice jewelry and clothing; (c) gang-related issues—gang affiliation colors; and (d) school-related issues of tardiness, absenteeism, poor academic performance, breaking school rules, and disruptive behavior.

Regarding the category of personal harm (e.g., teasing, taunting, fighting, theft), the majority of students as well as educators agreed that students are teased for wearing clothing that are out of style or wearing shabby clothing as shown in Table 1. However, as shown in Table 2, there were significant inter-grade differences between students, which were due mainly to the 8th grade students disagreeing with both statements regarding persons being attacked for wearing designer dress and nice jewelry at school.

### Table 1
Students' and Educators' Views on Students being Teased for Wearing Out of Style or Shabby Dress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ATTITUDE</th>
<th>OUT OF STYLE</th>
<th>SCHOOL PERSONNEL</th>
<th>SHABBY</th>
<th>SCHOOL PERSONNEL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree / Agree</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree / Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2
Students' and Educators' Views on Attack on Persons for Wearing Designer Dress and Nice Jewelry at School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ATTITUDE</th>
<th>6th GRADE</th>
<th>7th GRADE</th>
<th>8th GRADE</th>
<th>SCHOOL PERSONNEL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree / Agree</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree / Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***$p < .001$
and persons getting their jewelry stolen. The pattern for physical attack was similar to that of teasing. The majority of the students and the school personnel agreed with the possibility of an attack on a person as well as theft when students wore designer clothing and nice jewelry.

Regarding social status (i.e., idolization for wearing designer dress and expensive looking jewelry), 48% of the students in comparison with 87.5% of school personnel agreed that students gained social status for wearing designer clothes and nice jewelry. Twenty-seven percent (27%) of students disagreed while none of the school personnel disagreed with the statement.

Regarding gang-related dress (i.e., gang-related colors, symbols, and dress), there was a significant difference between the students' and the school personnel's views that students who wear certain colors or clothing maybe connected with certain gangs as shown in Table 3. The younger students were more in agreement with the school personnel while the older students disagreed with the statement.

Regarding school-related problems (i.e., tardiness, absenteeism, poor academic achievement, disciplinary actions), students and school personnel differed significantly in their view that students who are too focused on clothing or appearance may skip school sometimes as shown in Table 4. While most students (55%) disagreed, 62.5% of school personnel disagreed.

### TABLE 3

*Students' and Educators' Attitudes toward Students who Wear Certain Colors or Dress may be Connected with Gangs*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ATTITUDE</th>
<th>STUDENTS**</th>
<th>SCHOOL PERSONNEL**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6TH GRADE</td>
<td>7TH GRADE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree / Agree</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree / Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05; ** p < .01

### TABLE 4

*Students' and Educators' Views about Students who are Too Focused on Dress*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ATTITUDE</th>
<th>STUDENTS**</th>
<th>SCHOOL PERSONNEL**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May Skip School Sometimes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree / Agree</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree / Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*May Get Lower Academic Grades*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ATTITUDE</th>
<th>STUDENTS**</th>
<th>SCHOOL PERSONNEL**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree / Agree</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree / Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p < .01
personnel agreed with the statement. There were no significant differences between students in the three grades.

Although there were no differences between grades, students differed significantly from school personnel in the opinion that students who are too focused on clothing or appearance may achieve lower academic grades, as shown in Table 4. There were no significant differences between students and school personnel in the opinion that students who are too focused on clothing or appearance may disrupt classes. However, there were significant differences between students in the three grades—the younger students agreed while the older students disagreed with the statement. There was also no significant difference between students and school personnel in the views that tardiness may be due to too much focus on clothing and appearance, 40% of each group agreed with the statement. Finally, there were no significant differences between students in the three grades, nor among students and school personnel in their opinion that students who are too focused on clothing or appearance may break school rules. Eight (50%) of school personnel agreed with the statement.

Focus Group Procedures and Data Analysis

The focus group provided additional data on educators' views about student dress and behavior including the use of uniforms at their school. The focus groups consisted of four Black American facilitators (as described earlier) and 12 volunteer educators that included 9 teachers, 2 counselors, and a librarian. The facilitators began the focus group by (a) introducing themselves and (b) describing the focus group objectives, focus group procedures, confidentiality guidelines, and use of collected focus group data.

Focus group participants were asked questions from the Unstructured Interviewer's Guide developed by the first two authors of this article. The Guide was designed to obtain information from the educators' views in three general areas, the Change Process Relating to Uniform Use, Acceptance of Uniforms, and Procedures to Facilitate Positive Uniform Use. There was one two-hour focus group conducted. It was conducted in a question and answer format with four facilitators—two group leaders and two recorders. The focus group discussion was tape recorded with the participants' permission. The tape recordings were transcribed onto a hard copy and then analyzed manually for responses to specific questions and topical themes.

Focus Group Findings

Question One. The first question that facilitators asked participants was twofold: (a) why school stakeholders decided to implement a school uniform policy and (b) what strategies they used to implement the uniform policy. First, educators said that economic diversity of the student body played a primary role. Some students were unable to afford many of the heavily marketed, expensive athletic shoes, clothes, and accessories that others were able to obtain. One participant said, "The children didn't all dress the same because of their parents' income levels, which would lead to ridicule." Consequently, students ridiculing peers would manifest itself in ways that interfere with the learning process, including bullying, absenteeism, and fighting—both classroom and school disturbances.

Educators also hoped that uniforms would curb the school violence that stemmed from bullying. A participant said, "Kids were teased a lot for not having certain types of clothes." These clothes included such name brands as Gucci, Versace, and Nike. An example of teasing was cited by the participant, "You don't have people saying 'oh you wore that yesterday.' You used to hear that a lot." Additionally, educators believed that
uniforms could improve school attendance. One educator said that there were some students who would not come to school "because they did not have what they thought was the proper clothing for their peers."

Regarding policymaking, educators said that several stakeholders were involved in the decision to develop and implement a uniform policy including administrators, teachers, the Parent Teacher Association, and the Student Council. Six years before the uniform policy was implemented at the school, the Board of Education held a public meeting to discuss escalating school violence and to suggest ways to curb the growing trend. In that meeting, school uniforms were mentioned as one of several solutions to prevent and reduce violence among students. Three years later, the school's administrators and members of the Parents' and Teachers' Association sent a survey to all parents and family members to obtain their views on the proposed use of school uniforms. The administration then took the idea to the Board of Education and a public hearing was held. The school adopted the uniform policy after obtaining positive results from all stakeholders. The school's administration then allowed students and their family members to select a type of uniform for the school. Several companies were invited to the school to display their products. After the choices had been narrowed to a few options, students were asked to select the uniform that they liked best.

**Question Two.** The second question focused on educators' views of how students responded to uniforms. All participants reported that they observed differences in students' behavior—teachers at every grade noted some type of difference in student behavior. One particular difference that educators noted was the reduction in teasing and bullying by students. One educator remarked, "I don't hear about the clothing or teasing in terms of clothing." Also, the uniforms have helped with class attendance. Educators indicated that they believed that the students were learning more in the classroom as a result of the school uniform policy. For instance, one teacher stated, "Well, there is not as much time wasted on telling them to stop 'jone-ing' [competitive, back and forth verbal bantering] on individuals in class." They also noted that the students' sense of pride in their school had grown because of the uniform policy.

When educators were asked if they noted age differences in students' responses to uniforms, educators' responses were mixed. Some indicated that there were no differences at all because there was only a slight difference in student's ages, while others said that there were noticeable differences. It is possible that there are age differences. It is also possible that some educators are more attuned to age differences and reporting such differences. Educators agreed, however, that there were major differences between girls and boys in that the boys demonstrated a more positive attitude towards uniforms. One administrator stated, "More of the young ladies than the men do not like the uniforms. Because the boys like wearing uniforms, they will make sure their shirts are ironed and clean. I mean some will wear nice tailored-like, white shirts and nice pants, nice and pressed. You can see the difference when they walk in the room. Some will even wear a tie sometimes, some of them." As for the attitude of girls in this particular school, another educator added, "Some girls do not want to wear the skirts; they sit as though they have on slacks or jeans. The skirt does not deter them from "un-lady like" behavior. Teachers would try to curb this type of behavior and the girls would reply that they have shorts on underneath their skirts.

When asked if they thought students liked the uniform policy, educators indicated that a majority of the student body disliked the uniform policy and many found ways to use their regular clothes instead. However, some children liked uniforms because "they don't have the designer clothes" to compete with peers. Educators were asked if they liked the uniform policy and they all responded positively. Overall, they said that the
policy had reduced teasing, absenteeism, and school violence and students were more focused on the teaching and learning process. Moreover, they said that they believed that school uniforms increased students’ confidence, pride, and self-esteem and improved behavior in class.

**Question Three.** The third question facilitators asked was how the uniform policy could be enhanced. Educators maintained that consistency in the uniform policy was the primary way to facilitate a positive attitude about uniforms. One educator said, “If one student has to wear uniforms, all students have to wear uniforms. There are no exceptions. If you choose not to wear uniforms, you need to enroll in another school.” Educators emphasized that “conforming to the uniform policy must be reinforced everyday, all day.” Others asserted that the message of enforcement starts with teachers, “all teachers should be told of the importance of enforcing the uniform policy.” Several educators said that talking to parents and family members is essential, and, if necessary, they could be offered help to acquire uniforms.

There were different opinions expressed on the use of individual and classroom incentives (e.g., pizza parties, dances, or in-school movies) to get students to comply with uniform policies. Educators offered other ways to improve the school’s uniform policy such as standardizing the student’s shoes to prevent students being teased about their shoes. School administrators even went as far as to give some students athletic shoes, but students refused them because they were not name brand. Another educator added that ties should be apart of the uniform. Finally, another educator wanted to change the design and color of the uniforms, suggesting that instead of White shirts, T-shirts would be more developmentally appropriate.

There were additional comments on strategies to improve the uniform policy. Classroom topics on social skills should be added to reinforce the school uniform policy. When asked about how to implement suggested changes to the uniform policy, such as starting with the sixth-graders, educators unanimously agreed that the change should apply to all students simultaneously. Another suggestion was to give student rewards, for example, a “dress down day.” This would allow students to wear their desired clothing on a certain day. Educators also stated student-peer and student-educator discussions would help. Overall, most of the educators were positive about the uniform policy.

**Discussion of Findings**

Findings from both the surveys and focus group indicate that educators believe students are impacted by commercial influences related to dress, influencing students’ attitudes and choice about dress. There are possible explanations for inter-grade differences. Perhaps, the younger students are at the developmental stage where they are more likely to accept parental, and educators’ views—and these views may serve as a buffer to commercial influences. Also, older students may be more susceptible to commercial influences especially since they are at the onset of adolescence where dress becomes highly influenced by peers who are in turn influenced by commercial influences. This is supported by other conceptualizations and research on commercial influences on adolescents (LaPoint & Alleyne, 2001).

We found that educators were very favorable towards uniforms in both the survey and focus group. This finding is consistent with some existing literature on educators’ views supporting the use of uniforms (LaPoint et al., 2003; Lopez, 2003). From the focus groups, educators outlined numerous factors why school uniforms are important to them. However, safety is their key concern. And from their perspectives, uniforms have improved school safety, promoted academic achievement, reduced peer pressure, reduced socioeconomic competition, and discouraged gang affiliation. Uniforms have also helped
in identifying non-enrolled, truant students from other schools and other outsiders. Additionally, uniforms give parents and families much needed financial respite from “keeping up with the Joneses” by outfitting their children in the “latest must-have” fashions.

Regarding educator views of student responses, some of the girls felt that the uniforms denied them a certain freedom of expression. It may be that girls, even at these ages, are more influenced by appearance standards (e.g., beauty, dress, hair- and nail-styles) in music videos, the Internet, and fashion magazines that generally market to females. Boys, on the other hand, seemed to show more pride in their uniforms. Educators responded that if parent and family involvement in the school was higher, students might have better attitudes about the uniforms, especially since parents purchase the uniforms. Given the influence of commercialism on students’ dress and behavior, as expressed by the educators, uniforms in public schools may be an appropriate intervention to mitigate dress-related challenges. In addition, there may be a need to implement social skills curricula where dress-related issues can also be addressed. However, each school district will need to determine whether uniforms and such social skills curricula are appropriate for their stakeholders.

Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

This study contributes to the growing body of research and reports on the use of school uniforms in public schools. It focuses on Black educators’ views on this topic—perspectives that are not often studied or reported. The study provides insights about the use of school uniforms and their perceived impact in several areas. If we want to see the long-term effects of uniforms on various outcomes such as academic achievement, school climate, attendance, and safety, then a longitudinal evaluation study may be more appropriate to explain the effectiveness of a school uniform intervention. Future research needs to have (a) larger samples of students, educators, and family and community members such as prospective employers; (b) both qualitative and quantitative methodologies; and (c) baseline data prior to the use of uniforms with clearly identifiable and measurable outcomes.

In terms of practice, there is a need to involve all stakeholders in developing, implementing, and evaluating the use of uniforms. Although the researchers were unable to collect data from parents and family members on the use of student uniforms (e.g., low participation, researcher time constraints), such data are needed, especially since educators need meaningful parent and family participation in developing and implanting dress codes and uniforms. Finally, educators will have to decide if such research as well as policy is warranted given the multitude of priorities and resource constraints that educators face in advancing both student achievement and social competence. In conclusion, youth are influenced increasingly by commercial contexts and youth of color have specific vulnerabilities as indicated in this issue. Educational researchers, policymakers, and practitioners, including advocates, must continue to elucidate the importance of these commercial contexts in addressing the challenges and prospects of all youth and stakeholders in the education contexts.

REFERENCES


**AUTHORS**

SYLVAN I. ALLEYNE and VELMA LAPOINT are Professors, and JENNIFER LEE is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Human Development and Psychoeducational Studies, School of Education, Howard University; sallyene@howard.edu, vlapoint@howard.edu, and jlee@howard.edu. Dr. Alleyne's interests include commercial influences on youth dress, social aspects of chronic illnesses, and obesity and its complications. Dr. LaPoint's interests include commercial influences on child development, families, and communities, student academic achievement, social competence, and the impact of parental incarceration on children, families, and communities. Ms. Lee's interests include learning, teaching, and schooling processes, student academic achievement and social competence, and commercial influences on child development.

HAROLD W. MITCHELL is a Judicial Law Clerk with the Montgomery County Circuit Court, Rockville, MD; hwmitch@aol.com. His interests include civil rights, educational, and administrative law.