

Ayiana Davis

Beatrice

Elisha Peacock

Fatimah

Samaria Short

Jill

Christine Marhoney

Rosalie Ngatchou

Nasirah Fair

Samantha O'Sullivan

Phina Walker

Essence Kendall

Kristine Turner

Nadiyah W

Kamaya

Gabby

Angel

Chrissy

Catharine G

Ceon DuBose

Sage Grace Dolan-Sandrinio



DRESS CODED

Black girls, bodies, and bias in D.C. schools

NATIONAL WOMEN'S LAW CENTER





Summary of Findings

Black girls in District of Columbia schools, like girls across the country, miss out on crucial class time simply because of the clothes they wear or the style of their hair or makeup. Again and again, they are suspended for tight pants, sent to the office for shoes that aren't quite the right color, and told they must "cover up" before they can learn. Strict dress, uniform, and grooming codes do nothing to protect girls or their classmates' learning. Rather, these codes needlessly interrupt their educations.

While all students disciplined for dress code violations face these interruptions, Black girls face unique dress and hair code burdens. For example, some schools ban styles associated with Black girls and women, like hair wraps. Black girls also face adults' stereotyped perceptions that they are more sexually provocative because of their race, and thus more deserving

of punishment for a low-cut shirt or short skirt. Girls who are more physically developed or curvier than their peers also may be viewed as more promiscuous by adults, which can lead to them being punished more often for tight or revealing clothing.

Dress codes also communicate to students that girls are to be blamed for "distracting" boys, instead of teaching boys to respect girls, correct their behavior and be more responsible. This dangerous message promotes sexual harassment in schools.

The costs of dress codes are known all too well by students, but are rarely considered a matter of important education policy. In order to demonstrate the impact of dress codes, the National Women's Law Center undertook a city-wide exploration into young people's real experiences alongside 21 Black girls who attend or recently attended schools in D.C. These girls represent 12 different public schools, including charter schools and traditional public schools (known as "District of Columbia Public Schools," or DCPS).

Our findings are cause for grave concern. Plain and simple, D.C. dress codes promote race and sex discrimination and pull students out of the classroom for no good reason—often through illegal suspensions. As a result, Black girls fall behind in school, which threatens their long-term earning potential while also exacerbating longstanding and widespread racial and gender inequalities.

In this report, we present some common problems with D.C. schools' dress codes, how these rules affect Black girls, and ideas for how schools and lawmakers can do better by all girls—but especially the Black girls who make up the majority of female students in D.C. schools. We hope that our findings will serve as a call to action for D.C. educators and policymakers to support Black girls in school.

Methodology

NWLC conducted one-on-one and small group interviews with Black girls who are or have previously been enrolled in a D.C. public middle or high school. Prior to the interviews, the girls were given a written and verbal project description and also given the opportunity to opt in or out of participating in the project. During the interviews, girls were asked about their views, experiences, and suggestions related to dress codes and asked to provide feedback on policy proposals developed by NWLC. Every interview session was recorded and then transcribed. Not all interview participants chose to become co-authors. In addition to the interviews, the girls

were given the opportunity to provide written accounts of their experiences. Each girl was given the chance to confirm or edit her transcribed account. Co-authors determined how they

would be identified, including what names they preferred and whether they wanted their ages and schools listed. This report only includes accounts confirmed by the co-authors. All co-authors were given a small stipend for their time and thoughtful engagement in this report. One middle school student co-author's confirmation was delayed because she was sent home for wearing a dirty uniform the day of a scheduled meeting.

The girls range in age from 12 to 18. Some students self-identified as lesbian or queer, some self-identified as straight, and some did not disclose their sexual orientation. Per recommendations from partners, NWLC did not ask students whether they were transgender or cisgender but one participant self-identified as transgender during her interview.

Additionally, NWLC conducted a qualitative and quantitative analysis of D.C.'s public high schools' written dress code policies. This analysis was of the most recent dress code policies posted on the school's website. Three high schools did not have student or family handbooks posted online. As a result, this analysis does not include information on McKinley Technology High School, Benjamin Banneker Academic High School, or Anacostia High School beyond information provided directly by students in confirmed accounts.

The photographs in this report are pictures of six co-authors in the clothing they get in trouble for wearing at school.

Common Problems with D.C. School Dress Codes

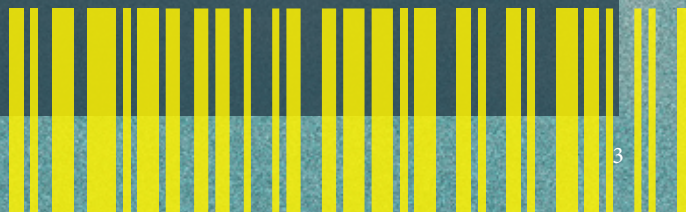
Dress and grooming codes in D.C. schools, as well as their enforcement patterns, share a number of common problems. These include:

Problems with Rules

- Rules that are overly strict
- Rules that require expensive purchases
- Rules that punish kids for dressing for the weather
- Rules based in racial stereotypes
- Rules based in sex stereotypes
- Unclear rules

Problems with Enforcement

- Discriminatory enforcement
- Enforcement that promotes rape culture
- Enforcement through physical touching by adults, including school police
- Shame-based punishments
- Overly harsh and illegal punishments




Problems with Rules

Overly Strict Rules

Many D.C. public schools have detailed dress codes that ban forms of student expression that pose no threat to classmates' safety or ability to learn. Many of these rules target "revealing" or "tight" clothing most often worn by girls, like halter tops and miniskirts. Of D.C. high schools with publicly accessible dress codes:

- 81 percent require a uniform
- 65 percent regulate the length of skirts
- 58 percent prohibit tank tops
- 42 percent ban tights and/or leggings
- 45 percent require students to wear belts (and many specify the belts must be black)

“In middle school, I had a dress code and they always dress coded people. Sometimes, they made you miss class because you didn’t have the right shoes or right sweater. That’s the downside to school dress codes.”
— Beatrice, Phelps ACE High School



“One time, I came into school with jeans that had holes in them, and as soon as I walked in at the metal detector they told me to go to the principal’s office. I was like, they’re just holes. You can’t see anything.”
— Kristine Turner, 16

“A teacher made a girl put on her jacket because her school jersey was a tank top.” — Eliska, 15

- Students must wear appropriately sized tan or khaki pants, shorts, or skirts.
- Skirts and shorts must be worn no more than two (2) inches above the knee.
- Belts must be worn if there are belt loops on the student’s pants, shorts, or skirts. . . .

The Following Are Prohibited:

- Pants, shorts, or skirts that have patterns, lace, polka dots, stripes, holes, or words.
- Brightly colored tights, leg-warmers, knee-high socks or fishnet stockings . . .
- Undershirts that have patterns, lace, polka dots, stripes, holes, or words.
- Sleeveless or cut-off shirts, blouses, dresses, or tank tops.

— Kipp DC College Preparatory Dress Code Policy



Expensive Rules

Some supporters of dress codes claim that uniforms hide students' financial differences. Some even argue that uniforms are less expensive for families. However, D.C. public schools' policies often require kids and their parents to purchase expensive clothing that puts a strain on families already struggling to make ends meet.

“At my middle school, we had to go to Campus Outfitters to buy the required uniform. I thought the uniforms were horrible. It consisted of an ugly plaid skirt and these dreadful red sweaters. Campus Outfitters sold many different school uniforms and I thought their prices were expensive. Altogether, my family paid approximately \$300 for the entire uniform.” — Catherine G., 16, Phelps A.C.E. High School

“I got to pay \$25 dollars for a sweater, \$20 dollars for each shirt I get, that's like \$100 dollars for four shirts.” — Phina Walker, 17, Thurgood Marshall Academy

**“The school dress codes are unfair because people can't afford to keep buying expensive special shirts and khaki pants. They could just let us wear a regular t-shirt and some red pants. My mom was mad because it's too much money. My brother goes to Sousa Middle School, too. And each shirt costs \$15 online. That's too much. And you have to pay to 'dress down' on Fridays—to not wear the uniform. You have to pay \$2 for one dress down pass. One day. One day. The school should let us wear regular clothes throughout the school. Why do you have to pay someone to actually wear clothes that we want to?”
— Kamaya, 12, Sousa Middle School**

Weather-Defiant Rules


Many dress codes do not account for the weather. Students are required to “cover up” during hot summer months and are prohibited from wearing coats or out-of-uniform sweaters during the winter—even when the school building is inadequately heated. Forty-two percent of D.C. public high schools with publicly accessible dress code policies ban outerwear, like jackets and sweaters, in school. Others place restrictions on the kinds of outerwear students may wear.

“We were not permitted to wear outerwear like jackets or coats inside the school. When we went through the metal detectors all outerwear had to be removed. The principal expelled one boy for having a coat on. It was considered a security violation.”

— Catherine G., 16, Phelps A.C.E. High School

“During the summer, they always harass girls and make us change.”

—Nasirah Fair,
17, Wilson
High
School



“We can't wear ... any outside coats [inside] but the school is freezing.”
— Ceon DuBose,
Phelps A.C.E.
High School*

“Outerwear cannot be worn during school hours. Administration discretion can waive this rule based on extenuating circumstances.” — Cardozo Education Campus Dress Code

*Phelps' formal dress code indicates students can wear a uniform school jacket with the Phelps logo, available for purchase at additional cost, indoors.

**“You should be able to show your shoulders when it’s hot.
What’s so attractive about shoulders?”**

— Rosalie Ngatchou, 15, D.C. International School



“Last year, when we were in a temporary building, we had to transfer from academic to arts block, so we had to wait for buses. It was really hot that day and I took off my jean jacket because since we were outside; inside, I was wearing a jacket. Since the shirt I had on underneath was strapless, I got dress coded and I was told that I couldn’t wear that.

But I was outside and it was really hot. What do you expect?”

— Ayiana Davis, 16, Duke Ellington School of the Arts

“OVERSIZED COATS, JACKETS, AND OTHER OUTER-WEAR /GARMENTS ARE NOT ALLOWED TO BE WORN IN THE CLASSROOM. NO EXCEPTIONS!”

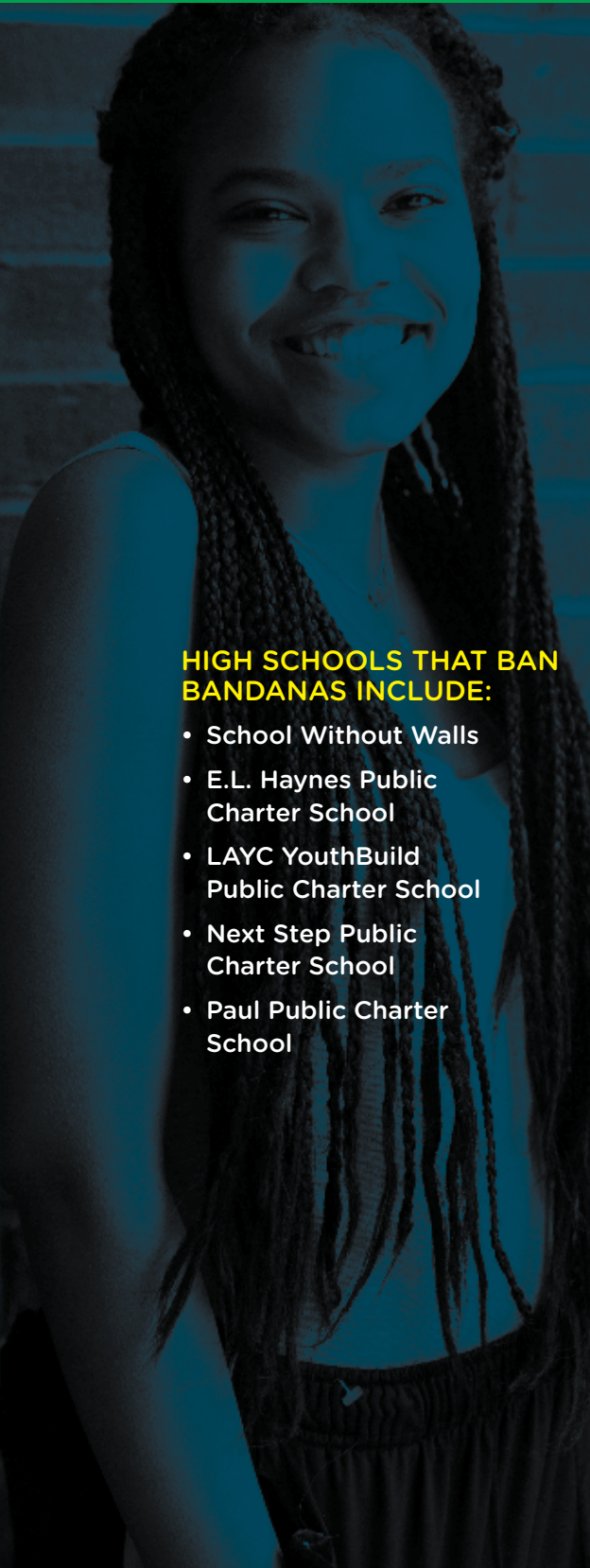
— Cardozo Education Campus flyer on school dress code

A close-up photograph of a person's face and neck, focusing on their braided hair. The person has dark skin and is wearing a small, round, clear earring and a thin gold chain necklace. The background is a plain, light-colored wall. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

Rules Based in Racial Stereotypes

Black people face

assumptions about who they are and what they are like based on racial stereotypes. For example, traditionally Black hairstyles and head coverings, which often have specific cultural or religious meaning, are sometimes viewed as “unprofessional.” These stereotypes can influence dress code policies, many of which target students of color. For instance, 68 percent of D.C. public high schools that publish their dress codes online ban hair wraps or head scarves.



HIGH SCHOOLS THAT BAN BANDANAS INCLUDE:

- School Without Walls
- E.L. Haynes Public Charter School
- LAYC YouthBuild Public Charter School
- Next Step Public Charter School
- Paul Public Charter School

“At my sister’s school, black girls are told that they shouldn’t wear headwraps.”

— Nasirah Fair, 17, Wilson High School

“The following clothing and/or personal items are not permitted in Ellington’s professional educational environment: . . . **No do-rags or baseball caps in the building at any time for males or females. **No combs in hair.**” — Duke Ellington School of the Arts Dress Code Policy**

“Apparently we cannot wear headwraps unless it’s for religious purposes.* Because all my friends who are Muslims are allowed to wear their hijabs but because it’s a cultural [rather than religious] thing we’re not allowed to do that. And so a lot of students are upset because they said that’s being culturally insensitive. I agree.” — Fatimah, 17, School Without Walls High School

*While School Without Walls’ formal dress code does ban bandanas, the policy does not include an explicit ban on headwraps. Many schools enforce rules that are not memorialized in official policies.


Rules Based in Sex Stereotypes

Many schools across the country have different dress codes for girls and boys based on sex stereotypes (i.e., notions about how people “should” act based on their gender). For example, such stereotypes may presume that girls should wear feminine skirts, while boys should be active and athletic in pants. These rules also can present obstacles for transgender students whose schools do not respect their gender identity, as well as nonbinary and gender fluid students.* While DCPS formally prohibits sex-specific rules, 35 percent of D.C. public high schools with publicly accessible policies—including some DCPS schools—have specific dress code requirements for students based on their gender.

“NOTE – boys are not allowed to wear earrings to school. Gentlemen with earrings will be asked to remove their earring(s) prior to entering the building. NO EXCEPTIONS” — Achievement Prep Wahler Middle School Dress Code Policy

“All boys must wear belts. Pants may never sag.” — KIPP D.C. College Preparatory School Dress Code Policy

*A non-binary person is someone who does not identify as a man or a woman. A genderfluid person’s gender identity varies over time.



Even dress codes that are the same for boys and girls may nonetheless rely on—and reinforce—sex stereotypes. Often dress codes enforce backward ideas about what makes a girl feminine or “ladylike.”

“The dress code is targeted towards girls, such as [rules requiring] fingertip-length bottoms and no shoulders showing. However, boys are allowed to wear whatever they please.” — Fatimah, 17, School Without Walls

“We're not allowed to wear shorts, but we're allowed to wear skirts.” — Phina Walker, 17, Thurgood Marshall Academy

School rules that ban “revealing” or tight clothing are also based in sex stereotypes that girls should be modest. Often, these rules are unclear, allowing administrators to enforce their own ideas about how much skin girls should show. Rules prohibiting makeup and nail polish are also based in a narrow vision of how a “good” girl presents herself.

“For trans students and non-binary students, dress codes are just another form of restriction. They also normalize cisgender and traditional roles and views. It's traumatizing to be forced into clothes that don't match your identity.” — Sage Grace Dolan-Sandrino, 17

“They told us

at the beginning of the year that we need to wear bras, which was gross.”

— Nasirah Fair, 17,
Wilson High School*

“NOT permitted:
make-up, lipstick,
colored-gloss, etc.”

— Jefferson
Middle School
Academy
Uniform
Policy

**Ten percent of
D.C. public high
schools that
publish their
dress code
policies ban
students
from wearing
makeup.**

“No face makeup . . . allowed.”
— Friendship Collegiate Academy Charter School
Dress Code Policy

“You can’t have a certain length of fingernails. This girl would come in with long cat nails and our dean would say, ‘You gotta take the nails off?’ She would come through and at the end her nails would be gone. The middle school tutor used to tell us we couldn’t wear lipstick, I guess because we were in middle school. We were kinda young, you know, trying weird lipstick and stuff, but it’s not that serious. You can’t tell us what lipstick we can and cannot wear. She tried to say we couldn’t wear no lipstick at all. Administrators try to be like your parent or something, but I don’t go home with you at the end of the day. **They said the lipstick was distracting. The nails were just considered too grown. And they’d say really short skirts were distracting. You get in trouble for that.**”

— Kristine Turner, 16

Unclear Rules

Unclear rules promote discrimination. Because they are open to interpretation, they create too much room for unfair enforcement. They are also hard for students to follow.

“*Dyed hair or a hairstyle*

that serves as a distraction—as determined in the sole discretion of the school—is not permitted. . . . Clothing must be sized appropriately to fit the Scholar. Clothes may not be too big or too small. What is too big or small is determined in the sole discretion of Achievement Prep administration.” — Achievement Prep Dress Code Policy

“**Clothes that are inappropriate in size (too tight) or see-through or expose undergarments may not be worn. Other inappropriate items determined by a Thurgood Marshall Academy administrator will not be allowed. Staff members will determine whether a student’s attire complies with the dress code and will report any violations to the Dean of Students. The Dean’s decision regarding dress code is final.**”
— Thurgood Marshall Academy Dress Code Policy

Problems with Enforcement

Discriminatory Enforcement

Black girls are 20.8 times more likely to be suspended from D.C. schools than white girls. One reason for this disproportionate punishment is that adults often see Black girls as older and more sexual than their white peers, and so in need of greater correction for minor misbehaviors like “talking back” or wearing a skirt shorter than permitted.¹ Race- and sex-based stereotypes result in unequal enforcement of rules.

“At my school the dress code is more enforced on the girls than boys. The girls get in trouble more often for ripped jeans and tank tops but the boys usually don’t.”
— Christine Marhone, 16, D.C. International School

“Yes, they really enforce their dress code especially towards the girls. You never hear a boy [say], ‘Oh, y’all got dress coded today, bro.’ I mean at Banneker, no, it’s not about race, but it is by body type. Like the little skinny girls can just wear what they want. I’m just being honest. And then the girls with curves, like really curvy, they just [say], ‘Oh, you’re showing too much, you’re revealing so much.’ I have this friend she has no breasts, no butt. She wears crop tops, mini skirts. It doesn’t matter. They don’t care.” — Essence Kendall, 18, Charles Herbert Flowers High School, previously attended Banneker High School



Three words to describe your school's dress code:

“Unequally enforced, bothersome, eh” — Eliska, 15

“Strict, ugly, extra”
— Kristine Turner, 16

“Racist, sexist, unfair”
— Samantha O’Sullivan, 17

“Silly, uncomfortable, expensive”
— Samaria Short, 13,
Sousa Middle School

“ We have a dress code but it’s more of a casual [thing]. Basically you’re not supposed to wear anything shorter than like your fingertip, so you can wear shorts and skirts, but they have to be longer than your fingertips and you’re not supposed to wear crop tops or spaghetti straps. People wear it all the time and the biggest problem is that they enforce it based on your body type basically. So what, two people be wearing the same thing and then like if you, if you’re like curvier then they’ll tell you to change because it looks inappropriate.”

— Samantha O’Sullivan, 17



“ I feel like when it comes to girls they’re like, ‘Oh, where’s your belt, where’s your belt?’ I’ve seen boys that were in front of me they didn’t even ask where his belt was. It was just let him go through.” — Phina Walker, 17, Thurgood Marshall

“I don't get why no one says

anything to the boys when the boys come to school without their uniforms. But when the girls do it, they say something. They let the boys slide and it's not fair.”

— Kamaya, 12, Sousa Middle School

“Boys can walk around shirtless outside during lunch, sag their pants, wear shirts objectifying women and aren't reprimanded at all.” — Nasirah Fair, 17, Wilson High School

“I think the rules are usually enforced depending on your body type a lot. That's often how it's enforced. I don't know, like I'm pretty skinny and small so people usually don't notice when I break the rules. But when people who are curvier wear short shorts or a skirt then I see them get dress coded. Race has to do with it sometimes. Often times I see a lot of white females wearing stuff that is just, like, I don't follow the dress code but my mother would never let me walk to school like that. Just like, backs out, really short crop tops or like really short shorts. Nobody ever says anything to them, but my friends will wear something the same or not even as bad and they'll get dress coded or have to change clothes.”

— Fatimah, 17, School Without Walls

“I've noticed how my friends have gotten dress coded on stuff because they have bigger hips, bigger breasts, or bigger butts, yet I have worn similar things but I did not get dressed coded because I'm skinnier and it is less noticeable on me.

That kind of thing teaches girls to be ashamed of their bodies.”

— Ayiana Davis, 16, Duke Ellington School of the Arts

“Many of the Caucasian

girls wear things against the dress code without getting into trouble, while girls of color would get into trouble.”


— Eliska, 15

Enforcement That Promotes Rape Culture

“The adults at this school say that if girls wear tight stuff, the boys think that it’s okay to touch them. I think everyone should keep their hands to themselves, no matter what anybody is wearing.” — Samaria Short, 13, Sousa Middle school

Too many schools make clear that girls need to cover up their bodies so as not to “distract” or “tempt” boys. That enforcement sends the clear message that boys are not responsible for their bad behavior. By blaming boys’ misconduct on girls’ choices, schools promote an environment where sexual harassment is excused. Students may think it is appropriate to comment on girls’ bodies because they see their teachers do it, too, when they enforce the dress code.

“One teacher at Banneker did not like the girls for some reason. One day she told me that I had on ripped jeans, but I had gym shorts to cover it. She was like, ‘You know why I don’t like holes above the knee? Because a boy can put [his] finger up there.’ And I’m just like, ‘Wait, what?’ Why would you even say something like that to a student? And she said, ‘So, your mom let you walk from the station to your to school like that?’ I’m like, ‘Yeah, sure.’ She wanted you to be covered.” — Essence Kendall, 18, Charles Herbert Flowers High School, previously attended Banneker High School

A close-up photograph of a person's neck and shoulder. The person has dark skin and is wearing a gold chain necklace with a pendant. The background is a plain, light-colored wall. The text is overlaid on the image.

Enforcement Through Physical Touching

Teachers, administrators, and even security guards and school police unnecessarily touch girls without their consent when enforcing a dress code. In doing so, these adults send the message to girls (and their classmates) that their bodies are not their own.

“Well, today, so this girl she had on some brown Uggs. And she didn’t have no other shoes at home because some people cannot afford all black shoes... **[The teacher] grabbed her shirt.** She told her to come, come on. And so the girl had to get up and the girl had to change her shoes to these orthopedic shoes.”
— Phina Walker, 17, Thurgood Marshall Academy

Shame-Based Punishments

Too many schools punish students who break the dress code, or even other rules, by shaming them with attention-grabbing clothing “fixes.” In doing so, the schools distract and upset students and undermine young people’s trust in educators.

“[If you break dress code] you get sent home. Or they give you like a big shirt, or big pairs of pants or like big shoes on purpose.”
— Phina Walker, 17, Thurgood Marshall Academy

“I’ve heard about other girls having to wear jerseys and gym clothes from the school after being dress coded.” — Eliska, 15

“If you have rips above your thighs
(especially if you’re a girl) then they put duct tape on the holes. So if you arrive to Banneker and have rips above the knee, they’ll put duct tape on the rips to cover it up or you’ll have wear gym shorts over top of your pants. They will also give you a big t-shirt that says ‘help the homeless’ if you have on a crop top or something and they’ll call your parent as well.”
— Essence Kendall, 18, Charles Herbert Flowers High School, previously attended Banneker High School





Overly Harsh and Illegal Punishments

74 percent of D.C. public high school dress codes authorize disciplinary action that can lead to missed class or school.

As the Washington Post exposed in 2017, D.C. public schools have a problem with illegal “send homes,” where students are excluded from school without formal suspensions, allowing schools to artificially reduce their suspension rates.² While DCPS policy forbids out of school suspensions for dress code violations, many students report they are nonetheless sent home for violations. These suspensions do not follow required procedures and are likely not recorded.

“[If you break the dress code], they either send you home or make you sit in the office.”
— Ceon DuBose, 16, Phelps ACE High School

“If you break the dress code, the school will say ‘You gotta go to the office,’ or, ‘Oh, you gotta go home.’ Last time I got dress coded, I almost had to go all the way home. I live far. I have to catch two buses and get up at 6:00 in the morning just to get to school on time. They almost made me go all the way back home, just to change my uniform pants, because my uniform pants were dirty. I said, ‘I can’t go home, ‘cause there’s no one there and it takes a long time for me to get home and get back here.’ So, they made me come try on all these different pants they had. Some of them were small, and some were too big. They told me to go home because none of the pants fit me. That wasn’t right. Not everybody is the same size. Some people are big, some people are skinny. . . . [Once] they sent me to ISS—in school suspension. They give you work. They tell you to get work from your teachers but sometimes that’s hard because you don’t know what to do. So you end up doing the wrong thing and you have to do it over again.”

— Samaria Short, 13, Sousa Middle School

“To enforce the uniform policy, scholars would have to sit in the office all day if you wore the wrong shoes. Or they’ll send you home to strongly emphasize the importance of obeying the school uniform dress code.”

— Catherine G., 16, Phelps A.C.E. High School

“Students who report to school not in uniform will either:

- Return home to change
- Receive loaner clothes if available
- Remain in ISS until parent brings clothes to school

***Students who routinely report to school out of uniform are subject to school disciplinary action* — Dunbar High School Dress Code**

While charter schools are not, at the time of publication, subject to the same regulations as DCPS, many of their punishments for dress code violations also exclude students from the classroom in ways that are educationally harmful.

“They make you go through the metal detector. And the security guards have little wands. Once I got in trouble for a belt I wasn’t wearing. The Administration called my mother and said I had detention and I said ‘Mama, I ain’t going to no detention over some belt that I’m not wearing.’” — Chrissy, 15, IDEA Public Charter School

“We got to wear uniform. And if we don’t wear the right uniform, they send us home.”
— Angel, 15, Friendship Collegiate Academy Public Charter School

Impact of Dress Codes on Black Girls

“When you are made to feel uncomfortable in your clothes and with your body, it’s hard to focus on learning and expanding your mind. Or even just getting good grades.”

— Sage Grace
Dolan-Sandrino, 17

Across the city, Black girls are missing out on class time because of dress and grooming codes. Some are suspended, while others are pulled out of the classroom informally. Both formal and informal classroom removals cause these girls to lose out on the opportunity to learn. Harsh and discriminatory school discipline leads to pushout, lost future earnings, poorer health outcomes and increased likelihood of living in poverty.³ For example, a girl who misses three or more days of school in a month can fall a year behind her peers.⁴ And even short, informal removals—like when a student is sent to the front office to “cover up” with a sweatshirt from the lost and found box—can add up to hours of lost instruction.

Suspensions put students at risk for not graduating and going to

college. This exclusionary discipline threatens girls’ long-term earning potential. Black women without a high school degree made \$7,631 less annually than Black women who graduated from high school, and \$25,117 less each year than Black women with a college degree.⁵

Even apart from lost class time, discriminatory dress codes and unfair enforcement change how Black girls see themselves and how their classmates see them, too. Studies show school practices that draw distinctions between students cause young people to form biases based on how different groups of students are treated.⁶ Dress codes create distinctions both through different rules for girls and boys and through different enforcement based on race, sex, and body type. In these ways, dress codes are not only rooted in stereotypes, but also reinforce them.

These biases have negative academic, social, and emotional effects on students. **And Black girls, of course, live at the intersection of damaging race- and sex-based stereotypes.**

Research shows that Black students' performance and well-being are undermined by race-based stereotypes. Racial bias undermines Black students self-confidence.⁷ Many studies confirm that Black students who are reminded of racist stereotypes—even in very subtle ways—perform worse on academic exams, often because they are afraid of conforming to a negative stereotype about Black people.⁸ This phenomenon, known as “stereotype threat,” drives racial disparities in school performance.⁹

Girls who believe gender stereotypes are more likely to have low self-esteem, including negative feelings about their bodies.¹⁰ This trend is reinforced by adults' comments that girls wearing tight or revealing clothing are “asking for it.” Stereotype threat also leads to disparities between boys and girls. Studies even show that girls who wear gender-specific clothing perform worse in math and science.¹¹ Practices that put pressure on students to conform to sex stereotypes are especially damaging for girls who do not conform to gendered expectations, like girls who prefer wearing traditionally masculine clothes,¹² as well as transgender students of all genders and students who are genderfluid or nonbinary.

Dress codes also can encourage sexual harassment. Boys who believe in sex stereotypes like those promoted by many school rules are more likely to harass girls.¹³ Adults also promote harassment when they focus on girls' bodies over their minds. When students see girls sent out of the classroom because they are out of dress code, they learn that how a girl looks is more important than her thoughts and actions. When students see educators talking about girls' bodies, they learn to “sexualize” young women and view them as objects meant for others' pleasure rather than full human beings. Plus, when educators say girls are “distracting” boys or “asking for it,” students get the message that boys are not responsible for how they behave, and girls who wear certain clothes or makeup deserve harassment and violence. Such viewpoints underlie a 2017 NWLC study that found that 1 in 5 girls ages 14-18 has been kissed or touched without her consent.¹⁴ In addition to perpetuating harassment, adults who exclude girls from class to avoid “distracting” their male classmates prioritize boys' educations over girls'.

“I mean, we already struggling with grades at school right now, and people not attending school. So if you all want kids at school, why would you all put them out of school? And if you all want us to have good grades, why would you all not allow us in school?” — Ceon DuBose, 16, Phelps A.C.E. High School

“When it comes

between an item of clothing and a child’s education, the child’s education should always reign supreme.”

— Beatrice,
Phelps ACE High
School

For all these reasons, discriminatory dress codes not only interrupt individual students’ education but can compound race and gender inequalities. Every time a school sends a Black girl home because of what she is wearing, it risks exacerbating sharp race- and sex-based disparities in graduation rates, college enrollment rates, employment rates, and future wages.

- In D.C., white students are 1.3 times more likely to graduate from high school than Black students.¹⁵
- Nationally, white girls are 1.2 times more likely to be enrolled in a postsecondary program than Black girls.¹⁶
- Nationally, Black women who do not graduate from high school are 2.2 times more likely to be unemployed than white, non-Hispanic women.¹⁷
- Black women in D.C. who do find employment and who work full time, year round, are paid 52 cents for every dollar paid to white, non-Hispanic men.¹⁸ This amounts to more than \$1.8 million dollars in lifetime losses.

“In high school, you’re taught that you need to hide everything. Deciding that some people can’t wear certain shirts because their breasts are too big, it’s not really doing anything, and it just causes insecurities. It teaches you to hide your body.”

— Ayiana Davis, 16, Duke Ellington School of the Arts

Girls Have Answers

“If the purpose of a dress code is to teach professionalism, I feel like there should be like business week or one Friday out of the month, you have business casual attire. Then, the teachers and staff can give feedback on how to dress in a more professional way.”
— Ayiana Davis, 16, Duke Ellington High School of the Arts

“They’re just clothes. They should never result in a student being removed from the classroom or losing out on learning time, or starting a big issue. A classmate’s absence is more of a distraction to the classroom than a piece of clothing.”
— Sage Grace Dolan-Sandrino, 17

“Boys need to be taught respect. Security guards shouldn’t be able to touch you... Admin can’t make remarks about students’ bodies. Teach girls how to love their bodies and boys how to respect it.”
— Nasirah Fair, 17, Wilson High School

“If I were in charge of the dress code, I would loosen it up or at least equally enforce it. Definitely allow religious things, code enforcers should not touch any students or their belongings without consent, don’t publicly embarrass anyone, let students contribute to the dress code.” — Eliska, 15

“I don’t think that any school should have a dress code, whether it was uniform or regular clothes because what does wearing ripped jeans have to do with others’ learning? Like I don’t see the correlation between a dress code and education. I’m here for education. I’m not here to get teased because I don’t wear Jordans. I’m not here to get duct tape on my rips because it’s on my thigh. It’s just no correlation. I just don’t understand it. I don’t. Come as you please because your clothes shouldn’t define you or your learning. There is no correlation between the way you look and your education. What I wear shouldn’t bother anybody.”
— Essence Kendall, 18, Charles Herbert Flowers High School, previously attended Banneker High School

“*Dress codes shouldn't matter. Education does.*” — Chrissy, 15, IDEA Public Charter School

“We actually have a dress code committee at our school because a lot of people were complaining about the dress code. And so, at the beginning of the year, the Principal is like, ‘Okay you guys don’t think the dress code is fair. I want to hear what your thoughts are.’ And so we had meetings. They met, and they came up with new rules that were more fair towards girls. Allow off-the-shoulder tops, allow shorts that don’t go all the way down to knees —because I don’t know who buys shorts that go up to their knees anymore. And then, I think the Principal looked at them and then just, like disregarded the whole thing. They had several meetings about it and then nothing ever happened. He made an announcement one time. He said, ‘The dress code will remain the same.’” — Fatimah, 17, School Without Walls

“Schools should have a dress code committee. I would change the dress code by making the rules broader, and not primarily targeted at one gender. One thing that I know I would definitely change is the ‘no off the shoulder shirts or tank tops’ rule. Sheer clothing should be permitted, as long as there is solid clothing underneath. You should be able to wear crop tops with high-waisted jeans. The school can’t touch you. And they can’t put clothes on you. I don’t like that. You can wear ripped jeans but they can’t be ripped beneath your butt.”
— Jill, 17

A Better Way

Research and stories from students show that most school dress code policies hurt students, and specifically hurt Black girls. Dress codes often create an educational environment where the focus is on appearance rather than learning. When students are punished for violating dress code rules and are asked to leave the classroom, they are missing valuable class time and are prevented from having a school experience like their peers'. Plenty of schools (including high schools and colleges in D.C.) do not have dress codes and are able to educate students without distraction. **For these reasons, NWLC and many student partners believe schools should not have dress code policies at all.**

However, if a school insists on maintaining dress code policies, the policies should follow these guidelines:

Policies

- All schools should begin their dress codes with an equity policy.

“Evanston Township High School’s student dress code supports equitable educational access and is written in a manner that does not reinforce stereotypes and that does not reinforce or increase marginalization or oppression of any group based on race, sex, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, cultural observance, household income or body type/size.” — Excerpt from student dress code at Evanston Township High School, Evanston, IL

- Schools should celebrate expressions of diverse cultures. For example, schools should permit students to wear any religiously, ethnically, or culturally specific head coverings or hairstyles, such as hijabs, yarmulkes, headwraps, braids, dreadlocks, and cornrows.
- Schools should also celebrate body diversity. Students of different sizes and abilities should all feel equally welcome in school. The same shirt style might look very different on students with different bodies, and that’s great.

- Dress code policies should maintain gender neutrality. Students of all genders should be subject to the same rules. For example, if a school allows boys to wear pants, all students should be allowed to wear pants. If a school allows girls to wear skirts, all students should be allowed to wear skirts.
- Students should have the freedom to express themselves! Any rules should give students the space to be creative and show off what makes them unique.
- School rules should be clear and specific, avoiding subjective terms like “distracting,” “provocative,” or “inappropriate.”

Fair Consequences

- Students should never be forced to leave school or the classroom for violating the dress code.
- Parents and students should know what the consequences for not following the dress code will be. Consequences should never exceed those guidelines.
- Schools should require all members of the school community who have the power to enforce the dress code to participate in bias and anti-harassment training at least once a year.
- School police should not be allowed to enforce the dress code.
- Adults should not touch students or their clothing to correct dress code violations, and should not require students to undress in public spaces.

Community Engagement

- Schools should maintain data transparency when it comes to dress code enforcements. In annual reports, schools should publish statistics on how often students are punished for dress code violations and for what specific violation. Schools should disaggregate and cross-tabulate those statistics by race and ethnicity, sex, disability, English language learner status, and sexual orientation to the extent possible while respecting student privacy.
- Schools should also conduct annual anonymous climate surveys to hear directly from students about how school policies like dress code affect them.
- Based on data and climate surveys, schools should facilitate self-audits to assess whether or not their policies are disproportionately impacting specific student populations.
- Students should be integral to the process of writing the dress code. Schools should convene dress code committees to ensure students have the opportunity to shape these policies. A collaborative process will not only result in better but also stronger relationships and opportunities to model and build social-emotional skills.

D.C. Can Lead the Way

Here's the good news: D.C. can do better. And students have the solutions. Here are some ways educators and policymakers should take action to ensure students do not miss out on the chance to learn because of dress codes:

School-level leaders, like principals, should:

- Revise their discipline codes to remove dress and grooming rules. If they will not do that, they should:
 - Reform their rules and practices in accordance with the checklist above—and avoid the common problems listed in this report.
 - Take affirmative steps to make sure they and their staff are following the law.
 - Monitor how the dress code affects school climate.
 - Provide washing machines in school, dry cleaning vouchers, and free uniforms multiple times per year to ensure dress codes do not pose an obstacle to families struggling to make ends meet.

District-level administrators should:

- Create policies that ensure no student misses class time because of a dress or grooming code.
- Enforce existing rules about when and how schools discipline students.
- Check in with parents and students to learn what's happening in school.

The Office of the State Superintendent of Education should provide guidance to schools about avoiding the risks dress and grooming codes pose to student learning and self-esteem.

D.C. Councilmembers should pass a new law to ban schools from removing students from the classroom due to a dress or grooming code violation.

“*Schools should teach girls how to love their bodies. Vice versa. Boys how to love their bodies. And how to respect each other because you should feel confident. ‘Cause my objective is to learn.”*
— Nasirah Fair, 17, Wilson High School

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Acknowledgments

ABOUT THE NATIONAL WOMEN'S LAW CENTER The National Women's Law Center is a non-profit organization that has worked for more than 45 years to expand opportunities for women and girls, focusing on education and workplace justice, reproductive rights and health, and income security for families, with particular attention to the needs of women and girls of color and low-income women.

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