



August 8, 2009

Switch to uniforms saves on spending

BY KRISTINA SMITH HORN
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FREMONT -- Every fall, Liz Burns took her son shopping for brand-name back-to-school clothes.

The clothes were the styles he wanted, and they were nice enough that Burns didn't mind shelling out the cash for them.

But this year, instead of donning the latest jeans and T-shirt, her 13-year-old will head to Fremont Middle School in a uniform of standard pants and a polo shirt.

The dress code change is fine with them -- and Burn's budget. The uniforms probably will save her \$150 to \$200 on back-to-school clothes shopping this year, she said.

"I think the uniforms are better than regular clothes," she said. "Some parents can afford (brand-name clothes), and some can't. They won't compare themselves and say 'I've got this -- and you don't.'"

The school district implemented the uniforms, which it calls campus wear, to reduce pressure to have the latest clothing and cut down on classroom distraction, Superintendent Traci McCaudy said. Next year, officials plan to require all students in the district to wear uniforms, she said.

"We want kids to be focused on education when they come to school," she said. "If we can eliminate a distraction, that's fantastic."

School officials chose to require uniforms only at the middle school this year because students in this age group are often anxious about their physical changes, are easily offended and sensitive to criticism, said Tim Cullen, student services director.

They also started at one school because other districts that have uniforms recommended starting small, McCaudy said. Then they can make any necessary revisions to the uniform policy before requiring campus wear for everyone, she said.

"That's easier to do with one building than 4,200 students," she said.

School officials have said the clothing they are requiring is reasonably priced. Families spend different amounts on clothes, so it's difficult to say whether the school-required wardrobe will save them money or cost them more, McCaudy said.

The cost of back-to-school clothes shopping can add up, especially if parents buy their kids expensive brand-name clothes and new items whenever trends change. Parents spend more on clothes and accessories than supplies and computers, according to the National Retail Federation.

Midwestern parents spend an average of \$220 on clothes and accessories, according to the federation. In addition, they spend \$107 just on shoes, the federation reports.

To some extent, uniforms can cut down on clothing competition, classroom distraction and even violence in schools, said Dr. Alan Hilfer, chief psychiatrist and director of training at Maimonides Medical Center in Brooklyn, N.Y.

But there are so many variables in each situation where uniforms are used that it is difficult to predict how effective they will be, he said.

"Personally, I think it's a good idea," he said. "It makes it a lot easier to get a kid out the door in the morning. I know a lot of parents who say their kids take a long time picking out clothing."

Uniforms usually are an equalizer, he said. They also cut down on provocative clothing, like girls with low-cut tops or boys with pants that sag below their underwear, he said.

Students, however, usually hate uniforms and grow to resent them, he said.

"It sort of a denial of self-expression," Hilfer said. "They always find a way to get around it. It might be mismatched socks or a shirt with cuff links.

"That's the neat thing about kids."

The loss of individuality is why Scotty McHugh, a Fremont Middle School eighth-grader, is so unhappy he has to wear a uniform this year.

"It's not going to change anything," he said. "I don't think teasing is going to stop."

His mother, Beth Mc- Hugh, has mixed feelings. Although uniforms could reduce clothing competition, they actually will cost her about \$50 more than she spent last year on regular clothes.

That's a significant amount for a single mom, she said. Normally, she would buy Scotty a few shirts and pairs of jeans because he could still wear things from last year.

"Now, we have to go get all the polo shirts and dress pants," she said. "(In the past), as we go through school, we'd pick up stuff. It was easier."

For decades, another city school, St. Joseph Central Catholic High School, has required its students to wear uniforms.

Rick Barbour, 59, attended the school when it first implemented the uniforms -- pants, a shirt, tie of the student's choice and a jacket.

"When I was in school, I loved it," Barbour said. "It made it easy to get ready in the morning."

His attitude didn't change when he sent his three sons, who didn't object to the uniforms, to St. Joseph.

"You knew what you were getting," he said. "They didn't need so many clothes. Let's face it.

"We all come from different backgrounds and have different money available for clothes.

Hilfer said parochial schools tend to have students wear uniforms from an early age. They then become more comfortable with them, he said.

"It becomes a way of life," he said.

Additional Facts

Campus wear guidelines

Starting this fall, Fremont Middle School students must wear uniforms, which the district is calling campus wear. These are the requirements:

- **Pants** -- Must be khaki, black or navy and made of cotton, a cotton blend, wool or twill. They cannot drag on the floor and must not have side zippers or side pockets. Cargo pants and jeans, corduroy, sweat and wind pants are not allowed.
 - **Shorts, skirts and jumpers** -- The requirements are the same as those for pants. They also must be 3 inches above the knee or longer.
 - **Belts** -- Must be a standard dress belt in brown or black, fit properly and have standard buckle. All pants with belt loops require a belt.
 - **Shirts** -- Must be purple, white, navy or gray. They can be short or long-sleeved polo shirts or short or long-sleeved oxford shirts. All shirts must have collars and buttons. They must be tucked in, and no more than the top two buttons can be unbuttoned.
 - **T-shirts** -- White or gray T-shirts only can be worn under permitted polo shirts.
 - **Sweaters and sweater vests** -- Can be purple, white, navy or gray. They can be v-necks, crew necks and cardigans. Approved shirts must be worn under sweaters, and the shirts must be tucked in.
 - **Sweatshirts** -- Can be purple, white, navy or gray. They must be crew necks. No hooded sweatshirts are allowed. Approved shirts must be worn under sweaters, and the shirts must be tucked in.
 - **Shoes** -- Must be standard shoes with backs.
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