

FACT SHEET FOR SCHOOLS

OFFERING STUDENTS EQUITABLE UNIFORM OPTIONS

BACKGROUND

The ACT Education Directorate released the [Dress Standards and Uniforms in Canberra Public Schools policy](#) in August 2016. The policy and its supporting documents provide guidance for schools when developing and implementing a dress standards and uniform procedure for their school community.

School uniforms and dress are a visual representation of the standards expected of students and play an important role in promoting positive images of schools. A school's dress code should support all students to participate fully in school life, and help create a sense of identity and a school culture in which every student experiences a sense of belonging.

A key principle for the development of a school based uniform procedure, is school uniforms should promote freedom of choice for all students by categorising options by clothing type, rather than gender. This fact sheet has been developed to assist schools create their own procedures that allow all students to equally access the full range of activities at their school and to be comfortable whilst they do so.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO OFFER A CHOICE OF UNIFORM OPTIONS?

Schools play an important role in promoting gender equality, challenging gender stereotypes and encouraging inclusive, respectful relationships. This is achieved through interactions with children and young people, school policies/ procedures and teaching practice.

Schools can assist to break down rigid gender stereotypes that are limiting to boys and girls, functioning as agents of change in reducing gender inequality. Ensuring that policies, procedures and practices actively reflect your school's commitment to gender equality sends an important message about your school's values, such as inclusion, diversity and equality.

Providing limited choices of clothing options for girls and young women can limit their ability to participate equally in school activities. Research has shown that dresses and skirts can have a negative impact on girls' activity levels at recess and lunch time¹. Being active at school promotes health and wellbeing and should be encouraged at every opportunity for all students, not just in physical education lessons or on sports days.

For young people who express their gender or gender identity in diverse ways, school uniforms identified as belonging to 'boys' or 'girls' can cause undue anxiety and stress about school. When schools empower students to freely choose the school uniform items they want to wear, it allows students to meet uniform standards, without enforcing items that may cause discomfort, which can lead to anxiety and distress.

EQUITABLE PRINCIPLES TO CONSIDER WHEN DEVELOPING OR REVIEWING YOUR SCHOOL'S UNIFORM PROCEDURE.

- Language is important- avoid using phrases such as “pants and shorts are available for girls if required” or “the preferred option for girls is a school dress” as this does not offer genuine choice and can lead to discrimination. Your school’s uniform procedure must align with relevant discrimination legislation, which makes the uniform choices offered and your choice of language an important consideration.
- List your uniform options into clothing items such as shorts, pants, shirts, instead of dividing into boys’ and girls’ uniforms. Where possible, offer gender neutral options that include items that can be worn by all students irrespective of their gender or gender identity. For example, making a unisex sports uniform of shorts/ pants and a polo shirt acceptable wear for all students every day.
- To ensure comfort and wear ability, similar items do not have to be identical for all students. For example, shirts, shorts and pants may be tailored slightly differently based on gender to allow for a diversity of body shapes. This is particularly relevant from upper primary, high school and college.
- Community consultation will influence the uniform options for each school. Consultation may indicate specific items are popular (e.g. dresses, skirts) and result in these options being made available. These options should not be the sole option, pants and shorts should be available as well.
- As High Schools have recently added a formal option to their uniform choices, it is important there is equitable choice for all students to wear any formal item. For example, formal shorts, shirt and long pants, with a suitable fit should be available for all students. If using students to model the uniform, ensure students of both genders are shown in pants and shorts.
- Publish your uniform/ dress standards procedure on your school website in an accessible place that allows your school community to find it easily and understand your school’s uniform requirements. Make sure all documentation relating to uniforms, for example order forms, newsletter reminders, clothing pool promotional materials, are consistent with the school procedures. Using images of the clothing options and a link to suppliers is also helpful.

MORE INFORMATION

A procedure template has been developed for schools should they wish to utilise it. The template is available on [INDEX](#) for download and allows schools to adapt the template to suit their unique context.

For further information please email Student Wellbeing at ETDStudentWellbeing@act.gov.au

ⁱ ([Norrish, Farrington, Bulsara & Hands, 2012](#); [Stanley, Boshoff, & Dollman, 2012](#);