# Do uniforms make schools better?

For the past decade, schools, parents and students have debated the issue of school uniforms. Researchers are split over how much of an impact — if any — dress codes have upon student learning. A 2004 book makes the case that uniforms do not improve school safety or academic achievement. A 2005 study, on the other hand, says that in some Ohio high schools uniforms may have improved graduation and attendance rates, although no improvements were observed in academic performance.

## ****Why do some public schools have uniforms?****

In the 1980s, public schools were often seen as not as good as Catholic schools. Noting the perceived benefit that uniforms gave Catholic schools, some public schools decided to start a school uniform policy of their own. President Clinton provided momentum to the school uniform movement when he said in his 1996 State of the Union speech, “If it means teenagers will stop killing each other over designer jackets, then our public schools should be able to require their students to wear school uniforms.”

## What research says about school uniforms

Virginia Draa, assistant professor at Youngstown State University, reviewed attendance, graduation and academic pass rates at 64 public high schools in Ohio. Her final analysis surprised her: “I really went into this thinking uniforms don’t make a difference, but I came away seeing that they do. At least at these schools, they do. I was absolutely floored.” Draa’s study says that those schools with uniform policies improved in attendance, graduation and suspension rates. She was unable to connect uniforms with academic improvement because of such complicating factors as changing teaching methods and curriculum.

University of Missouri assistant professor, David Brunsma reached a different conclusion. In his 2004 book, *The School Uniform Movement and What It Tells Us About American Education: A Symbolic Crusade*, Brunsma reviewed past studies on the effect of uniforms on academic performance. Brunsma concluded that there is no positive connection between uniforms and school safety or academic achievement.

Meanwhile, the movement toward uniforms in public schools has spread to about a quarter of all elementary schools. Experts say that the number of middle and high schools with uniforms is about half the number of elementary schools. If uniforms are intended to curb school violence and improve academics, why are they not more common in middle and high schools, where these goals are just as important as in elementary schools? Because, says Brunsma, “It’s desperately much more difficult to implement uniforms in high schools, and even middle schools, for student resistance is much, much higher. Of course, this uniform debate is also one regarding whether children have rights, too!”

## What do students think about uniforms?

After a school uniform policy was started in three Nevada middle schools in 2008 and 2009, researchers at the University of Nevada, Reno, set out to find out what 1,350 seventh and eighth graders thought about the change. The vast majority — 90 percent of students — reported that they disliked wearing uniforms. However, other data showed more nuanced results. For instance, 54 percent of students agreed that they still had their identity while wearing a uniform, and 50 percent agreed that uniforms saved their families money. But only 41 percent of students agreed that there was less gang activity at their school after uniforms were required. However, when the researchers looked into school discipline and local police records and compared them to the prior year’s data, discipline referrals were down 10 percent, there were 63 percent fewer police log reports, and graffiti, fights, and gang-related activity were all down.