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A Uniform Approach

Can pupils smarten up their grades just by dressing better? Max Davidson investigates

Some schools demand them. Others want nothing to do with them. Some pupils love them. Others detest them. From St Ives to St Andrews, the nation's children are safely back at school, but what they are wearing remains as controversial as ever, as likely to provoke sharp differences of opinion as anything on the school curriculum. It is the look of each school that sets the tone for the whole establishment.

Beyond the school gates, the trend is all one way. Informality rules. How many restaurants still insist on a jacket and tie? Modern theatre audiences dress like football crowds of 20 years ago. But inside the school gates, oddly, the trend seems to be in the opposite direction. True, you won't find many starched collars, top hats and tails, but blazers are certainly back in style.

For every school that ditches its traditional uniform, on a tide of liberalism, another adopts one for the first time, or smartens up its existing uniform. Often, it is not the teachers behind the new conservatism, but the pupils.

"We held an extensive consultation process and at the end of the day, it was the pupils who decided what they wanted," says Dr Patrick Hazlewood, headmaster of St John's School and Community College, a state secondary in Marlborough, Wiltshire, where a low-key uniform of blue sweatshirts has just been replaced by blazers. "Among 11-16 year-olds, almost 90 per cent were in favour of the change."

A dapper suit-and-tie man himself, Dr Hazlewood was struck by how ingrained the habits of informality had become among the younger generation. "I asked a class of 11-year-old boys how many of them knew how to tie a tie. Only two of them put their hands up, which astonished me. They like the idea of dressing smartly. They are just not used to it in their daily lives."

Parents, too, have been supportive. The cost of a new blazer is about £30, compared with £16 for a sweatshirt. Since blazers last much longer, most parents regard that as a price worth paying. They see the smarter dress code as helping to raise the tone of the school at a time when it is about to move into state-of-the-art new buildings. They see it as a step forward.

To educational liberals, the idea of reverting from sweatshirts to blazers will probably seem like turning back the clock 50 years. But even the liberals have been kept outside. In a ground-breaking innovation, the new blazers will be made from recycled plastic bottles. The ideals of the past and the future have been seamlessly integrated.

Not only will the St John's pupils (or most of them) relish looking smarter, they are also likely to get better exam results, if the experience of other schools is any guide. Particularly in innercity schools, a tightening up in uniform rules has often been the harbinger of an improvement in performance generally.

At Mossbourne Community Academy in Hackney, East London, held up as a shining example of how to raise standards in a poor area, a strict discipline policy incorporates a traditional school uniform. Head teacher Sir Michael Wilshaw, who helped design the grey and red blazers, says that the uniform adds to pupils' sense of self-worth.

It has been a similar story at Sydney Russell Comprehensive School in Dagenham, famous locally for its bright green blazers. "I expect pupils to take pride in belonging to their school by wearing correct school uniform and wearing it smartly and properly," says headmaster Roger Leighton. A strictly applied dress code has been accompanied by a quadrupling in exam pass rates. The uniform is not stuffy or old-fashioned. White shirts and ties have recently been replaced by modern polo shirts.

On the other side of London, pupils at Fulham Cross Girls' School in Parsons Green have recently exchanged sweatshirts for black blazers with a pink trim – at their own request. Pupils "walked taller" as a result of the change, according to head teacher Carol Jones, who oversaw the introduction of the new uniform. Again, exam results improved significantly after the change.

Only a fool would generalise about the desirability of school uniforms. To preach individuality and self-expression in the young, then insist that they all dress the same, sends out a mixed message whichever way you look at it. But neither should the advantages of uniform be understated. If nothing else, it offers a buttress against the tyranny of a fashion free-for-all.