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More Than a Distraction

**[Content/Trigger Warning: This paper contains discussion about sexual harassment, sexual assault, and r\*pe.]**

It was a Thursday afternoon at Buchanan High School in Clovis, CA, and I was sitting in my drama class working on a scene with a group. The Learning Director for performing arts -- basically the boss of the drama, band, and choir teachers -- walked in for a routine dress code check. I was wearing a light material pant that was tighter on the top and flowed out at the bottom, and a black t-shirt that went up to about an inch below my collarbone with a yellow bralette that held around my neck. The LD dress coded me because he could see two inches of the strap of my bra coming around my neck. I was sent to the disciplinary office in the middle of class where I walked in and saw three other girls. One of the girls was in there for her leggings. She was wearing a big t-shirt over it so her backside was covered, but it was shorter than five inches above her knee thanks to her long legs, so she got dress coded. Another girl was there because she was wearing a skirt that was deemed too short, despite the fact that she was wearing almost opaque black tights underneath. The last girl was wearing jeans and a t-shirt, but you could see the straps of her sports bra just above her collarbone. All of us were pulled out of class to get detention because of our clothing. I was pulled out of my elective course which was easy to catch up on later, but what about the other students who are pulled out of their core math, science, english, or history classes? Was our clothing affecting our classmates' focus so much

that they couldn't listen to their teacher lecture or pass their tests unless we were removed from class? I wondered why the dress code was so important that I had to miss class to learn its lesson.

Dictionary.com defines dress code as, "a set of rules specifying the garb or type of clothing to be worn by a group or by people under specific circumstances." Dress codes across America have come a long way even just since I've been in school, but there is still a heavy controversy over whether or not dress codes are led by a gender bias. Those who are in support of dress codes in public high schools back up the idea that it is there for both safety and educational purposes. As Julie Underwood addresses in "School Uniforms, Dress Codes, and Free Expression: What's the Balance?", "dress codes tend to prohibit things like lewd or disruptive apparel or anything that promotes violence, harassment, or illegal activity (including alcohol and drug use)." Supporters of dress codes also claim that having one can teach students responsibility and discipline by sticking to the set of rules lined out by the school. Whereas, those who oppose dress codes in public high schools claim that they tend to unfairly target the female students. The primary argument against dress codes is that the female students are being punished for the male students' inability to focus on school because they are sexually distracted by girls' clothing choices. The girls are forced to suppress their expression through clothing while the boys are told it's not their fault they can't keep it in their pants. The question is: are the justifications for public high school dress codes protective and educational, or are they sexist toward female students?

For those of you who attended a high school that didn't have a strict dress code -- or didn't even have one at all -- you might be curious what the specific rules actually are. As I mentioned before, I attended Buchanan High School in Clovis, CA, which is just one of five high schools in Clovis Unified School District, and the dress code is the same for all five. Lucky for

us, the dress code rules are attached to each school's website. The Clovis Unified Administrative Board states the overarching reason for their dress code as follows: "These regulations specify standards of dress and grooming promoting a safe school setting conducive to a positive learning environment consistent with the Board's policy governing acceptable and appropriate apparel and appearance for students." They also say, "All clothing shall be neat, clean and acceptable in repair and appearance and shall be worn within the bounds of decency and good taste as appropriate for school," (Administrative Board). It then goes on to list nineteen specific rules when it comes to apparel; only some rules include the actual reason for it. For example, the first rule expresses that clothing that "display[s] gang symbols, profanity or products or slogans which promote tobacco, alcohol, drugs or sex... [could] create disorder or disrupt the educational process," (Administrative Board). Similarly, students are also not permitted to wear clothing or hats that represent any professional sports teams or other affiliations, such as armed forces or political parties, because they could cause harassment and/or fights. It also explains that swim wear, "flip-flops", slippers, and sleepwear are not acceptable to be worn during the school day (Administrative Board). Dress code was always a major point when we had assemblies about school policies, and the administrators always brought up something like, "would you wear your flip-flops or Coors-Light shirt to a college or job interview?" This point made sense; I probably wouldn't wear pajamas or a swim-suit to a job interview because common sense tells me that that's not appropriate for the situation, and I want to show my best self. However, there are some dress code rules that aren't as self-explanatory.

This dress code outlines strict rules when it comes to shorts, skirts, dresses, and leggings, which are most commonly garments worn by female students. For dresses, skirts, and shorts, the item must be worn "no shorter than five inches (5") above the top of the kneecap, but no shorter

than mid-thigh,” (Administrative Board). This isn’t usually an issue with the male students because they tend to wear shorts that sit around or just above their knee cap anyways. They also say that form-fitting or tight shorts -- such as bike shorts or spandex -- are “unacceptable.” Leggings are allowed as long as the student’s top follows the same five inch or mid-thigh rule. Therefore, students can’t wear a pair of leggings with just a t-shirt; it would need to be either an oversized shirt or a dress of some kind. They don’t give a reason for these length rules, but students have figured it out: shorter skirts, shorts, and dresses highlight the legs -- a part of the female body that has been historically sexualized in media and society over time -- and leggings highlight the girl’s butt. In addition, they declare that “[s]houlder straps on tops and other clothing must be a minimum of two inches (2”) wide,” making most popular tank tops typically worn by students that identify as female unacceptable at school (Administrative Board). The male students wore tank tops very often, and I personally never witnessed them getting dress coded for it, even if they violated the 2” rule. I never really understood this rule until I saw the 2021 Netflix film *Moxie*. In it, one character, Caitlin, wore a tank top to school and was dress coded for it. Her principal asked her to “cover up,” claiming her straps are “thin” and she is “showing lots of... collarbone,” to which a few boys snicker, because they know that that was her nice way of saying she’s showing too much cleavage. Caitlin points out that another female student is wearing a very similar top, but that girl’s breasts are a lot smaller, so there’s nothing really showing. The principal then asks Caitlin to “give [her] a break and just cover up,” (gestures to her chest) “so that we can all get back to learning,” (*Moxie* 36:10). Based on this scene, we as an audience can see that certain dress code rules were intended for girls with very specific bodies: girls with bigger breasts, bigger asses, generically “sexy” legs, etc. Tank tops, leggings, or shorter shorts can draw attention to these parts of the female body, so schools deem

them “inappropriate.” The schools are deciding what classifies as “inappropriate” or “unprofessional” for the general population of their student body, instead of leaving it up to the students to make those judgements for themselves. They claim it teaches discipline and gives students an opportunity to practice following a strict set of rules.

Similarly, Nikki Haller from Alliance High School in Alliance, Nebraska writes in “What Is The Purpose Behind School Dress Codes?” that school dress codes have more of an educational purpose. Haller says dress codes are “fundamental to helping students learn a skill,” and that “[s]chool dress codes are a great way to teach students the importance of a respectable appearance which is a lesson that can positively impact their self-respect and self-esteem.” These statements are backed up by the principal of Alliance High School, George Clear: “[t]he purpose of dress code is to have safety... [and] constant education for students... This is an education institution, not a social club. Our purpose is to educate,” (Haller). George Clear brings up an important thing to remember; at the end of the day, schools exist to educate students. They were not created to be a place for students to hang out with their friends or impress their classmates. Schools are also where students spend *a lot* of their time between the ages of 5-18, so school administrations have to do what they feel is necessary to properly educate them and keep them safe.

School safety has become very important due to the number of school shootings over the past 20-30 years, and it has even affected dress codes. After the Columbine high school massacre in 1999<sup>1</sup>, many schools cited Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold’s dress as warning signs. In the Niche article, “Dress Codes Growing in Style at U.S. Schools,” the writer says that “[a]fter [Columbine], people looked for answers [as to how no one saw the massacre coming] and soon

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<sup>1</sup> “On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold opened fire on their school in Littleton, Colo., killing 12 students and one teacher before turning their guns on themselves,” (Niche).

were drawn to the behaviors of Harris and Klebold, including their clothing, which consisted of trench coats with pockets deep enough for weaponry.” This analysis of their clothing became very present in schools all over the country; excessively “baggy” pants, long overcoats like trench coats, and long shirts were no longer acceptable in schools’ dress codes. The “safety” reasoning behind dress codes applies to more than just a fear of concealing weapons; I remember one of the reasons my high school told us we weren’t allowed to wear flip-flops was because we could lose our shoe while walking up or down the stairs, or someone could step on the back of our shoe and we could trip (yes, I’m serious). I wonder too, even though most schools don’t explicitly say it, does the “safety” justification apply to the rules like the length of shorts, skirts, and dresses, and the leggings rule? Do schools think they’re keeping their female students safe by eliminating “distractions” for their male students, and lessening the female students’ chances of being harassed by their male classmates?

The argument against dress codes in public high schools is one that has gained momentum and support all across the country. This side of the debate claims that dress codes are restricting students’ freedom of expression through their clothing by instituting a school dress code, but only for certain students. They claim that dress codes are catered toward male students, and it punishes the girls on account of the boys being distracted by their female classmates’ bodies. In Charleston County School of the Arts in South Carolina, a group of female students “wore shirts with a scarlet ‘A’ that read: ‘I am not A distraction,’” (Sorto). Female students across the country participated in the #IAmMoreThanADistracted movement in 2015-2016, and it gained a great momentum. Many schools also found that while the dress code rules didn’t explicitly discriminate against the female students, it was the handling of the dress code that hurt them. For example, “Oklahoma student Rose Lynn scribbled on her shirt what a school

administrator told her when she was sent home for violating dress code. ‘It doesn’t cover your crotch,’ her shirt read. ‘You’ll distract the boys,’” (Sorto). This reveals a flaw in public high school dress codes that this side is trying to emphasize in their argument; the rules might not be discriminatory *on paper*, but in execution, the line between “appropriate dress” and dress that can be “distracting” for the attracting gender gets crossed. The dress code rules may not say, “girls with bigger asses shouldn’t wear leggings with shirts that don’t cover their backsides because it could distract the boys,” but the administrators and teachers who are in charge of enforcing the dress code understand that that exact reason is why they have to dress code certain students.

However, there are certain things that though students may believe to be true, school administrations cannot legally write them that way. In “5 Things Public School Can and Can’t Do When It Comes to Dress Codes,” Galen Sherwin outlines the things public schools are and aren’t allowed to say when it comes to dress code, otherwise they may face legal consequences. The five main points are:

1. “Dress codes can’t be explicitly discriminatory,”
2. “All students, whether transgender or cisgender, must be allowed to wear clothing consistent with their gender identity and expression,”
3. “Dress codes that are targeted at or unevenly enforced against particular groups of students may violate laws prohibiting race and sex discrimination,”
4. “Schools can’t discriminate based on the viewpoint expressed by your clothing,”
5. “Grooming codes regulating hair length, jewelry, or ear piercing can raise many of the same issues,” so they are mostly regulated by where you live/go to school (Sherwin).

So when administrators such as the one in Oklahoma mentioned above say things like they said to Rose Lynn, they are violating federal laws that protect “against discrimination in education[:] Title IX and the Constitution’s equal protection guarantee,” (Sherwin). The bottom line is that school dress codes cannot discriminate against any student, but there are many instances where the female students are continuously targeted by their schools in an effort to keep the male students from getting “distracted.”

Sometimes, girls are getting dress coded at an age where heterosexual boys barely understand what it means to be sexually attracted to a girl. Jennifer Weiss-Wolf’s daughter was dress coded when she was in sixth grade because her shorts were deemed “too short.” She said her daughter’s shorts didn’t adhere to the “fingertip” rule -- “shorts or skirts must ‘reach to the fingertips of the extended arm’” -- so her daughter was pulled from class and sent to detention, where she was forced to wear an extremely oversized “shirt of shame” for the rest of her day at school (Weiss-Wolf). In “My Daughter Was Dress-Coded for Wearing Shorts,” Weiss-Wolf goes on to explain that the dress code was always a prevalent issue in their schools, especially for the students who identify as female. She said “[t]here is talk about clothes interfering with establishing and maintaining a ‘learning environment’ -- prompting the question of whose ‘learning environment’ is being prioritized and at whose expense.” Teaching the female students that males will be distracted and will sexualize them if they wear clothing that is “too revealing” is very dangerous in the larger sense. Weiss-Wolf comments on this, saying, “That schools are passing on this very message to ... female students -- and simultaneously communicating to boys that their learning environment is being compromised by the sight of girls’ limbs or cleavage -- is unhealthy and unsound at best, illegal at worst.” By implementing the dress code policy, schools are putting ideas of what are “good” and “bad” ways to dress instead of allowing students to



make those judgements for themselves. They're just calling girls' outfits "inappropriate" and punishing them.

So, what does it mean to dress in a way that is "inappropriate," and who decides this? What I've figured out is that our society has long oversexualized women based on our clothing, and school dress codes are no exception. "Inappropriate" outfits in school dress codes are often ones that show a bit more skin or are a tighter fit on a woman's body, highlighting her figure. In "Society Needs to Stop Sexualizing Female Clothing," Danielle Abril discusses school dress codes specifically, describing one high school in Colorado that explicitly states that "traditionally private parts of the body" must be covered -- aka cleavage, backside, and midriff. Abril points out, though, that "[c]lothes that may demonstrate cleavage or even tightness around certain parts would encourage teachers and administration to call the female out and make her feel bad for her choice in clothing." This is much more important than one may think. In our society, a woman's appearance weighs very heavily on her self-confidence, so if a female student feels confident enough in her body to show off a little more of her "traditionally private areas," we should be more encouraging and appreciative of the fact that she's not letting what other people think change who she wants to be. What is even worse is that by shaming female students over the way they dress, schools are teaching their male students that it's okay to objectify their female classmates because they shouldn't be wearing it in the first place if they didn't want the attention. Abril comments on this, too: "Rather than teaching others to not sexualize girls by the outfit choices, people—more often men—are being taught that it is okay to objectify women." If students are learning this at such a young age, it can be really hard to change their way of thinking when they head off into the real world; making it especially dangerous for women.

By deeming certain women's clothing "inappropriate" or "distracting" in schools, male students are being taught that it's not their fault if they find themselves sexualizing one of their female classmates because of her clothing. It's also teaching women that our bodies are "dangerous" and will be objectified if we dress in a way that *might* be "revealing." This notion being taught in schools correlates with the fear that most women have over speaking out against sexual assault. It is often found that survivors of sexual assault will not speak out about their assault or against their assailant because they don't think anyone will believe them. There is a fear that they will, instead, be seen as liars, and that their reputation and integrity will be ruined. Society has taught female assault survivors that the harassment they received is usually their fault. One of the most common blames put on these survivors is that they were dressed "provocatively," so they were "asking for it." It is seen as an invitation for attention, and men seem to think if they can see it, it's theirs to take. This creates an incredibly toxic society; women's bodies are the ones seen as dangerous rather than the men who are executing that danger.

The objectification and over-sexualization of women has had an insane effect on society, most notably contributing to rape culture. In "Rape Culture Isn't a Myth. It's Real, and It's Dangerous," Amanda Taub defines rape culture as "a culture in which sexual violence is treated as the norm and victims are blamed for their own assaults." She goes on to write: "It's not just about sexual violence itself, but about cultural norms and institutions that protect rapists, promote impunity, shame victims, and demand that women make unreasonable sacrifices to avoid sexual assault," (Taub). This statement directly correlates with the sexism being taught through school dress codes. Female students are being forced to give up their ability to dress in a way that makes them feel confident and truly expresses themselves to avoid being harassed by

their male classmates. “It puts the burden of safety on women’s shoulders, and blames them when they don’t succeed,” Taub writes. By teaching students in their adolescent years these sexist ways to evaluate appearance, we have no hope in extinguishing rape culture anytime soon. Laura Bates writes in “Everyday Sexism Project: Dress Codes and Rape Culture,” that “[t]he problem is often compounded by a lack of any attempt to discipline boys for harassing behavior, which drives home the message that it is the victim’s responsibility to prevent.” Bates also says that they “have received thousands of testimonies from girls who have complained about being verbally harassed, touched, groped, chased, followed, licked, and assaulted at school, only to be told: ‘he just likes you’, or: ‘boys will be boys’.” The standards are *very* different when it comes to male and female students and their education with consent. Female students are being taught to suppress their expression through clothing, and male students are being taught that it’s okay to be distracted by sexual thoughts about their female classmates because these classmates should know better than to dress in a way that distracts them.

But, why is the blame being placed on the girls? The effort should not be put towards teaching the girls how not to dress in order to avoid unwanted male attention. We should, instead, be trying to teach boys that the way a woman dresses is not theirs to exploit or objectify. If schools put more effort in teaching boys consent and how to control their sexual urges, we may not have such an intense issue. As I wrote that out, I started to think about what I learned from society when it came to trying to “win over” boys. Here’s what I’ve learned: in a male-female relationship, it is often seen as desperate or clingy for the girl to show more interest in the boy, but it is seen as vulnerable or charming for the boy to show more interest in the girl. We slut-shame the girl for “coming on too strong,” yet we applaud the boy for chasing after a girl

who doesn't want it. Now, looking at dress codes through this lens of hypocrisy, the need for expelling "distractions" tends to cater to the boys. Laura Bates lines this up:

When a girl is taken out of class on a hot day for wearing a strappy top, because she is 'distracting' her male classmates, his education is prioritized over hers. When a school takes the decision to police female students' bodies while turning a blind eye to boys' behavior, it sets up a lifelong assumption that sexual violence is inevitable and victims are partially responsible. Students are being groomed to perpetuate the rape culture narrative that sits at the very heart of our society's sexual violence crisis.

One in every five women experience some form of sexual harassment in their lives, and since most behaviors are learned, schools need to do a better job to prevent such thoughts that make men think it's okay to harass women (Bates). That starts with the dress code.

This argument is about more than just "are public high school dress codes good or bad." I see it as more of a discussion about how students are affected by policies like dress code later in life. If a boy is used to the girl with big boobs getting in trouble for showing "too much chest" rather than just dealing with whatever urges he might feel, what is he going to do in the real world when there's no teacher to dress code the girl to keep him from acting on his urges? What about the girl with a bigger backside? How is she supposed to feel now when she goes to the gym and has to wear sweatpants because she feels insecure in her leggings?

The dress code at my high school made me not care about how I present myself because I couldn't wear what I wanted to wear and what I found most comfortable. Some of my best work got done after school when I was able to wear a comfortable bralette or sports bra and not worry about if my straps were showing, and a pair of leggings that I could easily move around in and sit in for hours at a time; not when I was sitting in class wearing an uncomfortable, wired bra and

tight jeans. More than that, the dress code made me believe that even though I may feel confident in my body and the way I present it, at the end of the day men will see it as an object, and it is my job to make sure I don't present it in that way. I felt ashamed of the parts of me that I really should've been proud of, and I felt that I couldn't talk about these insecurities because it was my fault my cleavage was showing enough to make boys sexually attracted to me. If I am leaving high school and entering the "real world" with these beliefs, what ideas are the dress code policies then leaving the male students with? It's not their fault they sexualize a woman's body when her bra straps are showing or she's wearing leggings? Newsflash: we're not wearing it for you, dude.

In an effort to compromise, I do believe an altered version of dress codes should exist. However, dress codes need to not be as strict and be based more on common sense. Obviously, swim-suits are meant for swimming or tanning, and pajamas are meant for sleeping; neither are meant for you to wear while listening to your teacher lecture on The War of 1812. But suppressing expression through fashion is detrimental to a student's self esteem; especially when it comes to the female students. Taking away female students' ability to wear what they want to wear to school the way the male students do so easily is cruel and unfair. There can be an incredible beauty in students supporting their classmates' differing and unique styles, but if school dress codes continue to objectify the girls' choice of clothing, they're never going to get there. You could have a much brighter school; and if the students are happier, chances are they will be much more willing and ready to learn. Most importantly, the female students should not feel as though they're being seen as objects. Women need to be seen as more than a distraction; and that all starts in school.

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