



Dress Coded !!

Protest, Progress,
and Power
in D.C.
Schools

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Introduction

In April 2018, the National Women’s Law Center released *Dress Coded: Black Girls, Bodies and Bias in D.C. Schools*. Co-authored by 21 students who live and learn in Washington, D.C., public schools, this groundbreaking report exposed how racist and sexist enforcement of dress codes unfairly targets Black girls, promotes rape culture and fuels school pushout. The report ignited student and parental activism within schools, the

District and across the nation and fueled policy change and legislative action. Despite these inspiring steps, problems with dress code enforcement still remain in many D.C. schools—particularly in charter schools, which, unlike schools within the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) system, are not governed by a central school district. This report looks at the work activists and policymakers have done and the work that still needs to be done to promote equitable school dress codes in the nation’s capital. Specifically, this follow-up report:

GAUGES THE IMPACT of *Dress Coded* in the District and beyond;

HIGHLIGHTS PROMISING PRACTICES and dress code equity models for policymakers in D.C. schools;

LIFTS UP THE STORIES OF STUDENTS, parents, and educators in the District who are working to change dress codes, providing a playbook for advocates across the country; and

URGES POLICYMAKERS AND SCHOOL LEADERS in D.C. and beyond to respond to the energy and activism of students and parents to revamp dress code and uniform policies at the district and school levels.

methodology

The National Women's Law Center

(NWLC) conducted a qualitative and quantitative analysis of D.C.'s public and charter high schools' written dress code policies. NWLC started by obtaining a list of schools that contained at least one high school grade (9-12) from the District of Columbia Public School system and the District of Columbia Public Charter School Board, which resulted in a list of 38 schools. Ron Brown College Preparatory High School was excluded as an all-boys public high school. Youth Services Center and Inspiring Youth Program were also excluded as schools for detained youth. Of the 35 schools that remained, NWLC obtained 29 schools' 2018-2019 dress code policies; six were not available (see "Accessing D.C. Schools' Dress Codes," below). As a result, those schools were excluded from this analysis.

NWLC also conducted an analysis of U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) data for the 2015-2016 school year for 28 of the 29 schools that were included in the dress code analysis. Chavez Public Policy Public Charter School data was not available in the 2015-2016 CRDC data and was therefore excluded from the analysis of CRDC data. CRDC data was available for Columbia Heights Educational Campus, which includes Bell High School and Lincoln Middle School, but separate data was not available for these two schools. Analysis of CRDC data, therefore, includes Lincoln Middle School.

NWLC also conducted one-on-one interviews with two school administrators working in DCPS schools, four high school students who attend schools in the District—including two former co-authors of its April 2018 *Dress Coded* report—and one parent of a DCPS student. Every interview session was recorded and then transcribed. Each participant was given the opportunity to confirm or edit their transcribed account; this report only includes confirmed accounts.

Accessing D.C. schools' dress codes

Of the 35 public and charter high schools in Washington, D.C., 28 had a dress code published on the schools' website, either in student handbooks or on the webpages themselves. Luke C. Moore did not have a dress code published, but after calling the school, NWLC learned that there was no dress code in place for the 2018–2019 school year. Six schools (Ballou High School, Capital City Public Charter School, District of Columbia International School, Maya Angelou Public Charter School, McKinley Technology High School, and H.D. Woodson STEM High School) did not have dress codes posted to their websites; NWLC staff contacted those schools via telephone to ask for those schools' dress code policies but were unable to obtain copies of their policies. This is unacceptable. Schools should be transparent about the policies that they expect students to follow. Although these schools provided no data to evaluate their dress codes, they are still included and noted in the report card (see pages 4–5) to urge them to be more transparent and hold them accountable to students, parents and other community members.

What D.C. dress codes say

An analysis of 29 publicly available dress codes from D.C. high schools shows that schools continue to ban forms of student expression that pose no threat to classmates' safety or ability to learn. And while some dress codes state that their purpose is to not reinforce stereotypes and to remain gender neutral, many of their restrictions target clothing most often worn by girls. NWLC checked whether the 29 schools:

1. Required a uniform
2. Mentioned different restrictions for male and female students
3. Restricted the use of makeup
4. Mentioned tank tops or the width of sleeves
5. Banned heels or kept them to less than one inch
6. Had a policy about head wraps, hats, or other head coverings
7. Banned outerwear once students arrive on campus
8. Provided length requirements for skirts or shorts
9. Banned tights or leggings
10. Required belts
11. Banned backpacks (or only allowed clear ones)
12. Mentioned the tightness, sizing, or fit of clothing

“Crop tops, tube tops, halters, and spaghetti straps are unacceptable (anything less than two inches is considered a spaghetti strap). Strapless dresses without jackets are unacceptable.... The display of cleavage is unacceptable. Low-cut blouses, tops, sweaters, etc., with plunging necklines are not allowed.”

— Roosevelt High School 2018–2019 dress code

report card

Schools were graded based on whether they had the restrictions listed on page 3; the fewer restrictions a school had, the better its grade.

THREE SCHOOLS received a grade of A for having 0 dress code restrictions or just one.

EIGHT SCHOOLS received a grade of B for having two dress code restrictions.

FOUR SCHOOLS received a grade of C for having three dress code restrictions.

TWO SCHOOLS received a grade of D for having four dress code restrictions.

TWELVE SCHOOLS received a grade of F for having five or more dress code restrictions.

SIX SCHOOLS received a grade of Incomplete because their dress codes were not accessible.

SCHOOL NAME	TYPE OF SCHOOL	NUMBER OF DRESS CODE RESTRICTIONS (OUT OF 12)	SCHOOL GRADE
Anacostia High School	DCPS	4	D
Ballou High School	DCPS	--*	INCOMPLETE
Basis Public Charter School	Charter	4	D
Benjamin Banneker High School	DCPS	7	F
Capital City Public Charter School	Charter	--*	INCOMPLETE
Cardozo Educational Campus	DCPS	2	B
Cesar Chavez Public Policy Public Charter School*	Charter	7	F
Columbia Heights Educational Campus (Bell High School and Lincoln Middle School)	DCPS	3	C
Coolidge High School	DCPS	1	A
District of Columbia International School	Charter	--*	INCOMPLETE
Dunbar High School	DCPS	3	C
Eastern High School	DCPS	2	B

SCHOOL NAME	TYPE OF SCHOOL	NUMBER OF DRESS CODE RESTRICTIONS (OUT OF 12)	SCHOOL GRADE
EL Haynes High School	Charter	2	B
Duke Ellington School of the Arts	DCPS	2	B
Friendship Public Charter School Collegiate Academy	Charter	8	F
Friendship Public Charter School Technology Preparatory Academy High	Charter	8	F
H.D. Woodson High School	DCPS	--*	INCOMPLETE
IDEA Public Charter School	Charter	3	C
Kingsman Academy Public Charter School	Charter	2	B
KIPP D.C. College Preparatory Academy Public Charter School	Charter	2	B
Luke Moore Alternative High School	DCPS	0	A
Maya Angelou Public Charter School	Charter	--*	INCOMPLETE
McKinley Technology High School	DCPS	--*	INCOMPLETE
National Collegiate Prep Public Charter School	Charter	8	F
Paul PCS International High School	Charter	7	F
Phelps Architecture, Construction and Engineering High School	DCPS	2	B
Richard Wright PCS for Journalism and Media Arts Public Charter School	Charter	8	F
Roosevelt High School	DCPS	6	F
School Without Walls High School	DCPS	3	C
SEED Public Charter School of Washington, D.C.	Charter	8	F
Somerset Preparatory Academy Public Charter School	Charter	9	F
Thurgood Marshall Academy Public Charter School	Charter	8	F
Washington Latin Public Charter School Upper School	Charter	6	F
Washington Metropolitan High School (formerly YEA)	DCPS	0	A
Woodrow Wilson High School	DCPS	2	B

Shaded rows denote that a school's student population had 51 percent or more Black students.

*NWLC was unable to obtain a written dress code policy via school's website, handbook or via request.

**As mentioned in the methodology, Chavez Public Policy Public Charter School data was not available in the 2015-2016 CRDC data. We therefore were unable to determine whether the student population had 51 percent or more Black students.

Of the 29

DCPS and charter schools that had a dress code policy available for analysis:

79 PERCENT required a uniform

59 PERCENT regulated the length of skirts and shorts

55 PERCENT mentioned something about the tightness, sizing, or fit of clothing

48 PERCENT banned hair wraps, hats, or other head coverings

38 PERCENT required students to wear belts (and many specified the belts must be black)

21 PERCENT banned tights or leggings

More than half of D.C. public and charter high schools (52 percent) mention disruptive consequences for dress code violations, such as parents or guardians being notified and asked to bring replacement items to school or detention. Several schools even allow for classroom removals, such as in-school and out-of-school suspension for dress code violations. Starting in the 2020–2021 school year, schools will be prohibited from issuing out-of-school suspensions for dress code violations. However, a review of 2018–2019 school handbooks shows that schools' policies are more likely to condone exclusionary discipline for dress code infractions than they are to condemn it. Only one school—Anacostia High School—explicitly states that being out of dress code will not result in lost classroom time.

Data shows that the racial makeup of the student body correlates with the strictness of high school dress codes. Specifically, high schools that are majority Black (i.e., schools where Black students make up at least 51 percent of students enrolled) on average have more dress code restrictions than other high schools (4.7 compared to 2.7). This racial trend holds even for selective high schools. For example, Benjamin Banneker High School—where Black students make up more than three-quarters (77 percent) of the student body—earns an F with seven out of 12 dress code restrictions. In comparison, School Without Walls—another

selective high school where Black students are about one-third (36 percent) of the student body—receives a C with three of the 12 dress code restrictions.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, majority Black schools also suspend girls at higher rates than other schools (13.2 percent compared to 7.7 percent). In other words, majority Black schools have 1.7 times the number of dress code restrictions and suspend girls at 1.7 times the rate as other schools.

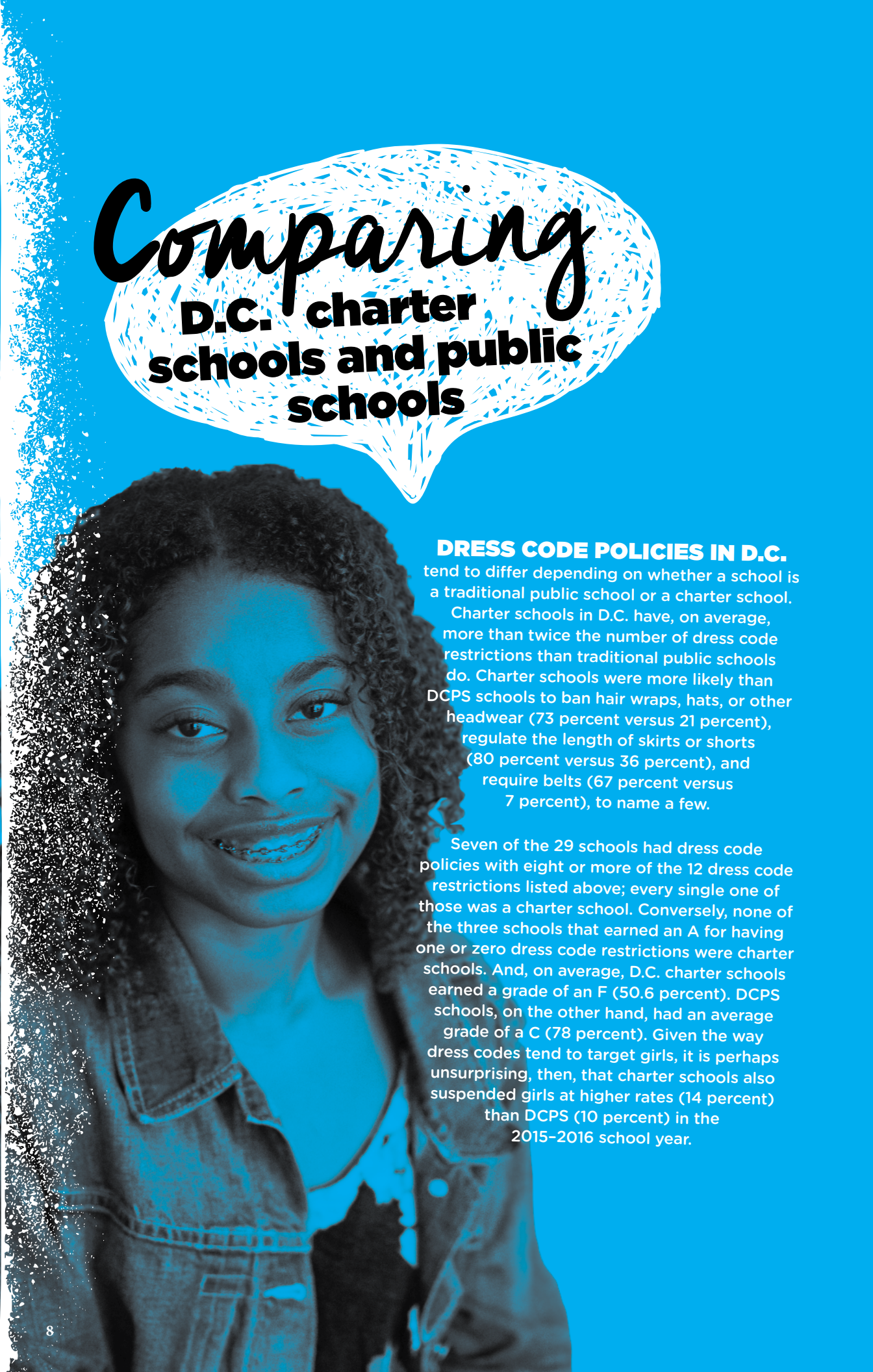
“*Students will not be turned away from the school for not being in proper uniform, and teachers should not turn students away from their individual classrooms for being out of uniform.... Students who are not following the dress code or uniform policy will not be barred from class.*”

— Anacostia High School 2018–2019
dress code

“If a student is in violation of this dress code, parents will be telephoned. More than one infraction in a school year will result in additional consequences which will include detention, the lowering the citizenship grade and/or suspension.”
— Benjamin Banneker
2018–2019
dress
code

Pushed out...

“Parents will receive a phone call when a student arrives to school improperly dressed. In addition, a student will be sent to [In School Suspension] for the remainder of the day for the uniform infraction.” — National Collegiate Preparatory Public Charter High School 2018–2019 dress code



Comparing D.C. charter schools and public schools

DRESS CODE POLICIES IN D.C.

tend to differ depending on whether a school is a traditional public school or a charter school.

Charter schools in D.C. have, on average, more than twice the number of dress code restrictions than traditional public schools do. Charter schools were more likely than DCPS schools to ban hair wraps, hats, or other headwear (73 percent versus 21 percent), regulate the length of skirts or shorts (80 percent versus 36 percent), and require belts (67 percent versus 7 percent), to name a few.

Seven of the 29 schools had dress code policies with eight or more of the 12 dress code restrictions listed above; every single one of those was a charter school. Conversely, none of the three schools that earned an A for having one or zero dress code restrictions were charter schools. And, on average, D.C. charter schools earned a grade of an F (50.6 percent). DCPS schools, on the other hand, had an average grade of a C (78 percent). Given the way dress codes tend to target girls, it is perhaps unsurprising, then, that charter schools also suspended girls at higher rates (14 percent) than DCPS (10 percent) in the 2015–2016 school year.

Timeline

progress in the district & beyond

APRIL 24, 2018

NWLC releases *Dress Coded: Black Girls, Bodies & Biases in D.C. Public Schools*. The report receives coverage in local and national press outlets, including *The Washington Post*, *Teen Vogue* and National Public Radio.

APRIL 27, 2018

A parent at Alice Deal Middle School approaches administrators about convening a dress code task force, which kicks off a series of meetings with parents, administrators and students—resulting in a new dress code that promotes diversity and inclusivity.



MAY 1, 2018

The Council of the District of Columbia passes the Student Fair Access to Schools Act of 2018, a bill that would prohibit out-of-school suspensions for minor infractions, including dress code violations. Bill sponsor Councilmember David Grosso highlighted *Dress Coded* to urge members to support the bill without weakening amendments.

MAY 4, 2018

Frustrated by their school's dismissal of a dress code task force earlier in the year and emboldened by the release of *Dress Coded*, students at School Without Walls organize a walkout—resulting in administrators reconvening the task force and eventually adopting of a revised dress code policy.



MAY 30, 2018

Councilmembers Grosso and Mary Cheh meet with *Dress Coded* co-authors to discuss problems they see in their schools' dress code enforcement and propose ways the D.C. Council can urge DCPS and charter schools to promote equitable uniform and dress code policies.



JUNE 8, 2018

Dress Coded co-authors meet with officials at the U.S. Department of Education to urge them to keep in place guidance that clarifies that "neutral" policies like dress codes that target students based on race and sex are illegal.





JUNE 15, 2018

Last day of school for most DCPS schools



JULY 23 & 24, 2018

DCPS hosts its Summer Leadership Institute trainings for 800 school leaders, teachers, and operations staff. In addition to requiring attendees to read *Dress Coded*, organizers dedicate a half day of the training to highlight how school leaders can promote (or undermine) educational equity through dress code policies and practices.



AUGUST 20, 2018

First day of school for most DCPS schools



SEPTEMBER 2018

Mere weeks into the new school year, students at Duke Ellington School of the Arts notice that school administrators are dress coding students for wearing head wraps—even though the handbook doesn't say they're prohibited. In response, students organize a "head wrap clapback"—forcing administrators to back off their questionable practices.



SEPTEMBER 27, 2018

Organizers, students, scholars, and administrators, including DCPS Deputy Chancellor Melissa Kim, gather at a forum hosted by the Georgetown Gender+ Justice Initiative to discuss *Dress Coded* and how to eliminate racist and sexist policies and practices that push Black girls out of school.



OCTOBER 15, 2018

Dress Coded co-authors testify at a D.C. Council hearing that schools are still making students miss class for dress code violations by sending students to in-school-suspension and informally removing them from class.



NOVEMBER 10, 2018

Students, parents, educators, and policymakers in Richmond, Virginia, organize a community forum to discuss how to address unfair dress code policies and other practices that push girls out of school.



DECEMBER 21, 2018 The U.S. Department of Education officially rescinds guidance clarifying how schools can make sure that discipline policies doesn't illegally punish students of color. Although the rescission didn't change the laws that apply to schools, it sends a message that schools should not be concerned about discipline policies that disproportionately harm Black and Native American children.



JANUARY 7, 2019

Inspired by *Dress Coded* and a student-led forum in Richmond, Virginia Delegate Jennifer Carroll Foy introduces HB 2104, a bill that would require Virginia schools to allow students to wear clothes that are religiously, ethnically, or culturally significant to students.



JANUARY 14, 2019

Dress Coded co-author Fatimah Fair pens an op-ed signed by 200 students from 14 states and D.C. calling on schools to address unfair discipline that pushes Black girls out of school in light of Education Secretary Betsy DeVos' failure to do so.



FEBRUARY 26, 2019

DCPS Chancellor Lewis Ferebee testifies before the D.C. Council on dress code enforcement. His testimony revealed that DCPS convened a committee at central office to consider revisions to regulations governing dress codes but failed to indicate whether DCPS will release those revisions in a proposed rule that will be available for comment by students, parents, and the public. The testimony also revealed that the committee met with schools to revise their dress codes without including the input of *Dress Coded* co-authors—despite repeated offers to allow co-authors to assist schools with revising their dress code policies.



MARCH 6, 2019

In response to student and DCPS testimony, the D.C. Council introduces a Sense of the Council resolution urging D.C. schools to end any classroom removals for uniform and dress code violations and to consult with students and parents to craft equitable dress code policies. As of June 2019, the resolution has the support of 10 out of 14 councilmembers and is awaiting committee consideration.



APRIL 24 TO JULY 3, 2019

California legislators amend the CROWN Act (SB 188), a bill to prohibit workplace discrimination based on Afrocentric hairstyles, to protect students from similar discrimination in California schools. Both the Assembly and Senate unanimously approved the amended bill, which was signed into law on July 3, 2019, by Governor Gavin Newsom—making California the first state to explicitly ban discrimination based on natural hair in the workplace and K-12 schools.



MARCH 28, 2019

In a case brought by the American Civil Liberties Union, a federal district court in North Carolina strikes down Charter Day School's uniform policy as unconstitutional because it requires girls to wear skirts.

girls

are creating the change

“There was a student protest at our school to make the dress code more inclusive and less harsh on girls’ bodies, and it ended up with our school actually changing their policy, and as a result they have the new dress code published on our website.”
— Samantha O’Sullivan, 18, School Without Walls High School Graduate

Fixing harsh and discriminatory dress code policies


is not a job for legislators alone. In fact, many of the most successful changemakers on this issue are not elected officials. They are the people most impacted by harmful dress codes: students, parents, teachers, and school staff. They understand more than anyone how dress codes can affect and—in many cases—interrupt a student’s education. Within weeks of the release of *Dress Coded: Black Girls, Bodies, and Bias in D.C. Schools*, students organized protests over the GroupMe app, parents prompted administrators to convene dress code committees, and teachers kicked off internal conversations to rethink enforcement. Many took aim at racist and sexist stereotypes embedded in dress codes, needless rules that deny girls class time, and the culture of harassment that paints girls as “distractions.” This wave of activism—overwhelmingly led by women and girls at the school level—has yielded a variety of responses. Their work offers a playbook to school communities around the country eager to confront outdated dress codes.

Black girls in Washington, D.C., aren’t waiting for schools or district leaders to address dress code disparities; they’re creating the change themselves. Across D.C.—on top of school work, social lives, family responsibilities, and planning for the future—girls have launched campaigns, organized protests, and led public education projects to push their schools to rethink harsh and discriminatory dress codes. Some succeeded, ushering in new rules, committees, and opportunities to create safer, more supportive climates for all students. Many more are still struggling to be heard. But from lunch walkouts to “head wrap clapbacks,” students are confronting outdated dress codes with a mixture of creativity, strategy, and bravery, offering a blueprint to students nationwide and shaming the inaction of school leaders and public officials. Their actions, while inspiring, are a reminder of another way dress codes place a burden on students—requiring students to spend time and energy protesting unfair dress codes instead of other academic or extracurricular pursuits.

“My friend Jayie and I made like a whole documentary on dress codes.... We were going to inform admin that we were offended by the things that have happened. So, we set up interviews with some of the female students, like, mostly Black and Hispanic girls. The documentary would show how girls have been pulled out of class, expelled, and put out of school for two days, because they didn’t comply with dress code or broke dress code rules.” — Keontria Wainwright, 17, Capital City Public Charter School



“We had a head wrap clapback where everybody at school, wore head wraps, bonnets, or durags. We were just trying to prove a point because we were like, ‘Don’t sit here and scrutinize these kids just because they came in a durag, or just because they came in a scarf, or bandanna, and call it unprofessional, because this is literally school, not a job.’” — Ayiana Davis, 17, Duke Ellington School of the Arts



“ I reached out to Principal Neal after reading the *Dress Coded* report and said, ‘I’m sure you get complaints from students and teachers and parents all the time about the dress code, but if you’re willing and interested in taking help from a parent I would love to spearhead an effort to update the policy.’ And she was immediately receptive. Not defensive at all. She said, ‘That would be great, I would love it,’ and invited me in for a meeting. We talked a little bit then about process and who would be involved.”

— Debb Zerwitz, Parent, Alice Deal Middle School

Lessons

from a dress code community taskforce

Dress codes should be created in conversation and collaboration with students.

Not only is this approach more likely to produce more inclusive, culturally responsive policies, it's also a way to build stronger relationships and social-emotional skills among the school community. Alice Deal Middle School saw these results firsthand. After reading *Dress Coded*, Debb Zerwitz, a parent at Alice Deal Middle School, decided to push back against biased dress codes and requested a meeting with her school principal. She was familiar with the dynamics and challenges outlined in the report—the distracting nature of dress codes, constant policing of girls' bodies, and sexist justifications—from her daughter. So, she took action. She had a frank conversation with her school's principal, Diedre L. Neal, and, together, they decided to create a community taskforce to review and revise the dress code.

“Dress code enforcement was too militant.” It was an everyday kind of thing. My daughter was regularly stopped for wearing leggings and shorts. Things that weren't a big deal. I just noticed how pervasive dress codes were—how they became a huge part of the day. Girls felt creeped out by their classmates and teachers commenting on how they looked and it empowered students to scrutinize each other, which makes them feel even more self-conscious . . . Middle school kids tend to be particularly sensitive to peer influence and self-conscious because it is a time of physical change.” — Debb Zerwitz, Parent, Alice Deal Middle School

“I think there was a tendency for school staff to equate the dress code with how other people would react. So, some staff members would say, ‘You can't wear leggings because boys might A, B, or C,’ or ‘The straps on your shirts have to be a certain width because boys A, B, or C,’ which never really sat well with me.”
— Diedre L. Neal, Principal, Alice Deal Middle School



With her school's support, Zerwitz launched the Alice Deal dress code taskforce with other parents and students in the spring of 2018, and she started by listening. She met with administrators and guidance counselors, organized several listening sessions for students to share their thoughts and hopes for the school dress codes, and created opportunities for the school community to discuss a new way forward. Using *Dress Coded* as a grounding resource and the Evanston Township High School dress code, which was highlighted as a model in *Dress Coded*, as inspiration, Zerwitz facilitated community meetings over the course of the spring and early summer and gathered findings and themes from each conversation. In the end, the listening sessions produced important results—educating everyone from students to administrators on how dress codes affect students and the messages they promote and creating space for students to speak out and advocate for themselves.

“It was great to hear the stories of our female students. The detail is in the story. We heard from girls who have really been negatively impacted by boys and adults making comments that were supported by our dress code.” — Diedre L. Neal, Principal, Alice Deal Middle School

“We had one or two meetings with Principal Neal

and other administrators of the school, and one of the early meetings also involved one of the guidance counselors as well. I wanted to have a series of community meetings. We publicized them through the school’s weekly newsletter that gets blasted out electronically to all the families. I think it also was part of weekly announcements at school.” — Debb Zerwitz, Parent, Alice Deal Middle School



“We had a number of family focus groups. We did two at the school, and then three out in the community to make sure we were including all voices.” — Diedre L. Neal, Principal, Alice Deal Middle School

“The two meetings at school had the most kids, and it was really great to hear from the students directly. They definitely seemed like they were really excited to have an opportunity to be heard. It was [almost] 100 percent girls who came. I think maybe one boy came to the meetings, which is telling. We also put up three poster boards with Post-it notes outside the cafeteria that invited them to put their thoughts down. One was soliciting general views about the dress code, one about how it was enforced, and then one was what’s your opinion on uniforms, and then we sorted through all of those.” — Debb Zerwitz, Parent, Alice Deal Middle School

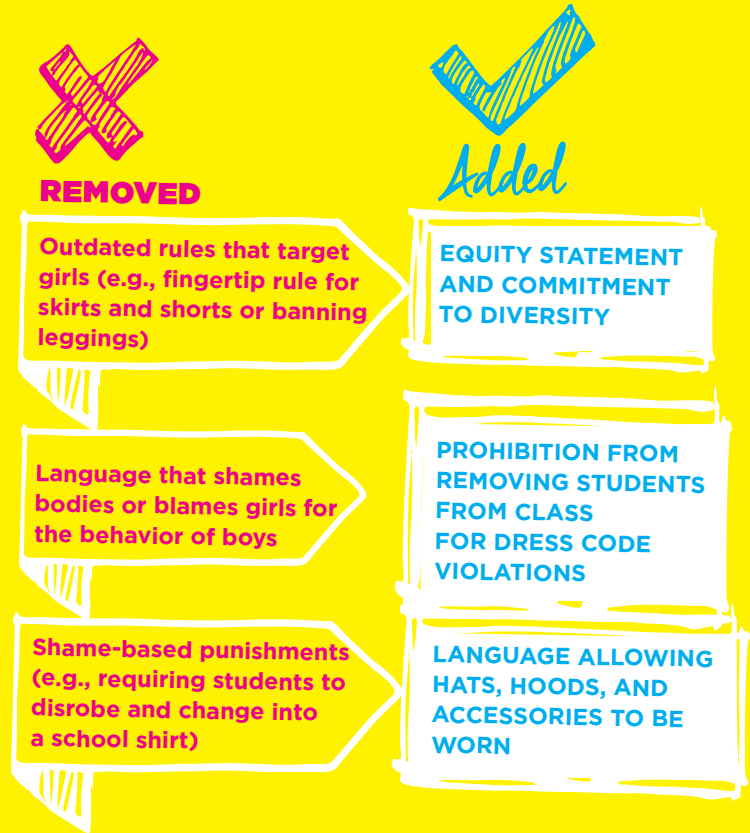


Upon the completion of the listening sessions, Debb shared the findings with Principal Neal and collaborated with school and community members to craft a dress code that reflected the needs and voices of her school community. Many of the recommendations reflected the solutions outlined by D.C. students in *Dress Coded*. The new dress code policy communicates a set of values and expectations that are much more in line with the perspectives and experiences of the school community.

“ Be open to those community opportunities to chat about what’s going on as it relates to dress code for your kids, with your students, your staff, and your family.” — Diedre L. Neal, Principal, Alice Deal Middle School

“We speak a lot more about what you can wear. And we no longer have expectations like a leggings rule. Our dress code is more about safety. Our community is very diverse, and I want students to be able to express that diversity and their individuality in appropriate ways.” — Diedre L. Neal, Principal, Alice Deal Middle School

Changes to the dress code policy after the Alice Deal Dress Code Task Force:



The Alice Deal dress code taskforce was successful because parents and students were willing to speak candidly about how policies affect them, and school administrators not only took their concerns seriously, but also worked with the community members to revise written policies. This is the kind of community input *Dress Coded* encouraged administrators to solicit when considering dress code policies and the kind of community dialogue and change the report was intended to inspire.

“So, I think what really is most poignant to me is making sure that kids feel like they are welcomed in their school and that the rules are gender neutral. That was a really, really big point for us because our dress code wasn’t gender neutral. Before, it was very focused on what girls had on and how boys would react to that. I just finished reading an article about how girls of color are seen as older and are given stiffer consequences in many schools. I would advise school leadership teams to consider. Do we end up dress coding more girls of color?” — Diedre L. Neal, Principal, Alice Deal Middle School

Learning

from student action at school without walls


Some dress code committees are initiated by conversation, others through collective action.

School Without Walls saw a wave of student protests after the release of *Dress Coded*. Dress codes had already been a conversation and source of collaboration among students and faculty. In 2017, the administration convened a dress code committee, but the recommendations were not adopted. In response, students organized a series of lunchtime protests, calling out the racist and sexist nature of dress codes and the need for reform.

“The report had a really big impact on my school.

I remember right after it was published, a lot of students were talking about it. And there was also a faculty meeting the principal held to talk about dress codes in general. Students were pretty cynical about the dress code, because we felt it was unfairly enforced. And then on top of that, the rules themselves were really limiting and seemed kind of like arbitrary.” — Samantha O’Sullivan, 18, School Without Walls High School Graduate

“So, students made some group chats to start talking amongst themselves and saying, ‘We should organize. We should pressure the administration to change things.’ And I think it culminated with like a small group of students organizing a protest during lunch one day. They advertised it on social media, and they said, ‘Everyone meet up at the school during lunch, and we’re going to make posters. And we’re going to really pressure the principals and everyone to change the dress code. Or stop enforcing it badly.’ I remember it being really successful in that a lot of students felt passionately about the issue. I think a lot of what made it successful was having some teacher support. And also, the principal being willing to have a meeting, or just someone in the administration be willing to listen to student voices.” Samantha O’Sullivan, 18, School Without Walls High School Graduate

A close-up portrait of a young woman with long, dark hair, smiling gently. She is wearing a necklace with a small elephant pendant. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light blue.

“ I think a lot of people just got really fed up with the fact that they were being dress coded every single day for something that their white counterparts would not be getting dress coded for.” —


**Chloe Pine, 16,
School Without Walls
High School**

The protests gained the attention of school administrators,

who decided to reconvene the dress code committee from the previous year and commit to changing the policy in partnership with students. Students from all grade levels were elected to participate by teachers, school staffers or administrators and worked with administration to craft a new dress code that would better reflect the community's values.

“ This was an opportunity for students to become involved and come together to demonstrate student advocacy around an important student issue. The process became a community effort and involved teachers and staff. A group of students volunteered to collaborate and offer a ‘Reformed Dress Code’ policy. Adult participants observed and listened to different groups explain why a ‘Reformed Dress Code’ proposal would impact the school culture in a positive manner. The students carefully reviewed the proposals and took information from each group and offered a ‘Reformed Dress Code’ that combined the proposals of the student groups.” — Sylvia Isaac, Associate Principal, School Without Walls High School

“ There’s less room for teacher discretion in enforcing the dress code or through discrimination based on body shape or body size. There’s less unfair enforcement of the dress code, because the way that it’s written, it allows girls to wear clothing that’s appropriate but also expressive, that they’re allowed to express themselves through.”
— Samantha O’Sullivan, 18, School Without Walls High School Graduate



“ I think it’s important to be able to develop those meaningful relationships and also have students believe that they are empowered. Because when they leave us we want them to be able to think critically. We want them to be able to advocate. We want them to be able to be in a position to make the best decisions and to be involved in causes that are going to impact their lives.”

— Sylvia Isaac, Associate Principal, School Without Walls High School

“ If someone were to support you and allow you to express yourself freely, it can create a sense of safeness. And by creating that ‘safer’ space, it enables people to allow themselves to feel comfortable and good. It allows people to understand they don’t have to abide by other people’s standards.” — Chloe Pine, 16, School Without Walls High School

School Without Walls unveiled their new dress code

at the end of the 2017–2018 school year. Not only was the policy more in line with their values, it also opened the door to stronger relationships, intergenerational learning, and a new set of advocacy skills and experience for students.

“ You have to have an open mind and always think about, okay, if this is changing, how do we be a part of the change to make it work in the most positive way where everyone benefits, where no one feels excluded, where no young lady feels they’re body shamed.”

— Sylvia Isaac, Associate Principal, School Without Walls High School

Resistance

to culture change stalls progress for many

Unfortunately, despite some promising steps in a few schools,

dress codes in Washington, D.C., still continue to push students out of school, affect girls' sense of self, and reinforce harmful stereotypes. As highlighted above, some schools ban clothing associated with Black girls and women, like hair wraps. And Black girls still report being sent to in-school suspension or being removed from class for dress code violations.¹ These actions may be informed by adults' stereotyped perceptions that Black girls are more sexually provocative—especially if they are curvier or more developed—and thus more deserving of punishment for a low-cut shirt or short skirt.² Strict enforcement of dress codes also communicates to students that girls are to be blamed for “distracting” boys, instead of teaching boys to respect girls, correct their behavior and be more responsible.³ This dangerous message promotes sexual harassment in schools.⁴ Nearly all of the students we interviewed described the distracting and detrimental effect of dress codes on their education and mental health, specifically emphasizing how it factors into their day-to-day life.

“

It can be a lot if every day if you're getting dress coded for something at school—especially if your parents are doing the same at home. You don't want people to grow up, especially girls, feeling like they have to cover themselves all the time. Everyone has a different body, and they know how they should and should not dress with that specific body, but there shouldn't be a standard.” — Ayiana Davis, 17, Duke Ellington School of the Arts

“This is not just about clothes. It’s about confidence, judgement, and bodies. It’s how our children learn how to treat and respect one another. *If we are training them to scrutinize and shame girls, they will carry that approach with them for the rest of their life.*” — Debb Zerwitz, Parent, Alice Deal Middle School

The students we interviewed connected the enforcement of dress codes in their schools with respectability politics, or a desire by some Black adults to police Black girls to enforce assimilation to white culture instead of challenging systems that punish Blackness. Specifically, students point out that Black teachers and administrators justify strict enforcement of dress codes against them to protect them from bigotry and prepare them for “success” in a culture that promotes anti-Blackness. However, school policies that ban styles like hoodies and hair wraps—and school administrators that disproportionately punish Black students for dress code infractions—reinforce the same stereotypes by communicating that students’ authentic selves are incompatible with success. These practices also threaten the potential success of Black students, by increasing the likelihood that they will be pushed out of school.

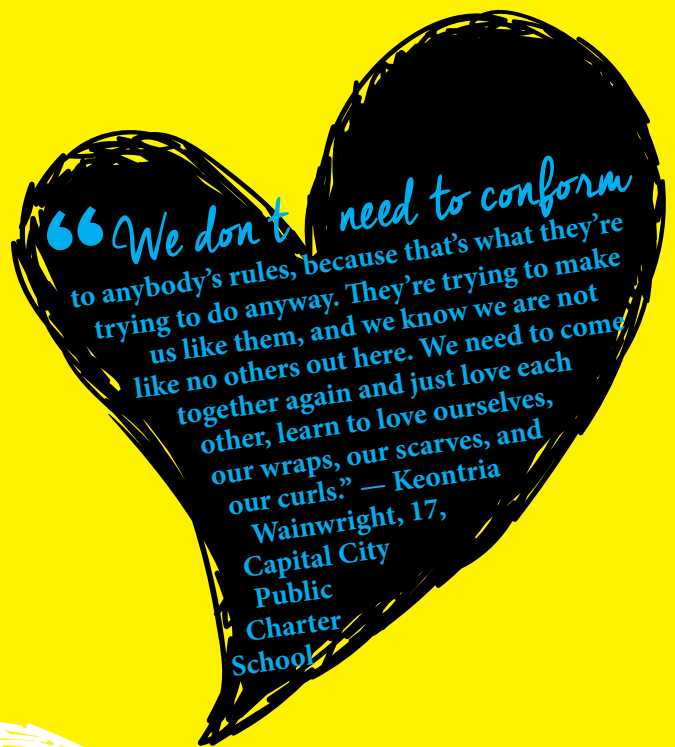
Black girls deserve to bring their authentic selves to school. They deserve teachers and school leaders willing to challenge systemic racism and misogyny that create barriers for students. They deserve a place where they are accepted for who they are, not punished for what the world might assume about them. Our participants called on their schools to model the behaviors we want their students to emulate when they graduate and show those students that what they think is more important than what they wear.

“If you go to school every single day and a male teacher tells you that you are showing too much skin or that you look inappropriate, or that you’re distracting other boys, you’re again embedding in their head that they have to live up to some certain standard that a male made. And that is just not the way that society should be.” — Chloe Pine, 16, School Without Walls High School

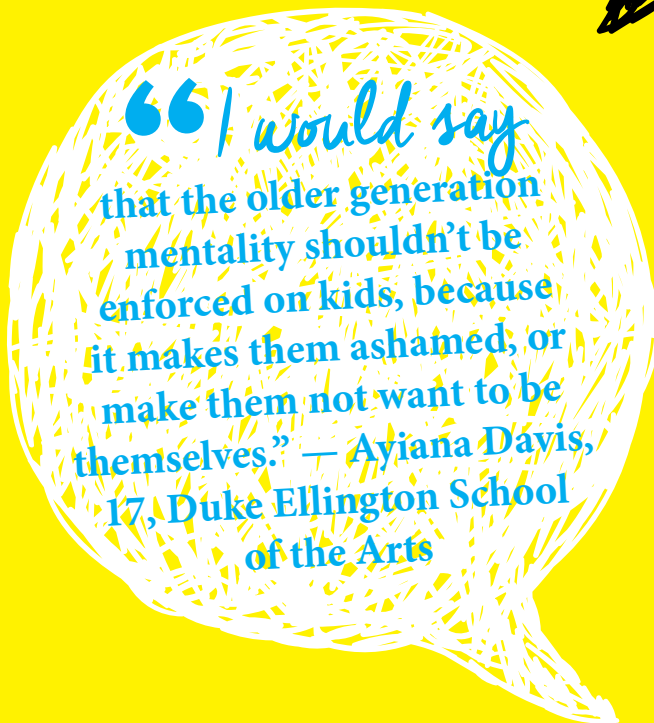


“ You’re continuing to allow for these inequalities to happen by saying to a Black boy or a Black girl, if you don’t dress this way, then people will think less of you.” — Chloe Pine, 16, School Without Walls High School

“ If you restrict us from allowing ourselves to like show who we are, it just seems like you’re ignoring the true fact of the way the world works now. These standards that were made a long time ago and the society has changed so much, and in 20 years, maybe society will be different too, and this is something that they need to realize will be constantly changing, and it’s something that you kind of have to take each step at a time.”
— Chloe Pine, 16, School Without Walls High School



“We don’t need to conform
to anybody’s rules, because that’s what they’re
trying to do anyway. They’re trying to make
us like them, and we know we are not
like no others out here. We need to come
together again and just love each
other, learn to love ourselves,
our wraps, our scarves, and
our curls.” — Keontria
Wainwright, 17,
Capital City
Public
Charter
School



“I would say
that the older generation
mentality shouldn’t be
enforced on kids, because
it makes them ashamed, or
make them not want to be
themselves.” — Ayiana Davis,
17, Duke Ellington School
of the Arts

“One of the teachers who’s really known for dress coding
a lot of young Black girls was a Black woman herself, and I do think that she was doing it from
a place of trying to protect us. But I think what I would say is that restricting our clothing
reinforces an idea that acting, dressing, or carrying ourselves in a certain way is the key to
success. And it is exactly this type of respectability politics that ends up hurting us more
in the long run.” — Samantha O’Sullivan, 18, School Without Walls High School Graduate

D.C. schools'

baseless dress code justifications

Many schools' written dress codes profess that dress codes and uniform policies are necessary to force students to focus on academic performance and for schools to achieve certain behavior modifications. In fact, two of the most common justifications set out in D.C. school dress code policies were to allow students to focus on learning instead of attire and to foster a sense of professionalism.

However, there is little evidence to support this assertion,⁵ with studies suggesting that there are no links between schools having a uniform policy and academic achievement.⁶ In fact, there may be a negative correlation between the two.⁷

Even though formal school policies use “student success” narratives to justify harsh dress codes, the D.C. administrators and parents we interviewed questioned whether dress codes helped or hurt students' ability to learn.

“School uniforms help minimize disruptive behavior, promote respect for oneself and others, and build school/community spirit. Friendship PCS also believes wearing school uniforms allows for identification of intruders on campus and encourages students to concentrate on learning rather than on what they are wearing.” — Friendship Public Charter School
2018–2019 dress code

“Virtually all professions have either explicit or implicit standards of dress. While some professions allow for more individual expression in terms of attire than others, the relationship between one’s dress habits and one’s work habits seems clear.” — Benjamin Banneker 2018–2019 dress code

“I don’t know if I equate dress codes with student success.

Of course, we want to limit any distractions in the classroom. But honestly a stringent dress code could also be a distraction, right? For example, the issue of dress codes became a barrier for academics because kids were being sent out of class because what they had on didn’t meet the dress code.” — Diedre L. Neal, Principal, Alice Deal Middle School

“If the first thing you hear when you walk into a school is a comment about your body, that will stay with you and affect your ability to focus.”
— Debb Zerwitz, Parent, Alice Deal Middle School

“I don’t think there should be no dress code at all, but there should be some sort of freedom to it. It shouldn’t just be concrete because that’s when the issue comes of like, oh well if I don’t fit that, then am I good enough? Am I capable enough of being at this school? But school is just about the education piece, it shouldn’t be about how you look, who you are, anything like that.”
— Chloe Pine, 16, School Without Walls

D.C. policymakers

must act

While students and parents at some D.C. schools


were able to collaborate with administrators to meaningfully change their dress code policies, too many D.C. schools still have strict dress codes that fall heavily on Black girls. The problem is especially egregious in charter schools where independent Boards of Trustees make their own policies without oversight by a central office tasked with promoting equity and standards across all schools. For students and parents in these schools, collective action and other school-based advocacy is necessary to push school policymakers to reverse policies that unfairly target Black girls because of what they wear.

In contrast, DCPS can get public input on dress code policies by revising the dress code and uniform policy in the D.C. Municipal Regulations (DCMR) and initiating a notice and comment period. Under the D.C. Administrative Procedure Act, any proposed revision to the DCMR requires DCPS to solicit written and oral comments from students, parents, and other members of the public. DCPS must also review and respond to public comments before allowing the new rule to go into effect. The dress code and uniform regulations are due for a rewrite since the last time they were updated was almost a decade ago. Additionally, because the recently passed Student Fair Access to School Act prohibits out-of-school suspensions for dress code infractions, the dress code regulations need to be updated to incorporate these safeguards by the 2020–2021 school year. Thus, DCPS should promptly propose a revision of the DCMR and solicit community input on dress code policies from a wide array of stakeholders, advancing dress code policies that promote equity amongst all DCPS schools.

DCPS and charter schools must listen to the students who are most affected by problematic dress codes and engage students, parents, and school staff to develop dress code policies that will allow students to be themselves and feel safe at school.

“So, I feel like first you have to listen to the people who go through this every day, and that’s the only way to make a change, because these are people who are experiencing this. You can’t make rules if you’re not in that environment or suffer those consequences.”

— Keontria Wainwright,
17, Capital City Public Charter School



“When crafting dress codes, it would be nice if schools were to get students that they trusted to help them craft a dress code.”
— Ayiana Davis, 17, Duke Ellington School of the Arts

“The most important thing is to start by listening to students, especially students that are Black girls who feel like they’ve been victims of discrimination. Leaders need to listen to these voices, and the dress code report is a great place to start listening.” — Samantha O’Sullivan, 18, School Without Walls High School Graduate



“Get other students that feel the same way. Make a proposal, or make like a video, and basically get admins’ attention that this is a problem here. Get at least one adult that feels the same way, or that can support you, because I feel like that’s the key into like the door. Make people aware.” — Keontria Wainwright, 17, Capital City Public Charter School

“Talk to an administrator at your school that you’re close with, even if that person may disagree, or may not agree with everything that you’re saying, they’re still going to listen to you, because at that point, you’ve built a relationship, where they respect you as a person.”
— Ayiana Davis, 17, Duke Ellington School of the Arts

girls have power

D.C. schools still have a long way to go

before truly eradicating discriminatory dress codes, but one thing is crystal clear about the progress made thus far: Black girls are the catalysts. Nearly all of the policy and culture changes we’ve seen in the past year are the result of their efforts to be seen, heard, and respected in school. And while it’s exhausting, often thankless work, we need girls to keep speaking up. To keep pushing their schools to be safe, supportive environments for all students. And adults should support them, inside schools and out. We have a responsibility to listen to their concerns and create opportunities for them to address them. Because when girls are at the table, better decisions are made.

“Use your voice. Find an advocate in the building—a teacher, a counselor, their principal—and start having conversations with those people because it’s possible folks really aren’t aware. I think if you’re not a girl of color you’re not aware of what girls of color are going through. So, I would say use your voice and your Black girl magic to try to change any policies that you think are unfair.” — Diedre L. Neal, Principal at Alice Deal Middle School

“Keep pushing.

I mean, this is really about what you’re going to have to do after you leave high school. It begins here.” — Sylvia Isaac, Associate Principal, School Without Walls High School



Acknowledgements

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The National Women's Law Center fights for gender justice—in the courts, in public policy, and in our society—working across the issues that are central to the lives of women and girls. We use the law in all its forms to change culture and drive solutions to the gender inequity that shapes our society and to break down the barriers that harm all of us—especially those who face multiple forms of discrimination, including women of color, LGBTQ people, and low-income women and families. For more than 45 years, we have been on the leading edge of every major legal and policy victory for women.

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