

# How to Reform or Abolish School Dress Codes

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# Acknowledgment

Special thanks to Sabrina Bernadel, who worked on this presentation while at the National Women's Law Center.

This presentation is best used after viewing the presentation  
“Can Dress Codes Harm Students?”





# Content Warning

**\*\*SASH Club Power Topics may include sensitive content that may be difficult to present and may possibly be triggering to some participants.\*\***

**You may want to seek the support of an ally during this presentation, especially if you're a survivor of sexual violence.**



# What's Ahead:

- > You have the power to advocate for school policies that make you feel safe, valued, and included in school. While the National Women's Law Center (NWLC) recommends abolishing dress codes, you may choose to modify these recommendations in the ways you feel are appropriate, such as an equitable dress code.

This presentation will cover:

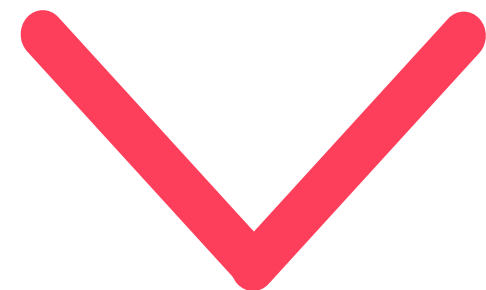
- How a school's safety and community goals can be met without dress codes
- Recommendations and resources for reforming or abolishing school dress codes

# What's Ahead:

- School dress code reform benefits all students
- Steps to reform or abolish school dress codes
- Stories of courageous activism
- Equitable school dress codes
- Sample letters to school to reform or abolish school dress codes

# Dress Code Reform Benefits All Students

- Reforming or abolishing your school dress code can benefit all students by shifting school climate:
- Away from how students look to how students are learning and feeling
  - To a culture of consent and respect, where sexual harassment is not tolerated, and harassers are held accountable—no matter what students are wearing
  - To rules that keep students safe and in class



**All of these changes can lead to an overall better school climate for not just students, but the whole school community**



# What Does it Mean to “Abolish” a Dress Code?

- Abolishing a dress code means getting rid of it!
- It can open a space where students and school leaders work together to create school safety and wellness policies that affirm students’ identities and keep them in class.





# Steps to Reforming or Abolishing Dress Codes





# Steps to Reforming or Abolishing Dress Codes

- > **Step 1:** Read your school or school district's dress code.
- It might be part of the code of conduct or may be a separate resource.
  - Codes of conduct are usually given out at school or on your school's website.
  - If you can't find it, ask a teacher (and make note of that!).

# Steps to Reforming or Abolishing Dress Codes

## > **Step 2:** Identify policies and practices that may impact certain students

- To help identify those policies and practices, ask these questions:
  - Are there policies worded in a way that could violate a student's rights?
  - Who is most likely to be punished by this policy?
  - Who have I seen get punished the most by this policy while in school?
  - Are there stereotypes underlying this policy that might lead some students to be punished more than others?



# Steps to Reforming or Abolishing Dress Codes

- **Step 3:** Build support within your community
  - Make or join a student group (make sure it's diverse!).
  - Use community spaces, events, and social media platforms to raise awareness and support for your issues.
    - These can be things like PTA meetings, town hall meetings, local newsletters and publications, community Facebook groups, TikToks, and posts on Instagram.





# Steps to Reforming or Abolishing Dress Codes

- > **Step 4:** Write your recommendations
- Make sure your “asks” are clear (such as abolishing policies vs. changing them, or setting up a meeting or town hall, etc.).
  - Be specific about what policies you’d like to see changed and how.
  - Collaborate with other students.
  - Find adults at school and in your community who can help.

# Steps to Reforming or Abolishing Dress Codes

## > **Step 5:** Share your recommendations with school leaders

- Ask your school leaders for a meeting.
- Write a letter to your principal, superintendent, or school board members (see our [sample letters](#) that you can modify).
- Speak at a school board meeting or town hall.
- Respond to a “request for public comment.”
- Ask to be included in future discussions about dress code reforms.





# Steps to Reforming or Abolishing Dress Codes

- **Step 6:** Hold your school leaders accountable (and add pressure, if needed):
- Start a petition.
  - Protest at school.
  - Go to the media.
  - File a complaint with your State Department of Education and/or the U.S. Department of Education.

# Stories of Courageous Activism

- In 2021, Riley O’Keefe, a student at Bartram Trail High School in St. Johns, Florida, led a petition signed by over 7,000 people and spoke at a public meeting held by the St. Johns County school board to fight her school’s sexist dress code.
  - The school edited yearbook photos of over 80 girls who had exposed shoulders and low necklines in their photos, without their permission.
  - The issue received national attention, and the case was picked up by the ACLU’s Women’s Rights Project, who filed a federal civil rights complaint against the school.
  - By 2022, the school district revised their dress code to be gender neutral.
  - To learn more, check out [this story](#) in Education Week.

# Stories of Courageous Activism

- Sophia Trevino brought national attention to her middle school's dress code issues in Cobb County, Georgia in 2021.
  - She spoke out about how her school was being incredibly lax about wearing masks during a deadly pandemic but were strictly enforcing sexist, racist, and classist dress codes.
  - She led student protests where, every Friday, students would wear t-shirts that criticized dress codes.
  - Sophia's advocacy was covered in media outlets across the country.
  - To learn more, check out [this story](#) in the New York Times or in [this segment](#) on Good Morning America.



# Stories of Courageous Activism

- Three girls filed a federal lawsuit in 2020 against North Carolina's Charter Day School for a dress code that forced girls to wear skirts at school.
  - They claimed the skirts requirement limited their ability to play at recess, caused embarrassment any time a teacher reprimanded them for sitting “inappropriately,” prompted harassment from boys, and resulted in lost learning time for dress code violations.
  - The federal court found that the North Carolina charter schools were violating the U.S. Constitution with the skirt requirement.
  - This decision was upheld by the federal appeals court and the U.S. Supreme Court.
  - To learn more, check out [NWLC's blog](#) describing the case and the “[friend of the court](#)” brief NWLC wrote to support the case.

# Equitable Dress Codes

- As a school community, you might decide you're not ready to abolish dress codes yet, but you still need to see a change in your district's dress codes.
- You can advocate for an equitable dress code – a dress code that supports educational access for all students and does not reinforce gender, racial, or other stereotypes in its language or enforcement.
- You can also look at materials from advocacy organizations that have published **model student dress codes** with recommendations for updated, equitable language and school staff training.



# Compare Dress Codes

## Texas Independent School District

The district's dress code is established to teach grooming and hygiene, prevent disruption, and minimize safety hazards. Students and parents may determine a student's personal dress and grooming standards, provided that they comply with the following:

- **Visible tattoos** must be covered.
- **Skirts, shorts and dresses may be no shorter than 4 inches from the top of the knee.** (This includes shorts, skirts, or shirts that are worn with leggings; they must be 4 inches from the knee as well.)
- Visible body piercing (other than the ears and a small nose stud piercing) and related jewelry is prohibited. Prohibited areas of the body include, but are not limited to eyebrow, cheek, tongue, and lips. Band-Aids to cover jewelry or spacers are not allowed.
- **Spiked jewelry** including earrings are not allowed.
- **Sagging** is not allowed. Pants, jeans and/or skirts must be worn above the hip bones, must be appropriately sized and remain at the waistline (**no sagging**). **If clothing exposes undergarments or shorts** students will be required to address and fix the issue before they are permitted into the classroom setting.
- **Holes in jeans or pants must be at the knee or below.** It is not acceptable to wear tights under jeans or pants with holes that are above the knee. Jeans or pants with built in holes lined with material or patches located above the knee are not allowed.



# Compare Dress Codes

## Texas Independent School District

You can access the full Texas City Independent School District 2019-2020 Dress & Grooming code [here](#) and its 2023-2024 code [here](#).

- **Tight fitting workout attire** (tights, spandex, etc.) are not acceptable outside of a designated activity period such as dance or athletics.
- Pajama, sleepwear and blankets are not allowed.
- Shoes and sandals (that have a back) must be worn. **House shoes and slides are not allowed.** For safety reasons, during recess and Physical Education Class (P.E.), tennis shoes or an equivalent type shoe (must have a closed toe and back, and a level rubber sole) are to be worn. Shoes such as flip flops, Crocs, sandals, etc. are not permitted during P.E. For students' protection, all footwear may be reviewed by P.E. teachers and/or campus administrators to determine if it meets safety requirements. All sandals must have a back for safety reasons.
- **Sunglasses worn in the building are not acceptable**, unless approved by the principal or as a result of a doctor's authorization submitted to the principal and nurse.
- **The torso (shoulders, back, stomach, hips and buttocks) must be covered.** Tank tops, crop tops, undershirts or muscle shirts are not allowed. Revealing clothing and see-through materials are not acceptable. Low cut necklines are not acceptable. All undergarments must be covered.
- **Leggings are only acceptable with an appropriate top that extends to 4 inches above the knee.** Jogging or bike shorts are not allowed. District approved shorts may be worn in Physical Education classes.



# Compare Dress Codes

## Portland (OR) Public Schools

Portland Public  
Schools successfully  
implemented an  
equitable dress code.

The District Dress Code policy applies to all schools in Portland Public Schools grades PK-12, with the exception of schools with a Uniform Dress Code policy.

*The responsibility for the dress and grooming of a student rests primarily with the student and his or her parents or guardians.*

### Allowable Dress & Grooming

- Students must wear clothing including both a shirt with pants or skirt, or the equivalent and shoes.
- Shirts and dresses must have fabric in the front and on the sides.
- Clothing must cover undergarments, waistbands and bra straps excluded.
- Fabric covering all private parts must not be see through.
- Hats and other headwear must allow the face to be visible and not interfere with the line of sight to any student or staff. Hoodies must allow the student face and ears to be visible to staff.
- Clothing must be suitable for all scheduled classroom activities including physical education, science labs, wood shop, and other activities where unique hazards exist.
- Specialized courses may require specialized attire, such as sports uniforms or safety gear.



# Compare Dress Codes

## Portland (OR) Public Schools

### Non-Allowable Dress & Grooming

- Clothing may not depict, advertise or advocate the use of alcohol, tobacco, marijuana or other controlled substances.
- Clothing may not depict pornography, nudity or sexual acts.
- Clothing may not use or depict hate speech targeting groups based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, religious affiliation or any other protected groups.
- Clothing, including gang identifiers, must not threaten the health or safety of any other student or staff.
- If the student's attire or grooming threatens the health or safety of any other person, then discipline for dress or grooming violations should be consistent with discipline policies for similar violations.

# Resources

- **Dress Coded: Black Girls, Bodies, and Bias in D.C. Schools** (NWLC)
- **Dress Coded II: Protest, Progress, and Power in D.C. Schools** (NWLC)
- **Dignity Denied: How Discriminatory School Discipline Leads to School Pushout** (NWLC)
- **100 School Districts: A Call to Action for School Districts Across the Country to Address Sexual Harassment through Inclusive Policies and Practices** (NWLC)
- **Survivors Speaking Out: A Toolkit About Defamation Lawsuits and Other Retaliation by and for People Speaking Out About Sex-Based Harassment** (NWLC)
- **Oregon National Organization for Women (NOW) Model Student Dress Code** (NOW)
- **4 Things Public Schools Can and Can't Do When It Comes to Dress Codes** (ACLU)
- **K-12 Education: Department of Education Should Provide Information on Equity and Safety in School Dress Codes** (U.S. Government Accountability Office)



# To Do Immediately if Sexually Assaulted

- > Get away from the attacker to a safe place as fast as you can.
- > Then call 911 or the police.
- > Call a friend or family member you trust.
- > You can call a crisis center or hotline to talk with a counselor.
- > One 24/7 option, for all genders, is the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) National Sexual Assault Hotline at 800-656-HOPE(4673).
- > RAINN will connect you with a rape crisis center in your area.
- > Visit the [Survivor Support page](#) for more helpline options and details.

# To Do Immediately if Sexually Assaulted

- > Preserve the evidence, even if you are unsure you will report.
- > **Do not:**
  - Wash, comb your hair, or clean any part of your body
  - Brush your teeth
  - Change clothes, if possible, so the hospital nurse can collect evidence
  - Touch or change anything at the scene of the assault
- > **Seek medical attention ASAP at your nearest hospital ER:**
  - You need to be examined, treated for any injuries, checked for possible sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or pregnancy, and can receive preventative medicine.
  - The nurse or doctor will collect evidence the attacker may have left behind.
- > **Ask hospital staff to connect you with a local rape crisis center.**

# If You are Sexually Harassed

**It isn't your fault... and you can get help to make it stop.**

- Reach out ASAP to a friend, school counselor or trusted adult for immediate safety & support to bring the issue to your Dean of Students, Principal, or Title IX Coordinator.
- Confidential National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-4673  
[www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org)
- Learn about your rights and how to take action on the [Stop Sexual Assault in Schools website](http://StopSexualAssaultinSchools.org).

# Feedback & Suggestions:

SASH Club welcomes your feedback and suggestions on the content of this presentation. Contact us via:

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