

Dress Coded

There's a poster that hangs in the hallways at Monticello High School that has become a point of debate amongst students at MHS. The poster depicts the "Dos" and "Don'ts" of the dress code. It looms over students as they rush to their next class, sprint to the cafeteria, or walk leisurely to ISS. The poster represents the controversial nature of the current dress code at MHS. Students, upset with the present standards, have begun to debate the necessity and effectiveness of the dress code. Much like the poster detailing these primitive rules, the dress code has become a point of much concern and scrutiny.

The dress code impacts every student at MHS. Whether it's sport shorts, off the shoulder shirts, or jeans with a tiny hole above the fingertips, the poster forbids it all. Students view the dreaded poster- and its underlying message- as a source of much contention and confusion within the hallways of MHS.

Curious about the dress code and its impact on students at MHS, and in order to get accurate, reliable information that pertains to people exclusively at MHS, I created a survey to engage student opinion regarding this issue. The results are based off of feedback from 100 participants-- more than half the enrollment of Monticello High School. Students ranging from 9th to 12th grades were asked a series of questions about the current dress code policy. 38% of students surveyed reported that they had been dress coded. More alarming is that 63% of those who were dress coded missed class time to change or otherwise deal with the issue. This seems contradictory to current policy in the Monticello High School Student Handbook. It clearly states specifically on page six that "Education is our first priority."

Missed class time for minor dress code violations becomes its own distraction to the learning process. The dress code's primary function is to eliminate distraction; and yet, according to the survey results, the code itself has caused more disruption to same the learning process it has pledged to protect.

According to the survey, students feel that learning has taken a backseat to the enforcement and implementation of a flawed dress code clearly geared toward pushing a moral code rather than promoting a safe and distraction free educational environment.

The dress code may have been created with good intent, but the effect on the student body has greatly evolved in the wrong direction. The purpose of a dress code is to cultivate an environment where education thrives and students can succeed. Distractions are to be eliminated, creating a scenario where all students feel safe and engaged in the learning process. The dress code certainly has its place in a school setting; however, it has morphed into a system that promotes an idea that the clothes students wear are more important than what they learn. Missed class time for dress code violations is certainly an example that implies that learning is secondary to this antiquated code.

Although a dress code is necessary to keep an atmosphere of professionalism, it often detracts from the learning environment. After all, it's kind of hard to learn when students have to leave or miss class to change clothes. Mr. Keyes, an English teacher at MHS cited an example when a student had to miss a core class to change out of pants that had a slight rip in the leg. The student missed 45 minutes of instruction and review two days before the state assessment at the end of the school year. Mr. Keyes was quite upset and indicated that the missed time was disheartening and ultimately a deterrent to success.

Mr. Keyes, however, agreed that the dress code is necessary to maintain a level of professionalism in the classroom. He noted that hats are a big distraction and sports shorts create an apathetic environment that is not conducive for learning. He also acknowledged that missing class time for minor infractions like sport shorts can be detrimental the student's ability to learn. He added, "Instruction time is so valuable and when students miss class time, it becomes difficult to catch them up." Ultimately, it becomes a huge distraction. He suggested using other methods to rectify the situation.

Missed class time is not the only disquieting red flag raised from the survey. 45% of students surveyed reported that they felt they had been targeted when it came to being dress coded. One student remarked, "I feel like the 'uncool' people are dress coded more often than popular people." Perhaps more alarming are the responses that went along the lines of the student that stated: "Guys are rarely dress coded meanwhile girls are constantly being watched." The survey strongly indicated that females feel targeted, and to a point, discriminated against.

Weston Nebeker, a senior at MHS, when interviewed, revealed his own concerns regarding what he called a "flawed" dress code. "It is biased towards the females," noted Nebeker. He added, "I've never been distracted by anything anyone's ever worn to school." Nebeker admitted being bothered that boys are considered weak and constantly distracted, indicating that boys shouldn't be used as the excuse: "I haven't ever seen anyone distracted by anything anyone is wearing."

For a different perspective, senior Crystal Alba was willing to share some of her insight regarding the dress code. Crystal immediately noted that the dress code was way too strict and could have a negative impact on a girl's self-esteem by constantly reminding them that they

aren't dressed "properly." She believes that it reduces the opportunity for students to express themselves.

Principal Lewis Whitaker, during an interview regarding the dress code, stated the following: "The legal reasoning behind a dress code is to not interrupt school and to help people feel safe," he said. He explained how it can be difficult to enforce a dress code without clear lines between right and wrong, which is part of the reason that the "fingertip rule" amongst other rules exists. "It's easy to measure and easy to enforce," he added. He also addressed the origin of the dress code and how community members impact those decisions.

Every April, Mr. Whitaker meets with the school community council, which is made up of parents and a few teachers. He remarked that he has received criticism from parents and the community that the dress code needs to be more strict, but from students, he hears the opposite. When asked if he felt like the dress code targeted a specific gender, he presented statistics from the 2017-18 school year. During that time, girls were dress coded forty times, while only ten dress code incidents involved boys (although all hat violations were not recorded). "We end up with more girls turned in than boys. The girls just tend to push the dress code more. We see that over and over again," he concluded.

Mr. Whitaker addressed the issue of the dress code with the staff at MHS at the beginning of the school year, stressing the need to be consistent, fair, and visual in regard to dress code violations. Mr. Whitaker did agree that a continued dialogue could help this controversial issue. He said, "For sure we need to continue to have conversations about it (the dress code)."

MHS needs a dress code that does its job: eliminate all distractions to the learning process. The ideal purpose of a dress code at Monticello High is to prevent vulgarity and

promote professionalism. Teachers want their students ready to learn in an environment that promotes innovation, determination, and growth. The dress code can most definitely add to this type of surrounding while also eradicating safety concerns. However, it does not need to dictate what is “modest” or “right” for students to wear. Students need to appear professional and ready to be taught. As long as students aren’t wearing anything with vulgar and profane imagery or arriving with clothing that is extremely revealing, there’s not much else to regulate.

These basic guidelines do allow for a lot of gray area. Not everyone has the same idea of what’s “appropriate,” and there are many viewpoints on what qualifies as professional. There are community standards and old traditions that come into play, and parents that serve on the school community council do have a large role in creating dress code policy. Perhaps it is time for a compromise, a solution that benefits both parties and also recognizes the needs of the students. An equitable agreement will be a small a start, but maybe, just maybe, even a small start like that will help MHS realign its priorities to what is truly important: education.