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SCHOOL UNIFORM REQUIREMENTS  
EFFECTS ON STUDENT ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

By

Elizabeth Brobeck

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree in Master of Arts in Teaching

Hamline University  
St. Paul, Minnesota  
August, 2018

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### Capstone Overview

Implementing uniform requirements in American schools is not a new debate. For decades, American citizens have argued over the pros and cons of school uniforms. In the United States' individualistic society, the people cannot definitively come to a consensus on this ever-popular issue. It is unrealistic to believe that this debate will soon end. However, it is clear that the uniform debate is not focused in one particular area. Instead, passionate debaters find themselves in continuous conflict over subtopics of self-expression and conformity, social and economic divides, and academic performance.

As a daughter of educators, a former public school student, a private school college graduate, and a current charter school teacher, I have seen and heard about American school uniforms from many sides. With the uniform debate as strong as ever, I am most strongly interested in its relation to academic performance – after all, the purpose of school is to educate youth. Therefore, my research question is: *Do school uniform requirements have an effect on overall student academic performance at one area charter school?*

In this chapter, I give context into my research question through providing an overview of my personal and professional background and experiences. I then explain my



action research question and rationale, as well as provide an overview of forthcoming chapters.

### **Childhood Background**

From a young age, I was aware of the merits and flaws of the American education system. My parents are educators, who grew up with very different backgrounds. Despite those differences, both attended private and public institutions during their primary and secondary school experiences. Now retired, my mother became an administrator for a private university and my father an art teacher at a public high school. Growing up, my inquisitive older sister and I learned about their childhood education experiences and listened as they discussed the day-to-day happenings at their professions. I have many memories of their stories, many of which gave me perspective into an older generation's ideas of dress codes. For example, my father would sometimes come home and talk about inappropriate outfits he had witnessed that day. He couldn't believe that students were able to wear certain articles of clothing and recalled how the students were not on task because of their wandering or distracted eyes. He had clear, sometimes negative, opinions about public school dress codes.

Despite those opinions, he and my mother are strong supporters of public education so my sister and I were sent to traditional, public schools. I had a wonderful school experience – I excelled in academics, made immediate friends, and was very involved. With that being said, I can distinctly remember moments of my K-12 career, where I was affected by lack of school dress codes. For example, as a child, I suffered from very sensitive skin. Due to this extreme sensitivity, dressing for school was often

challenging. I had a select few outfits I insisted I wear on rotation because they were soft, tag-free, and worn-in. My selective choices led to an unfortunate confrontation with a classmate, who asked if I was a “bum” because I wore the same clothing so much. At the time, as a 2<sup>nd</sup> grader, I was sad and offended. Today, I can look back and laugh, but understand that for my classmate, my clothing choices were distracting. For me, my clothing choices were necessary so that I could be focused on learning and not on my skin condition. Perhaps, a uniform would have eliminated this situation altogether.

By the time I reached middle school, my skin condition had become manageable and I was sparkly-eyed over all things teen-fashion. As I navigated middle and high school, I became unaware (or inconsiderate) of my parents’ finances and insistent on having a plethora of clothing, shoes, and accessories from all of the most popular stores. I felt that I needed Abercrombie & Fitch logo t-shirts, Juicy Couture sweatsuits, and Adidas sneakers with a very specific shade of blue stripes. My early 2000s obsession with clothing was, at times, out of control. Looking back, I understand how frustrating this must have been for my parents. However, it was equally difficult for my generation of students. I felt that, in order to easily glide through the social challenges of high school, one must fit in and adhere to social norms. I was able to perform well in academics, but clothing was always in the picture, making itself known. For example, I have memories of sitting in class and learning different topics, but I also, fifteen years later, remember what people were wearing and how I felt in my outfits on certain days. Immense power was given to clothing and it clearly affected students at my public high

school. It is hard for me to even imagine what my high school experience would have been like, had clothing not had such a prominent role.

### **Becoming A Teacher**

After receiving a BA and working in the business world for four years, I decided that working with children was a passion I wanted to pursue. I returned to college, while working full-time. After many courses on theory and practical application, it was time for me to begin student teaching in an elementary setting. I was placed at an urban Minneapolis public school teaching Kindergarten during the second semester of the school year. I had never imagined teaching Kindergarten before but had preconceived notions of what it might entail. My own Kindergarten experience was full of craft projects, learning to read, playing with friends, and taking daily naps – to me this sounded somewhat daunting but possibly fun!

Mere hours after arriving to the school, I realized that Kindergarten was not as I remembered, nor were elementary schools. Gone were the days of nap time and coloring. My students had set daily schedules that were rigorous and challenging. Yet, despite the structured environment, the students were completely out of control and struggling academically. They ran around the room, fought each other, swore and teased, and refused to complete their work. It was not like anything I had ever experienced.

As I adjusted to my new setting, I began to take note of student behaviors, as well as their origin in the classroom. What I discovered was that violent and aggressive behaviors were often in direct correlation and in reaction to teasing. That teasing appeared to, surprisingly often, stem from students' wardrobe choices and personal

appearance. As this was a public school, there were not particularly strict dress codes. The school, which was in a centralized location in the city, had a diverse population in terms of ethnicity and socioeconomic means. Despite their young ages, my students were keenly aware of the diversity within their class. Unfortunately, they often acknowledged those differences with cruelty. Students were most often teased for their clothing, such as if it were the “right” brand, new/old, or unfamiliar (clothing for religious purposes). However, they also made comments about others’ general appearance. At five and six years old, it was shocking that students had already formed negative attitudes about their classmates’ outward appearances.

During my twelve weeks of student teaching, I worked diligently on educating the students about demonstrating good character in and out of school. As I had arrived half way through the year, it was quite difficult but some improvements were made. In the end, I left the experience feeling incredibly discouraged and saddened by the state of public elementary schools. How would students behave as they grew older, given that in Kindergarten they were already treating each other with such disrespect? In the back of my mind, I couldn’t help but wonder if these behaviors could be improved if stricter dress codes were put in place. If students had a more unified, cohesive appearance, there may be a better chance that focus would be redirected to academics.

### **Current Position**

I am currently entering my second year of teaching third grade at a charter school. The school, located in a second-tier suburb of Minneapolis, has a diverse population. There is a strong emphasis on academics, as well as on community. Prior to accepting the

position, I was understandably nervous. I chose teaching as a profession to educate and mentor youth. While behavior management is a part of that, it certainly shouldn't be the primary focus. Were all schools going to be like my student teaching experience? If so, I thought, this might not be the career for me.

Shortly after starting, it became clear that this experience would be unlike student teaching. The community was supportive and warm. The students were, from the beginning, interested in school, kind to their peers, and respectful. I have spent a majority of each day teaching about all the topics third graders should be learning. Yes, I correct behaviors and talk to my students about class expectations, but it never takes significant time away from academics. As I walk my students to lunch and their specialist classes each day, I peer in at the Kindergarten classes. Again, this is far from my experience in student teaching. It is, in fact, how I originally imagined Kindergarten to be. Why, I find myself asking each day, is this school so different from my student teaching school?

Both schools make a point in emphasizing academic rigor. Both schools have diverse student populations in terms of ethnicity and socioeconomic means. The one prominent difference, which is very apparent, is that the charter school enforces a strict uniform policy. Students at the charter school are required to wear specific, color-approved tops, bottoms, and shoes. They are to refrain from dyeing their hair and wearing excessive amounts of makeup, and may only accessorize with a select number of jewelry pieces. Teachers, in the same vein, must wear business-casual clothing each day and have similar regulations for personal appearance. The uniform policy is taken seriously, with students and teachers receiving infractions for failing to comply with

these requirements. Yet, despite the strict uniform policy, students and teachers are thriving – it is clearly a supportive, happy environment.

### **Initial Observations**

Each day, as I observe my students, I assess their behaviors and academic abilities in correlation to their daily uniform requirements. Throughout the school year, I have noticed connections. When my students enter the classroom, they undoubtedly talk amongst themselves. However, there has not been any observable talk about clothing or appearance. When listening to presentations or read-alouds, there are occasional side conversations occurring, but those typically have to do with recess or fun happenings over the weekend and after school. I have not witnessed any significant situations involving teasing, name-calling, or inappropriate language from my students. They consistently surprise me with their generous, caring nature with each other, as well as their focus during work time. This leads me to believe that, in some way, the enforced uniform requirements have influenced the students' behaviors and academic aptitude. Appropriate, on-task behaviors allow for students to focus on learning, therefore, potentially improving their academic performance. Studies from public schools, such as Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) suggest that uniforms can significantly improve many areas of a school's climate, including academic achievement (Lopez, 2003, p. 2). It is with evidence, such as that from LBUSD, that I will begin extensive research.

In my research, I will explore the history of school uniforms and their impact on students' academics. I plan to investigate studies from other American schools that have

adopted uniform requirements. I will also look into other countries' uniform requirements to determine if they have influenced overall primary and secondary academic performance. Finally, I will conduct my own research at my charter school, by interviewing and surveying administration and staff, as well as surveying students in their classrooms. Through thorough investigation and research into the history of uniform requirements, I will seek to answer my research question: *Do school uniform requirements have an effect on overall student academic performance at one area charter school?*

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Overview**

To fully understand the complex nature of how dress codes and academic achievement are related, one must first investigate the many other aspects of school uniforms. First, it is essential to examine the history of uniforms, from the earliest accounts in England to how countries such as South Korea, Australia and South Africa utilize uniforms today. From there, an overview of how the United States adapted uniform trends from around the world to fit their specific needs will be discussed. After reviewing laws and landmark case studies of public schools in America, the pros and cons of uniform policies and implementation will be reviewed. Finally, case studies and research on uniforms and their correlation to academic achievement will be examined. The thorough literature review will create a developed understanding of how uniforms impact American schools. That understanding will serve as a basis for developing a research plan to answer the question: *Do school uniform requirements have an effect on overall student academic performance?*

#### **Worldwide and American Perspectives on School Uniforms**

Uniforms are a prominent fixture in elementary and secondary schools worldwide. From South Africa to South Korea, uniforms and strict dress codes are often



considered to be a vital part of each country's collectivist environment (Kim, Kasser, & Lee, 2003, p. 278). In the United States, a more individualistic culture, perspectives on uniforms are diverse. Policies and public opinion on this topic continue to evolve over time. It is imperative to examine worldwide history of and perspectives on school uniforms, in order to see how they have impacted the viewpoints of school uniforms in America.

England is often considered to be the country with the oldest history of uniform requirements in primary and secondary schools. Uniforms are typically associated with well-to-do establishments; however, they were first introduced in England in 1552 at a charity school (Scott, 2014, p. 1). The London school, Christ's Hospital, was designed to educate orphaned and poor children in the community (Scott, 2014, p. 1). The founders clothed students in matching blue coats to create a sense of uniformity and cohesiveness. The idea of uniforms spread throughout England and today "bluecoat schools" are still a prominent part of British institutions. While "bluecoat schools" are abundant, various other types of uniforms are worn at many British schools today. While uniforms take on aspects of their traditional attire, such as top hats and coats, uniform requirements have modernized. Modernization corresponds to practicality, as many traditional British uniform requirements would not be comfortable or practical in today's schools.

Uniforms are still an important fixture in England's schools, even though they have been adapted over time. They provide stability and unity among students and staff. According to author and historian Alexander Davidson, "Uniforms give schools a sense of identity and cohesion...when some aspects of society have become much less certain,

uniforms suggest schools are there to provide certainty and order” (cited in Scott, 2014, p. 2). The British are also proud of their uniform traditions, as they are the oldest in the world. In a 2011 survey at Christ’s Hospital, 95% of students surveyed said that the traditional uniforms of the 16th century should remain intact. As one student said, “It is important to stick to our historical traditions, not only to be unique and special, but it makes a sort of unity between us” (cited in Scott, 2014, p. 2).

English uniform traditions greatly influenced other countries’ opinions on implementing uniforms. One way that uniform practices initially spread was through imperialism, as England’s colonies around the world were expected to follow British traditions. In countries like Australia, schools sought to emulate English grammar school characteristics, like the implementation of uniforms (Synott & Symes, 1995, p. 141). Today, Australia still has many uniform schools, as well as schools that utilize the school “badge.” The badge is the emblem of any particular school and is featured on the clothing worn by students, such as polo shirts and sweatshirts. For Australia, the badge represents invariance. Although time passes, the educational values of the institution remain. This serves to unite and bring students together, creating a strong sense of community. Depending on the school, and whether it is public or private, Australian schools’ uniform requirements showcase specific character traits important to the school. Those include hard work/perseverance and respect for others (Synott & Symes, 1995, p. 150). Overall, Australian uniforms (and badges), like English uniforms, serve as a way to connect communities and unite specific schools.

While England and Australia implements uniforms mainly as a way to preserve

tradition and continue unity and community among students, other countries have different reasons for uniform implementation. South Korea, for example, was influenced by the policies of Japan and the United States. Uniforms in South Korea were introduced to help with discipline, eliminate class differences between students, and to improve academic performance (Park, 2013, p. 161). Until the 1980s, all students in South Korea wore identical uniforms, as required by law (Park, 2013, p. 161). Today there is slightly more leeway in appearance; however, most uniforms are similar across schools. The ease in uniform requirements was implemented with a goal of “relieving psychological suppression and isolation of adolescents, and encouraging individuality and a democratic mind” (Park, 2013, p. 165). Despite the uniform changes, South Koreans live in a conservative, collectivist society, where uniformity is very important. To Koreans, uniformity helps to “instill a sense of belonging in people and lead to better teamwork” (Park, 2013, p. 169). They can instill a sense of discipline, send out specific signals about roles of individuals, and set the tone for how organizations should be run (Baumann & Krskova, 2016, p. 1012). Many companies and organizations in South Korea, such as most of their banks, require uniforms for this exact reason. Therefore, although uniform requirements are less strict than in decades past, they still remain an integral part of South Korea’s schools.

In South Africa, a former British colony, uniforms are required by law for all public and private schools. South African officials implemented mandatory uniforms for the same reasons as many other nations around the world. Uniforms are implemented to create a sense of unity and pride for the school and to improve behavior and academic

performance. However, due to uniforms being required for all students, there have been many controversies. The hard line mandate has prevented many students from being able to afford an education, as they are unable to come to school without a uniform. Charities across South Africa and the world have been founded to raise money for students in need. As one young student said of her involvement with a charity, “Often times we take our education for granted, and one uniform in South Africa can completely change one kid’s life and they can, in turn, help their families and communities” (Moorer, 2005, p. 37). Along with those opposed for financial reasons, others feel that the uniforms “infringe on learners’ constitutional rights to self-expression” (Wilken, 2012, p. 159). Despite this, in a South African study by Wilken (2012), educators and parents overwhelmingly agreed that uniforms should continue to be a requirement in schools.

Uniforms are a major part of schools around the world. According to Baumann and Krskova (2016), who studied uniforms in countries ranging from South Korea to Australia, evidence and research supports the idea that implementing uniforms in schools may enhance discipline and create a better environment for learning (p. 1003). With evidence of successful implementation of uniforms from other countries, many schools in the United States have adopted uniform policies as well. However, these have come not without their challenges.

In the United States, uniforms have strong roots in private and parochial schools. According to Brunsmma (2004), these institutions in America implemented uniforms based on what they had seen and liked about British uniform traditions (p. 8). One aspect of English common law that early colonial Americans borrowed was that of *in loco parentis*.

In loco parentis refers to the relationship between parent and child and, today, is most commonly associated with teachers and students. In certain situations, under in locos parentis, an individual can assume parental status and responsibilities for another individual, usually a minor, without formally adopting that person (in locos parentis, n.d.). For colonialists, this law fit well with their puritanical values. Other than concerns within private and parochial schools, the first half of history on American dress codes is limited. As Brunσμα (2004) stated, “the first hundred years of American history on public school dress codes is wrapped up in the traditions of religious and symbolic class and gender distinctions derived from Protestantism and British roots” (p. 10).

For many years, uniform requirements, went without opposition. However, starting in the late 1950s to early 1960s, people began protesting uniforms in the private, parochial, and public sectors. There were many reasons for why the protests began, but one of the most significant reasons was that uniforms taking away from parental rights and responsibilities. Parents felt that they should not be required to adhere to in loco parentis regulations, dictated by secondary schools and universities (Brunσμα, 2004, p. 9). The other main reason was general dissatisfaction by students with how administration was implementing rules on their appearance. Students and their parents began engaging in battles with schools over freedom of speech and expression, related to educational dress and whether or not dress caused an interference to the educational process (Brunσμα, 2004, p. 12).

According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, freedom of speech is the “legal right to express one’s opinions freely” (freedom of speech, 2017). One way that a person

expresses themselves is through clothing. One of the most significant court cases on freedom of speech, related to clothing, in schools began in 1965 in Des Moines, Iowa. A group of students wore black armbands to their schools in protest of the Vietnam War. In response, administration at their schools created a policy ensuring that students would not wear the armbands and, if they did, they would have violated the policy and be suspended. The students did not adhere to the policy, were suspended, and filed a legal suit (Alexander & Alexander, 2015). In 1969, after years of debate at the state and national level, the “United States Supreme Court interpreted dress as a protected form of expression and pronounced that students do not shed their constitutional rights at the schoolhouse gate” (Tinker v. Des Moines Independent School District, 1969).

Many other legal battles have been fought in regards to freedom of speech and school dress codes. Until the early 1980s, states were cautious of requiring strict dress codes in schools because they feared lawsuits and subsequent loss of federal funding (Brunsmma, 2004, p. 14). Then, during the conservative decade of the 1980s, dress regulations in schools began to increase. Since that time, the United States has seen an increase in public schools adopting uniform policies. Public schools have increasingly made the transition to more structured dress codes for a variety of reasons. School districts’ reasoning for implementation differs, but many believe that uniforms are a catalyst for positive change. An element of change, which many schools look for and strive to reach, is growth in academic performance.

### **School Uniforms in Public Schools**

There are a plethora of reasons why schools choose to implement school uniform requirements. One significant reason for implementation is that uniforms are seen as a way to eliminate crime and violence and create a safe environment for students. Another reason would be that they “level the playing field” and create unity among social classes. There are a few well-known, significant accounts of public schools in America that chose to implement uniforms in an effort to improve their schools.

For Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD), a large urban district in California, the 1990s was a time when the district was plagued by many problems. The district, which is the third largest in California, is remarkably diverse with students speaking over 46 different languages (Lopez, 2003, p. 1). In order to improve their students’ academic performance, as well as eliminate violence and high rates of crime, socioeconomic divisions, and more, the district worked with the Board of Education to pilot a uniform policy. The pilot started small at one school and quickly grew, adding more schools within the district. Initial evaluations of the program saw that, due to uniforms, attendance, academic achievement, school safety, and racial tensions had improved. With such positive feedback, LBUSD was able to expand their mandatory uniform policy, requiring uniforms for all students in grades K-8 (Lopez, 2003, p. 1). This made LBUSD the first large, urban district in America to implement school uniforms for elementary and middle schools.

Implementation of the uniform policy did not come without its challenges. As with most uniform implementations, some stakeholders felt that the policy was an

infringement on students' freedom of speech. Yet others felt that uniforms would be a financial burden. LBUSD remedied these concerns in a variety of ways. First, they provided parents/students with waiver policies to opt out of the uniform requirements. They were also able to provide financial assistance to students in need of uniforms. Ultimately, with the accommodations, community members were pleased and supportive of the policy. LBUSD continues to implement their uniform policies and quantitative outcomes of the policy are significant. Lopez (2003) noted that in the category of crime, overall crime at school dropped about 86% within five years from the date of implementation (p. 2). With positive statistics, such as this, LBUSD has had high schools adopt their mandatory uniform requirements as well.

When administrators and school officials witness the success of uniform implementation at other districts like LBUSD, it makes them more inclined to adopt policies for their own district. For example, Washoe County Schools, which includes the cities of Reno and Lake Tahoe, was struggling with one of their middle schools. The school wanted to increase academic success, so they researched and voted to pilot a uniform program (Daugherty, 2002, p. 390). School officials researched information from the U.S. Department of Education, as well as of other districts that had implemented uniform programs effectively. Additionally, the middle school's principal visited LBUSD to see firsthand how the uniform program had worked successfully. Like LBUSD, the Washoe County School gained support from the community and, specifically, the students who would be affected by the changes. They also created funds to help families who were unable to afford uniforms. The difference between LBUSD and Washoe



County is the follow through of the program. In Washoe County, the uniform policy began as voluntary. Due to it not being a mandatory requirement to wear a uniform, by the end of the year only 50% of student were wearing uniforms. Although the school saw improvements in their goals, it would have been more successful had the uniform program been mandatory (Daugherty, 2002, p. 392). Without the entire school body participating, goals were not achieved in full.

Both case studies show why and how uniform policies can be implemented in public schools. While both districts had successful initial steps, they show that follow-through and careful planning throughout a pilot is essential for maintaining an effective uniform policy. Additionally, the case studies show how uniforms can transform a school's environment for the better. However, one's opinion on whether or not to implement a uniform policy depends on the data, case studies, and research that individuals choose to review.

### **Reasons For and Against Implementation**

The importance of uniform policies in public schools has been at the forefront of public discourse related to education reform for many years. A factor in that discourse involves the reasons for and against implementation of school uniforms. Those reasons vary greatly and are dependent on multiple factors, ranging from freedom of speech to school safety. As previously indicated, there are many public schools and districts in the United States that have chosen to implement school uniforms. According to the National Center of Education Statistics (2017), in 2013-14, the number of American public schools with uniforms was 20%, up from 12% in 1999-2000. However, there is, alternately, a

large constituent of individuals within the public school realm that argue that uniforms are not beneficial. Therefore, one must thoroughly investigate both sides of the uniform debate in order to articulate a clear understanding and opinion on the matter.

### **Opponents**

School districts across the nation have chosen alternative means of creating change in their schools instead of utilizing uniforms. While there is a general consensus among districts that change within schools is necessary, the way of going about that change differs drastically. According to Brunsmma and Rockquemore (1998), “Opponents of adopting uniform policies stress the legal, financial, and questionable effectiveness of those policies” (p. 53). Freedom of speech/expression, cost of uniforms, and the general belief that uniforms will not solve behavioral or academic problems are the three most common concerns and reasons for opposition against uniforms.

Those opposed have found that uniform implementation can have many legal ramifications. Countless lawsuits are filed each year against school districts, due to various aspects of the schools’ uniform requirements. Many view uniform requirements as violating students’ individual rights and freedom of expression. In lawsuits nationwide, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has joined students and their families to oppose and ratify uniform policies. One prominent example of this involved Lawrence High School a public high school in Massachusetts. The school, which was struggling academically, chose to implement a uniform policy in order to create an environment more conducive to learning. In response, students and families worked with the Massachusetts ACLU to oppose and overturn the policy. The ACLU stated, “It is

clear that many feel that personal dress is beyond the scope of authority of the school. It is an issue of personal freedom..." (DeMitchell & Fossey, 2015, p. 228). For many public school districts, the legislation, legal concerns, and disgruntled families can be exasperating. This leads to school officials choosing alternative means of creating positive change within their schools.

Opponents of school uniforms also stress the financial implications of adhering to strict uniform policies. Many parents, for example, are concerned about the cost associated with buying specific brands of uniform clothing. As one student explained in an online petition at Pinkerton Academy, a secondary school in New Hampshire, "Uniforms are too much money for each child. Parents do not have that type of money, especially in this economy" (DeMitchell & Fossey, 2015, p. 362). Uniforms are implemented in schools across the country; however, they are oftentimes implemented in urban school districts. According to Brunsmas and Rockquemore (1998), uniforms are "being forced on a predominantly minority and poor student population" (p. 53). Those communities of disadvantaged individuals are unable to afford uniforms for their children. When these students attend school, they are reprimanded and given uniform infractions for not adhering to guidelines. This creates a continuous cycle of problems for parents and school administration, ultimately not allowing for positive results/opinions from any party.

The final, and often strongest, reason for uniform opposition is the belief that uniforms will not solve problems within the school. Many districts that have uniforms claim that they have positively impacted their students' behavior and achievement.

However, there is not significant empirical evidence that exists to support those claims. A well-known 1998 study by Brunσμα and Rockquemore concluded that uniforms did not affect academic preparedness, attendance, substance use, or behavior (p. 59). Many districts look to this study as a main reason for validating their viewpoints against uniforms, as it was the most prominent study from the 1990s. At the time of the study; however, Brunσμα and Rockquemore noted that closer examination and subsequent research was needed in order to fully determine if there was a direct effect of uniforms on behavior or academic achievement. Furthermore, the study indicated that, although direct evidence was not found, uniforms may “act as a catalyst for change and provide a highly visible opportunity for additional [educational] programs” (Brunσμα & Rockquemore, 1998, p. 60).

Research continues to be conducted since the initial prominent research of the 1990s on the many implications of instituting school uniforms as part of a wider dress code policy. Researchers, such as Bodine (2003) from the University of Texas, have found data indicating a positive correlation between uniforms and achievement in various areas. While there are still many districts across the country that do not believe uniforms are the answer to their schools’ problems, the number of schools that have adopted uniform requirements have increased by six percent in under ten years (DeMitchell & Fossey, 2015, p. 1385).

### **Proponents**

According to the US Department of Education (1996), there are numerous potential benefits for implementing a school uniform policy. Those benefits include, but

are not limited to: elimination of peer pressure, greater discipline and self-awareness in students, a decrease in gang-related paraphernalia and violence, and improved concentration in academics. President Bill Clinton's 1996 State of the Union Address was one of the first times uniforms were publically mentioned to an expansive national audience. Clinton, a proponent of school uniforms, stated that schools needed to "teach character education, to teach good values and good citizenship. And if it means that teenagers will stop killing each other over designer jackets, then our public schools should be able to require their students to wear school uniforms" (as cited in Boutelle, 2007, p. 36). For the Department of Education, President Clinton, and many other uniform advocates, uniforms help students in a variety of ways.

One common argument for uniforms is that they level the playing field for students, eliminating peer pressure, teasing/name-calling, and clothing-related competition. Students are able to concentrate and focus when clothing is no longer a distraction. This, in turn, creates a positive learning environment. As one Sacramento-area principal stated, "Students spend less time talking about and analyzing everyone's dress" (Boutelle, 2007, p. 36). In addition to being less distracted, students show improved behavior. When everyone is dressed similarly, it eliminates the urge to criticize others' appearance and brings together the students. Another California school noted that, with the implementation of uniforms, "Students seemed to have far greater respect for one another, and discipline problems decreased. A sense of belonging and community now permeates the campus" (Peters, 1996, p. 3).

When students feel connected to their community, it increases safety and helps to eliminate negative behaviors including name-calling, bullying, and, more seriously, gang-violence. In 2013, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) conducted a survey on uniform effectiveness. According to that survey, 86% and 84% of principals, respectively, felt that uniforms helped eliminate peer pressure and bullying. Connelly, the Executive Director of the NAESP stated, “We know that a school uniform policy can help reduce instances of classroom discipline and bullying... The use of school uniforms... has a powerful influence on school culture in ways that contribute to greater levels of student achievement” (as cited in Tucker & Hawkins, 2013, p. 1).

In middle and high school environments, bullying can turn to more serious behaviors, often times related to gang violence. Gang members typically differentiate themselves from other gangs by wearing specific clothing/clothing colors. According to the National Crime Prevention Council, when schools allow gang members to distinguish themselves with clothing, it places pressure on other students. Non-gang members become keenly aware of the prevalence of gangs, feel unsafe, and are compelled to join gangs to alleviate nervousness and gain protection and safety (“School Uniforms As An Anti-Gang Tactic,” 2014). Implementation of uniforms can help eliminate violence because they “prevent gang members from wearing gang colors and insignia at school” (DeMitchell & Fossey, 2015, p. 1385). When gang members are not wearing their paraphernalia, their ability to recruit others is limited. This, in turn, creates a safer school climate and proactively addresses the problem of gang recruitment in school settings.

Academic achievement, along with behavior and safety, is considered a main reason why many school districts choose to implement uniform policies. In 2003, Bodine investigated the 1998 findings of Brunσμα and Rockquemore regarding the correlation between uniforms and academic achievement. By using data from the original study, Bodine found that Brunσμα and Rockquemore had “found statistically significant positive correlation between test scores and uniform use” (Bodine, 2003, p. 71). According to Bodine, generalizations in the original study and clouded thinking caused many other researchers and educators to believe in unfounded claims. Since writing her response to Brunσμα and Rockquemore, Bodine and many others in the field of education believe that uniforms are, in fact, directly correlated to academic achievement. In order to understand the correlation, one must first examine the complex nature of academic achievement. The available studies indicate that to show direct correlation, it is essential to define the nature of academic achievement and how it is measured.

### **Factors of Academic Achievement**

Academic achievement is the extent to which a student has achieved their educational goals mandated by the school and state. According to Stewart (2012), academic achievement is also described as the effort toward educational attainment “characterized by the level of school attachment, involvement, and commitment displayed” by individual students (p. 181). Therefore, academic success is determined by a number of internal and external factors. Those factors include students’ individual efforts and behaviors, peer association and adolescent development, parental involvement, and school structural characteristics.

While all factors have an influence on academic success, school structural characteristics play a substantial role in improving students' achievement. "Schools influence the academic and social development of their students, in particular their academic achievement, through their structure, staffing, organization, resources, and climate" (Stewart, 2012, p. 183). School climate is a multidimensional construct that is often described as a combination of the previously mentioned physical characteristics (i.e. organization and resources), as well as social and academic dimensions. Social dimensions would include equitable treatment of students and quality of interpersonal relationships among students, teachers, and staff, while academic dimensions would include quality of instruction, teacher expectations, and monitoring of student progress (Loukas, 2007, p. 1). When schools are able to effectively incorporate many or most of these items, it results in a positive school climate. This, subsequently, affects student outcomes, such as academic achievement. According to the NAESP (2007), the quality of school climate impacts students' connectedness to their school. This, in turn, directly predicts how students feel, behave, and perform in their classes (p. 2).

School uniforms are considered by many to be an important aspect of American schools' climates. They are seen as a valuable resource that schools utilize to positively impact the climate. As previously mentioned, advocates of uniforms believe that they impact climate by leveling the playing field, creating connectedness among students, decreasing violence/increasing safety, and increasing academic achievement. Of these many impacts, academic achievement proves to be the most difficult to prove through empirical data. Despite this difficulty, many researchers over the last twenty years have



sought to determine the effectiveness of school uniforms in connection to whether or not they impact student academic performance. After the first widely recognized research project by Brunσμα and Rockquemore, researchers have sought to find specific evidence linking uniforms and academic achievement.

Bodine's 2003 research on the correlation between uniforms and academic achievement is in direct juxtaposition to the 1998 Brunσμα and Rockquemore study. Instead of creating her own research, Bodine chose to analyze the 1998 study's empirical data, specifically on composite reading and math standardized test scores, and made new connections that were previously unseen. She noted that cross sectional variation in uniform status, which was the method of Brunσμα and Rockquemore, can result in skewed results. The most significant finding that Bodine (2003) discovered was that "uniform public school students must have scored considerably higher than non-uniformed public school students" as they had 2.31 points higher, on average, on the two documented standardized tests (p. 69). Bodine's research sought to showcase that misinterpretations in data can cause widespread misunderstanding. Her research led to many others conducting their own, new research on uniforms and academic achievement, rather than relying on one well-known study as absolute proof.

Four years after Bodine's article was published, John Huss (2007) from Northern Kentucky University published his research on whether school uniforms create an academically motivated school climate. The research was done to specifically help a group of elementary public school teachers determine if they should adopt a uniform policy for their school building. Prior to his own research, Huss examined research of the

past including that of Brunnsma and Rockquemore and Bodine. What Huss determined was that many of the studies previously done had lacked extensive qualitative research, instead relying heavily on test scores and numerical statistics. Huss believed that face-to-face interactions and observations were necessary in order to get a well-rounded understanding of whether there was a correlation between uniforms and academic performance (p. 33).

Huss's research was done at a K-5 public elementary school (about 400 students) in a close suburb of Cincinnati, Ohio. Unlike past studies, Huss chose to research/interview teachers rather than students. He interviewed teachers using a standardized, open-ended interview, with probing questions. Along with the interviews, Huss observed students throughout school days, analyzing their behaviors during different situations. He also utilized official school documentation on information such as grades and discipline referrals. His results showed that teachers saw an increase in respect, caring, trust, responsibility and behavior due to uniform implementation. As one teacher noted, "I think the school takes on a quieter, studious atmosphere. They're getting along. They're more focused on their assignments" (cited in Huss, 2007, p. 36). Teachers, overall, believed that uniforms, in a variety of ways, had enhanced the learning environment at the school. After the implementation of uniforms, teachers saw increased academic motivation, improved grades among students, and administrators saw the number of suspensions drop. Huss concluded that when uniforms are part of a school's climate, academic motivation is increased and, therefore, students' grades in class and on tests are improved.

In 2011, a study by Gentile and Imberman from the University of Houston was conducted on the effect of uniforms on student achievement. Like Huss, Gentile and Imberman examined past research on the positive and negative attributes of uniforms on academic achievement. The Gentile and Imberman study was conducted in a large, urban school district in the southwestern United States. The researchers reviewed administrative records of students from 1993-2006, including standardized testing data. They also sent surveys to principals of every school in the district, asking questions related to when uniforms were implemented and if they currently required uniforms (p. 7). Gentile and Imberman concluded that attendance rates increased after uniform adoption, but that there was little evidence that uniform implementation has a lasting effect on achievement and/or grade retention (pp. 21-22). Achievement increased slightly, but not enough to make a significant impact. The Gentile and Imberman study indicates a need for researchers in academia to further investigate the topic of uniform requirements and academic achievement.

### **Summary**

The studies and research on uniforms and academic achievement are sparse. Most, as mentioned, rely on cross-sectional variation, which can result in inaccuracies. Additionally, the studies previously done are not conclusive as a whole, with researchers' opinions drastically different. While some researchers believe that uniforms do impact academic achievement, others do not and/or cannot find enough empirical data to make a valid claim. It is with that prior knowledge and research that I will begin my own study. I plan to utilize a mixed method approach, based on studies of the past and my own

curiosities to explore the role of uniforms and answer the question: *Do school uniform requirements have an effect on overall student academic performance at one area charter school?*

## CHAPTER THREE

### Methods

#### Introduction and Rationale

In Chapter Two, many aspects of uniforms in American schools were explored. Along with looking at the history and background of uniforms, the possible relationship between uniforms and academic achievement, through past research, were investigated. It is with the results of those prior research studies, as well as my thorough review of literature related to uniforms, that I seek to answer the question: *Do school uniform requirements have an effect on overall student academic performance at one area charter school?*

In this chapter, I will explain the various facets of my research and the methods I took to answer my research question. The literature review showed that school uniforms are a social phenomenon in American schools. Whether one is an advocate or opponent of uniforms, there is significant research proving that they are impacting the way Americans think about designing and operating schools. According to Creswell (2014), “qualitative research makes sense of social phenomena by comparing, contrasting, analyzing, and classifying the object of study” (p. 4). It is with that understanding that I chose to use a mainly qualitative approach to my research. However, I also incorporated some aspects of quantitative research, such as close-ended surveys, to provide numerical

evidence of trends, attitudes and general opinions of the population I researched (Creswell, 2015, p. 155). Many past studies have chosen only one method of conducting research. It is my goal that a more well-rounded, mixed-method approach will yield significant results.

### **Research Design**

The research design of my investigation was in the form of a case study. Given my research question, a case study was the most appropriate, all-encompassing choice. According to Creswell (2014), case studies are “a qualitative design in which the researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, process or one or more individuals” (p. 241). A case study allowed me to observe and interview, as well as obtain documentation, over an extended period of time. As explained by Yin (2014), the combination of a case study with open-ended, focused, and structured interviews, surveys, documents, and archival records creates a convergence of relevant evidence and findings (p. 121). These forms of data collection, allowed me to get an in depth, overarching understanding of my school’s relationship with school uniforms. The addition of close-ended surveys helped to get more substantial, anonymous data that lent itself well to understanding the opinions of my participants.

### **Setting**

The setting of my case study was a K-8 charter school in a medium-sized (20,000+) suburban city. Students who attend the school come from many nearby towns, all of which are considered diverse in racial makeup. For example, a town where many students are from has a racial makeup of about 52% white, 25% African American, 15%

Asian, 6% Latino, and 2% two or more races. The school has about 500 students, 280 of which are new as of the 2017-18 school year. The amount of new students is largely due to the school making a location change. The location change was mainly the result of the school needing a larger space to accommodate its growing population, as well as to provide more students the opportunity to attend. The new location brought an increase in students, along with more racial diversity and an increase in students benefiting from free and reduced lunch. Last year, the racial demographics for the school were 70% white, 16% African American, 10% Latino, 2% Asian, and 2% two or more races. The percentage of students with free and reduced lunch was 30%. These statistics have changed significantly this year and will be made publically available in 2018. Staff at the school consists of approximately 35 teachers, three administrators, one social worker, six special education teachers and 20-25 special education paraprofessionals.

### **IRB Process**

Prior to conducting any research, I completed the IRB process at Hamline University and my charter school. At Hamline, I submitted my IRB proposal form and had it approved by the five person committee. After approval, I received a standard consent request document for my research. When finished with the Hamline IRB process, I spoke to the principal of my school about my intentions and was given permission to study the school. The principal informed the rest of the administration team about my case study, while I emailed the teachers/staff. Teachers that were interviewed had verbal and signed consent, using a form I created detailing their voluntary participation in my study. Additionally, although student surveys were anonymous, all participants' parents

were given a consent form to sign and return to their child's classroom teacher prior to the administering of the survey.

### **Participants, Methods, and Tools**

For the case study, I utilized a variety of tools. The first step was to interview my participants, who were key stakeholders at my school. Interviews allowed me to talk openly with participants about their opinions on school uniforms. Interviews, in this case structured, are considered "one of the most important sources of case study evidence" (Yin, 2015, p. 110). Creswell (2014) notes that interviews largely do not require set questions; however, I did create a number of questions pre-written to ask participants (p. 17) (see Appendix A). Questions were chosen after reviewing past literature on the topic and discussing with my capstone committee. The first to be interviewed were administration. These individuals (Principal, Assistant Principal, and Dean of Students) are decision-makers in the school and their thoughts on uniforms and academic achievement formed my base understanding for the case study. After interviewing administration, I set up four interviews with teachers in the following grade bands: K-1, 2-3, 4-5, and 6-8. I asked the same/similar questions (see Appendix B) in order to gain a teacher's perspective on the effectiveness of uniforms in relation to academic success. I selected teachers based on their teaching experience, as well as their familiarity with teaching at both uniform and non-uniform schools.

After administrator and teacher interviews, I chose to administer two types of surveys at my school. The first set of surveys were for students (K-8). I chose to survey the classes of the teachers that I interviewed. This resulted in surveys of about 65



students, as I only surveyed students whose parents had returned signed consent forms. Surveys were written in a Likert Scale format and included comment boxes for students who chose to write additional information (see Appendix C). Due to the age range of students, I chose to create two separate student surveys, one for K-4 and other for 5-8. This allowed all students to understand what was being asked of them, as the writing of the survey was reading level appropriate. Surveys were kept anonymous, were administered by teachers, and were paper-based versus electronic. Creating student surveys allowed me to get a different perspective on the issue of school uniforms. While teachers and administration opinions are key, student opinions also give necessary perspective into whether uniforms correlate to academic achievement.

Simultaneously with student surveys, I sent out surveys to all of the teachers and paraprofessionals in the school (see Appendix D). I utilized Survey Monkey to complete surveys and indicated a cut-off date for submission. The surveys allowed for another perspective into the effect on uniforms and academic achievement, as well as provided a place for teachers/staff to submit anonymous responses to questions. There was an additional section for comments, if teachers felt inclined to add personal thoughts/opinions on the matter. Staff surveys were optional, but I received 50 completed surveys after the brief, one week time frame to complete the survey.

Finally, I reviewed documents from my school, including the official school uniform policy and the quarterly uniform infraction data for grades Kindergarten through eighth grade. This served as additional information to back up or refute any claims made through my other research methods. This was a non-obtrusive source of data that allowed

me, as the researcher, to analyze data in a convenient time and place. According to Yin (2015), documentation and archival records are key sources of evidence because they are stable, unobtrusive, specific, and precise (p. 106). This case study features many methods that result in open-ended, broad information. It is important to have a combination of that, as well as the more specific data, to gain a clear perspective of the topic.

### **Data Analysis**

My data analysis process was correlated with the ideas and steps indicated by Creswell in *Research Design*. The first step was to carefully organize all of my research. I compiled my notes and documentation from the interviews, surveys, and document reviews. I also transcribed my interviews and typed all handwritten notes. I saved all of the notes and transcriptions onto Google Docs. Second, I read through all of the data I collected. This allowed the data to be fresh in my mind so that I could further analyze and reflect on the research I did. Third, as Creswell suggested, I coded (organized) my data. I followed the steps typically used for coding by Tesch (As cited in Creswell, 2014, pp. 197-198). Fourth, I used my codes to set up themes for my analysis. Finally, I determined how to use those themes to represent my findings. As shown in the next chapter, I chose to use a narrative passage because according to Creswell (2014), it is the most popular approach to explain the findings of the analysis (p. 199).

### **Summary**

Chapter Three explained the methods used for the case study at my charter school. A qualitative research approach and the use of interviews, surveys, and document review allowed me to gain insight and understanding into the possible connection between

uniform policy and academic achievement. It is my goal that, by conducting this thorough case study, I will be able to understand and answer the question: *Do school uniform requirements have an effect on overall student academic performance at one area charter school?* In the forthcoming chapter, I will illustrate my findings from the case study I conducted.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Results

#### Introduction

The complexity of the school uniform debate can be overwhelming, as there are a multitude of opinions and a general lack of empirical evidence to support either side. The goal of this case study was not to find a definitive answer to the debate, but rather to provide the academic community with another example of an American school community's opinions on school uniforms. It is with that mindset that I set out to answer the question: *Do school uniform requirements have an effect on overall student academic performance at one area charter school?*

In the middle of March 2018, I began my case study, which primarily involved conducting interviews and administering surveys to staff and students at a Minneapolis-area K-8 charter school. Through these methods, I attempted to highlight and understand the opinions and thought processes of the school's key stakeholders, teachers, support staff, and students. Over a period of three months, I conducted seven, structured interviews, surveyed 50 staff members, and surveyed 67 students in grades K-8. The results of the interviews and surveys are presented in this chapter.

Interviews and surveys focused on staff and students' opinions of uniforms in general, as they pertained to academic achievement and growth. Questions and survey

statements were presented in terms that were understandable and developmentally appropriate to the individuals involved. For example, although staff and students' surveys both had statements about the correlation between uniforms and academics, the student version was simple and written with the intent that either a Kindergarten or 8<sup>th</sup> grade student could easily understand. Major findings include general trends in the data, as well as more specific findings related to the significantly differing opinions of staff and students.

### **Results**

The results of the case study are in chronological order, as well as separated between the different methods utilized to discover data trends. That order is as such: interviews, staff surveys, student surveys, and uniform infraction documentation. Detailing staff opinions and findings prior to student findings helps one to clearly understand the agreements and disagreements presented in the data. The documentation provides an extra element of data, in that it provides quantitative, non-opinion based data directly correlated to uniforms within the charter school setting.

### **Interviews**

Beginning data analysis with interviews creates a foundation for the more detailed data to come from surveys. Interviews were conducted with key stakeholders and four senior-level teachers from the staff. After interviewing each participant, I typed my hand-written notes, saved them on Google Docs, and reviewed the notes multiple times in order to analyze the answers and determine what information was significant to the case study results. The results of the interview questions provide a basis for which additional

information will come. The information learned from the interviews gives great insight into the opinions of those individuals who are prominent figures within the school structure. While their opinions are not encompassing of all staff, they do represent administration and teachers from all grade level bands.

The first five questions of the administrator and teacher interviews focused on background information (See Appendix A and B). Gaining knowledge of an interviewee's background allows one to then better understand that individual's opinions and thought-processes. As the fictional Atticus Finch states in *To Kill A Mockingbird*, "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view" (Lee, 1960, p. 85). The debate on uniforms is based around many people's differing viewpoints. Often times, the debate has turned negative because the sides involved are not interested in understanding the other sides' views. When it comes to this specific case study, I felt that it was essential to learn about the key stakeholders and teachers' backgrounds, in order to best understand the answers on uniforms they each provided.

The administrators interviewed had a combined seventeen years working on the administrative side of schools in the capacity of principal, assistant principal and dean of students. Prior to becoming administrators, the interviewees had all been teachers; however, their teaching experiences differed significantly. Administrator A had been a middle school Language Arts teacher, Administrator B a high school English teacher, and Administrator C an alternative program teacher, focused on students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). Along with different teaching experiences, the individuals had differences in terms of where they taught/served as an administrator. Administrator A

had spent about half of his career in public schools and the other half in charter settings. Administrator B had experience in public, private (Montessori) and charter schools. Administrator C had spent a majority of his teaching career in self-contained (alternative) public schools, as well as four years in general public schools, and one year in a charter environment. As far as uniform requirements, all three administrators had only worked at one school with uniform requirements – their current place of employment and focus of the case study. This background information was significant in understanding the answers to their remaining questions. Although they had a plethora of experiences in varying school environments, they did not have much combined experience with uniforms. They did, however, have an outside perspective, in that they could answer questions about uniforms as individuals who'd been involved with many successful schools that did not utilize uniforms.

The teacher interviews were determined based on years of experience for each grade band within the school. The final four teachers interviewed represented 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade and had a combined 68 years of teaching. Of the four teachers, two (Teacher A and B) had experiences teaching in public, private, and charter school environments. The other two teachers (Teacher C and D) had experiences in two of the three types of schools, in that one had prior experience as a private school teacher and the other as a public school teacher. Two of the teachers (Teacher A and B) had experience with uniforms outside of their current charter school setting. In fact, Teacher A had spent five years of her teaching career in England, where uniforms were required at all of the schools where she worked. Additionally, although the teachers were currently teaching

1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> grade, they all had experiences teaching at different grade levels. The teachers' experiences, like that of the administrators, were varying and unique. Their backgrounds were diverse and all encompassing, which led to interesting answers to the remaining uniform and academic achievement-based questions.

The first of the non-background related questions was: *Do you believe that student attire influences student behavior? Why or why not?* I chose to start with this question, as it did not specifically refer to uniforms, but rather students' general appearance. All of the participants could easily rely on their years of experience to thoughtfully respond. Of the seven participants, six felt that student attire did influence student behavior. As Administrator A explained, "It starts with the belief that the way we dress influences how we act, regardless of age. If a person feels good about how they look, they are more likely to be productive in whatever task they have set to accomplish" (Personal Interview, April 23, 2018). The other participants shared Administrator A's sentiments, mentioning that the way one feels and looks influences their behavior and work ethic. They elaborated that, in many situations, productivity can be hindered due to students' attire. Students, especially in their tween and early teen years, are heavily focused on discovering their personal identities, with clothing acting as a means of expression. When clothing and appearance become a central aspect of their lives, it can cause distractions and lack of focus. As Teacher D stated, "When students are dressed alike, they are on the same learning plane. They are not worried about appearance and that, in turn, takes away many distractions at school" (Personal Interview, May 1, 2018). Teacher C was the only participant who did not entirely believe that attire influenced



behavior. She stated that, “Based on past experiences, it did not seem that there was a direct correlation” (Personal Interview, May 2, 2018). She did not elaborate on that statement, but in later questions did mention uniform attire positively affecting focus and schoolwork. It is with the answers from this question, that I could dig deeper into the relationship between uniform attire and students’ behaviors and actions, academic and otherwise.

The next question was similar to the previous question; however, specified uniforms. It was only asked to the teachers, as the administration answered within the previous question and it was developed as a follow-up question for more elaboration. It stated: *Do you believe that specific uniform requirements influence student behavior? If yes, how so?* The four teachers were in agreement that uniforms influence student behavior, mostly in a positive manner. Teacher B stated that, “Students are behaved better because they look the same – they aren’t checking out each other’s appearance and getting distracted” (Personal Interview, June 7, 2018). Teacher D elaborated saying, “Uniforms eliminate comparisons, which builds community and creates unity among students” (Personal Interview, May 1, 2018). As the administrators had also mentioned, the teachers felt that uniforms seem to help students with focus and behavior. With that being said, Teacher A did mention one negative aspect of uniforms. As a middle school teacher, Teacher A had witnessed students fighting back against the restraints uniforms create. She said of uniforms, “Stricter uniforms can be counterproductive and take away from learning by creating arguments from students.” However, she felt that from personal experience with both uniform and non-uniform schools that, “dress codes, in general, do

create a community feel. Without them, there is less of a united front” (Personal Interview, May 23, 2018).

From the first two questions, it was clear that the participants agreed that student attire, specifically uniforms, have an influence on student behavior. As many research and academic studies have argued in the past, uniforms tend to help schools create community and allow for students and staff to feel connected to one another and unified. It was with that knowledge that I asked the next two questions, which in many ways were more difficult for the participants to definitively answer. The first question was: *Do you believe that uniform requirements affect students’ academic performance? Why or why not?* The follow up question was: *Have you seen any instances of academic achievement directly correlated to student attire? If so, explain?*

Of the seven participants, six believed that uniforms did affect students on an academic level. The administrators and teachers who agreed about the correlation felt that uniforms affect academic performance on multiple levels. For example, Administrator A initially related the topic to science and adolescent brain development stating, “With uniforms, students aren’t worried about appearance. They are not closing down brain receptors and, in turn, are able to eliminate areas of stress to focus on academics” (Personal Interview, April 23, 2018). Administrators B and C agreed, mentioning that students in uniform are able to focus and channel their energies on more positive aspects of their lives, such as learning. Teachers A, B, and D also felt that uniforms create focus and an element of calmness which, in turn, creates an environment suitable for learning. Teacher D stated, “With uniforms there is a sense of coherency and cooperation. Nothing

(wardrobe-related) interferes with learning” (Personal Interview, May 1, 2018). While participants felt that there was a positive correlation, two of the participants were quick to mention that uniforms alone do not make or break a positive learning environment. As Administrator B stated, “There are out-of-uniform schools that do well and those that don’t do so well – the same can be said of in-uniform schools” (Personal Interview, June 5, 2018). Teacher D elaborated saying, “Anything different distracts students at school” (Personal Interview, May 1, 2018). Essentially, she felt that change, whether wardrobe related or otherwise, can cause students to be unfocused on schoolwork. Teacher C was the only participant who felt that uniforms did not affect academic achievement. She believed that, “learning is based on who they (the students) are and their natural abilities and instincts. What they are wearing doesn’t affect *how* they learn” (Personal Interview, May 2, 2018). With the exception of Teacher C, the participants agreed that uniforms could affect academic performance. Brain development, the ability to focus, and a sense of calmness/safety in appearance can help foster a positive learning environment. Distractions are bound to occur and cause students to stray academically, but ultimately, uniforms help create stability in the learning space. Again, as Administrator B mentioned, that does not mean that a positive learning space cannot be achieved without uniforms. It certainly can, but as many of the participants noted, uniform requirements are essential tools to reach academic achievement.

The second part of the question was more difficult to answer, as even the most complex case studies and research of recent years have shown. *Have you seen any instances of academic achievement directly correlated to student attire? If so, explain?*

For this case study, the ultimate answer from participants was no. As Administrator A stated, “It’s all theory. I can see behaviors influenced by uniforms, but not academics” (Personal Interview, April 23, 2018). However, Teacher A connected the question to her own personal experiences and found a correlation. She mentioned, “In the past, I took a standardized test in my pajamas. Afterwards, I felt I did poorly compared to other tests that I went to where I was dressed professionally” (Personal Interview, May 23, 2018). The key word in this statement is “felt.” Teacher A did not necessarily do poorly, but *felt* that she did. The feeling of doing poorly reflects her behavior, not her actual academic abilities. Teacher D shared a story about one of her students in another attempt to find a correlation. She said that she had a current student who often came to class without the right parts of her uniform (i.e. black dress shoes). The student would be asked to change or be given a uniform infraction and would, therefore, become very upset. This, in turn, affected the student’s day at school. Again, it is possible that the student’s academic performance suffered, but it more strongly correlates to the idea that her behavior was affected not her academics.

The final interview question was created to tie together all of the questions and place the focus on the specific charter school and case study. The question was: *You currently work at a school that strongly enforces uniforms. What role, if any, do you think that uniforms play in the school culture?* In asking this question, I felt that I could clearly paint a picture of what key staff felt the role of uniforms were at their current school. The word that was repeatedly used in all seven interviews was community. At this specific charter school, community is created, in large part, due to the uniforms. Teacher D shared

that, “Uniforms contribute to the community feel and help to eliminate clothing-related cliques. When that barrier is gone, students are more accepting of each other” (Personal Interview, May 1, 2018). Teacher C agreed saying that, “Uniforms create a culture of ‘this is how it is at our school.’ We are a team and a group” (Personal Interview, May 2, 2018). The other teachers and administrators shared those sentiments, adding that students take pride in their school, have a sense of belonging, create healthy social interactions, and carry themselves with more dignity. Although a majority of the commentary for the last question was positive, Teacher A did mention that opinions of students differ slightly when they reach middle school. Students do feel extremely connected to each other, but also feel that together they can rebel against rules. They collectively feel that the strict uniform requirements are not completely fair and often reach out to their teachers to argue and/or come to school ready to bend the rules to create change (Personal Interview, May 23, 2018).

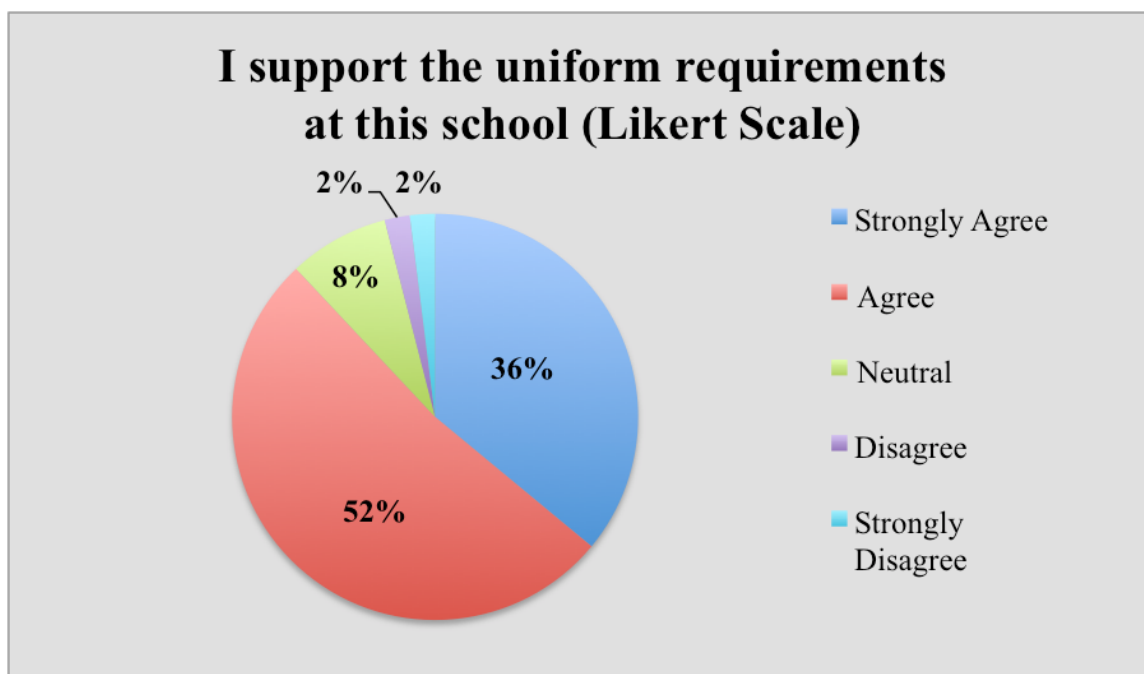
Interviewing key stakeholders and teachers at the charter school was important to this case study. It helped frame the research question and do so from the perspective of those on the inside. In any case study, the results are based primarily on the specific community being explored. For this case study, it was clear that key members of the school staff were in support of uniforms and felt that they, in some way, affected students and the school as a whole. It is with that information that I began the survey process, to retrieve more data about opinions on uniforms from staff and from students.

## Staff Survey

Staff and student surveys were administered at a similar time period. However, for the purpose of clarity in data, I have chosen to first explain the results of the staff survey. The staff survey (see Appendix E) was sent to all staff on Tuesday, May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018 through the SurveyMonkey platform. The survey consisted of six statements, where staff could rate each statement, based on a 1-5 scale with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. Participants were also given the opportunity to comment on any of the statements. Staff members were asked, via email, to voluntarily complete the survey prior to the following Tuesday, which gave them one week to produce results. By the following Tuesday, 50 complete surveys were received, along with many comments on the various survey statements. I sent the survey out in email form to *all staff*, which consists of about 90 individuals. Given the number of completed surveys, my response rate was about 56%. As the survey was voluntary, it is unclear who completed it; however, it can be assumed that it was a mix of mainly K-8 teachers and paraprofessionals. Other individuals who may have completed the survey include office staff, maintenance and kitchen staff, and administration.

The first statement on the survey read: *I support the uniform requirements at this school*. It was essentially designed to gain a better understanding of how the staff felt about uniforms within their specific school. Interviewing administration and teachers had allowed me to gain insight into key stakeholders' opinions, but it was also vital to know the opinions of the majority of staff members. In analyzing the results (see Figure 1), it was determined that 96% or 48 of the 50 staff members supported (or were neutral about)

the charter school's uniform policies. The remaining two individuals disagreed and strongly disagreed with the uniform requirements. Positive commentary focused on uniforms creating a community and helping students to focus/concentrate. One anonymous participant wrote, "It makes for an even playing field for the kids! They can concentrate on the work and not worry about looks." Another participant added, "Most children seem to forget about what they are wearing and then concentrate on other aspects of school. This is exactly what is expected in a school that utilizes uniforms." Although a majority of comments were positive, many participants added that there could be changes made moving forward. The two main complaints were black dress shoes versus black/white tennis shoes (the latter only being allowed for physical education in grades 3-8) and khaki pants for middle school students. The khaki pants comments were also brought up in the teacher interviews, as many middle school students have faced humiliation during school due to puberty-related occurrences. The statement results and comments led me to believe that, overwhelmingly, staff supported the uniforms at the school, but felt that there could be slightly more leniency while still maintaining the basics of uniform requirements.

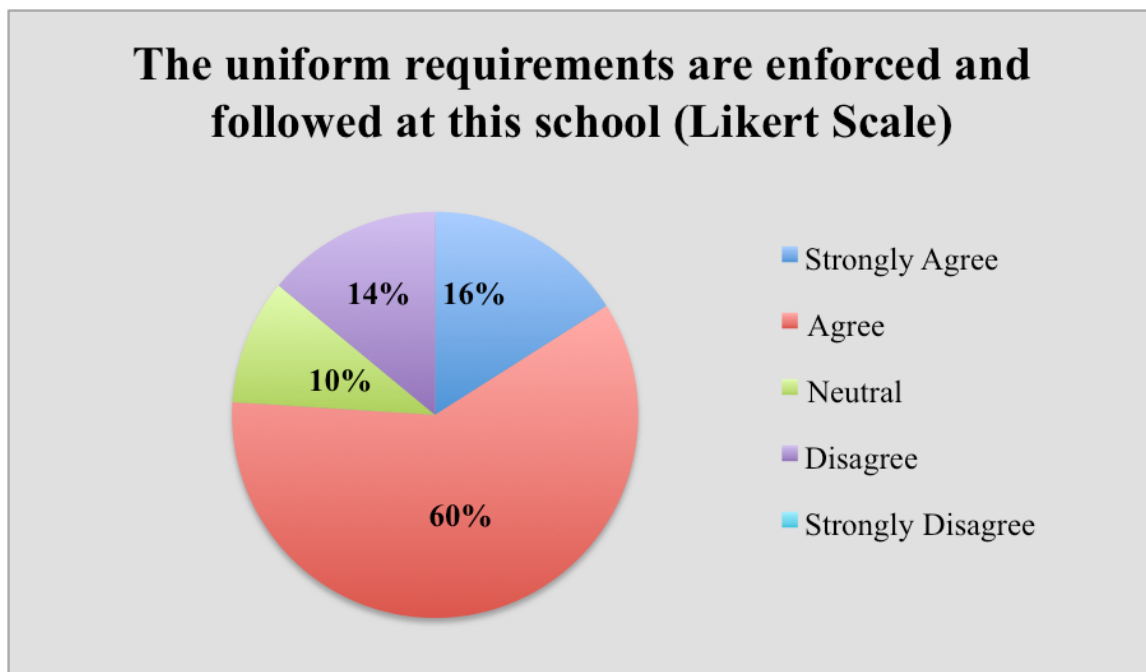


*Figure 1.* Representation of results of statement 1 on staff survey: I support the uniform requirements at this school. Scale ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The second statement on the survey read: *The uniform requirements are enforced and followed at this school.* This question was important to ask because, as seen with the Washboe County Schools in Nevada, when uniform requirements aren't enforced by a majority of staff and/or schools in a district, it creates problems and uniform-based goals are not able to be achieved (Daugherty, 2002, p. 392). The charter school community, as detailed in statement one, support uniforms and believe that they are part of what makes the school a well-rounded, positive community. Enforcing uniforms is the key to that success. According to the survey results (See Figure 2), 16% or 8 individuals answered strongly agree, 60% or 30 individuals answered agree, 10% or 5 individuals answered neutral, and the remaining 14% or 7 individuals answered disagree. The comments on this statement ranged from positive to negative. Many participants felt that teachers try



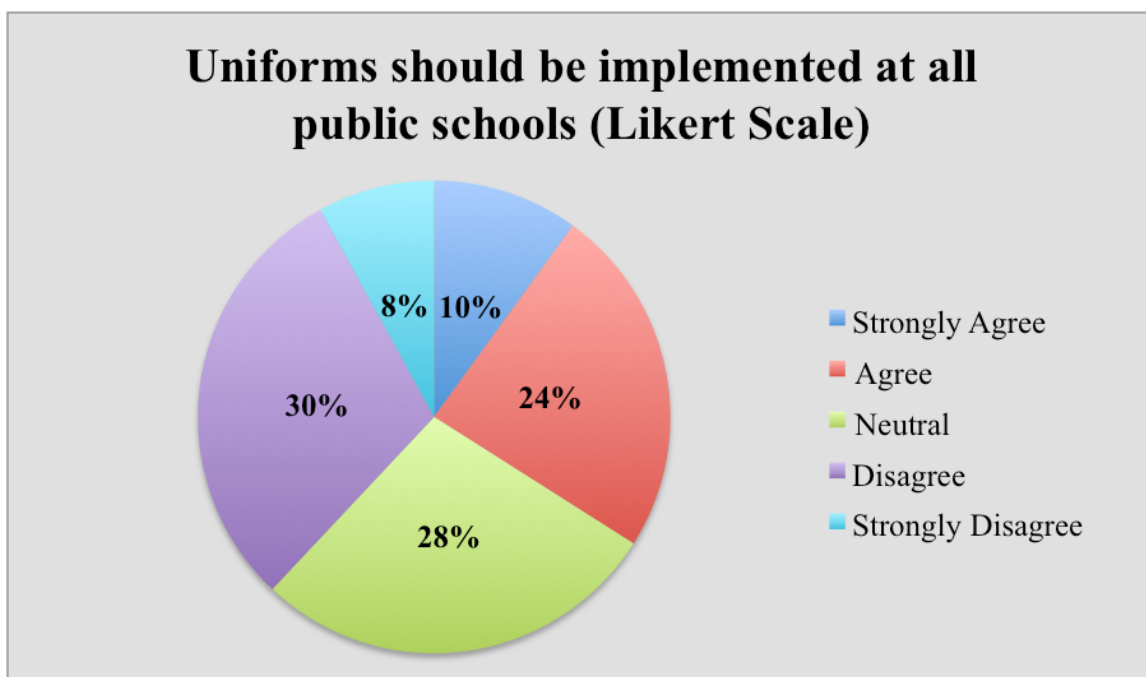
their best to enforce the requirements, but that the level in which they do so varies. For example, one participant noted that some teachers are stronger in this area than others and that middle school teachers, specifically, are more relaxed with the enforcement. Another participant felt that their coworkers were not helping enforce stating, “We have some teachers that are vigilant and others who never look at what their students are wearing. It has caused some hard feelings amongst peers.” Along with teacher enforcement, others noted that it can be very difficult, specifically because of the students’ individual needs in the classroom. One teacher mentioned, “The one thing I’ll honestly admit to is if I have a very unregulated student who is out of uniform, I will not push for them to get an infraction. I tend to overlook it.” Others agreed, but noted that when there is a lack of enforcement from staff, other students are quick to point out their out-of-uniform classmates. In general, there is a clear attempt to follow uniform requirements on the part of staff and students, but as another participant wrote, “It is constantly a struggle. We (staff and students) spend a lot of time and energy on it.” The results of this statement were not unexpected. Often times, schools struggle to enforce all rules, whether uniform related or not. However, it is evident that this charter school believes uniforms are an essential aspect of the community. Without regular enforcement on the part of all staff, the community could eventually suffer.



*Figure 2.* Representation of results of statement 2 on staff survey: The uniform requirements are enforced and followed at this school. Scale ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The third statement on the survey read: *Uniforms should be implemented at all public schools.* The reasoning for the addition of this question was that I wanted to determine if staff felt that uniforms were universally a good tool to implement or only at certain schools and/or charter schools. Charter schools, although seen differently, are publically funded like traditional public schools. Did the staff at my school believe that uniforms would help foster a positive community in all schools, regardless of their label (i.e. charter, public, private)? The results of this statement (see Figure 3) were divided in that 10% or 5 individuals answered strongly agree, 24% or 12 individuals answered agree, 28% or 14 individuals answered neutral, 30% or 15 individuals answered disagreed and the remaining 8% or 4 individuals answered strongly disagree. Although the results spanned the spectrum, there were fewer comments on this statement versus

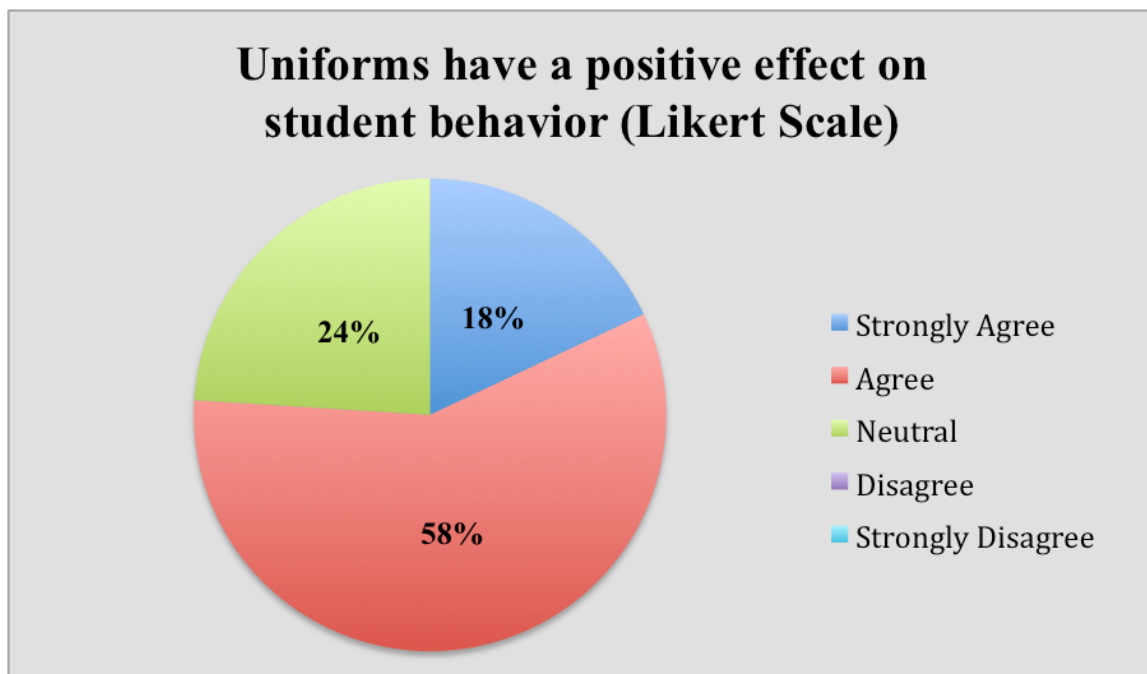
other survey statements. A majority of the detailed comments were pro-uniform; however both sides of the debate were represented through comments. Positive comments included that uniforms create a cohesive, leveled playing field for students, create unity amongst the school community, and help create a sense of identity for students. Commentary from participants not in favor of universal uniforms mentioned that uniforms are restrictive and can be seen as a form of micromanagement of students. Others mentioned that uniforms should be kept as a school choice instead of government regulated. A final participant had a different viewpoint on the topic, mentioning gender norms. The anonymous individual wrote, "I would push for this if I knew uniforms would be the same for all genders (i.e. skirts and jumpers allowed for male students)... Without equality across genders in uniforms, I think that schools will ultimately run into issues." At the charter school of the case study, per their official family handbook, students are able to wear any article of clothing that is considered to be part of the uniform. Uniform items, like skirts, are not specified for gender. However, as the participant mentioned, that is most likely not the case for all schools across the county. The results of this survey statement are in line with national norms. According to Rasmussen Reports, 41% of Americans believe that all students should be wearing uniforms to school, while 12% are undecided. (2013). In my survey analysis, it was determined that 34% were in favor and 28% were neutral/undecided. When national and school-level surveys produce results that are divided, such as these, it is difficult for determine if or how a change should be made. This question did, however, help me to further understand how the staff at my charter school felt about uniform requirements outside of their specific school.



*Figure 3.* Representation of results of statement 3 on staff survey: Uniforms should be implemented at all public schools. Scale ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The fourth survey statement related back to one of the key questions from the administrator/staff interviews. It read: *Uniforms have a positive effect on student behavior.* While my research question relates specifically to academic achievement, it is important to first determine if individuals at my charter school believe that uniforms have an effect on behavior. As Chapter 2's literature review showed, proponents agree that uniforms have a positive effect on students. Additionally, the interviews and commentary from the first two statements of the staff survey prove that many participants in the case study feel that, in some way, uniforms do have an impact on students. This fourth statement is more pointed and designed to get more specific information and commentary. After analysis, it was determined that no participant disagreed with the

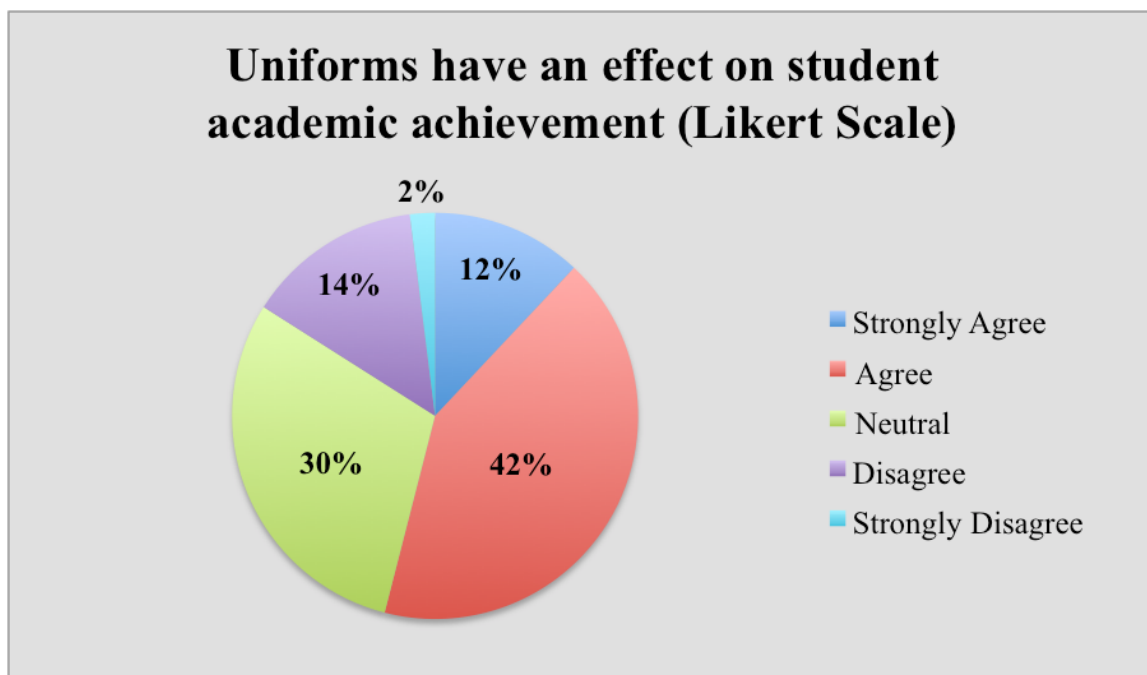
statement (see Figure 4) Of the 50 participants, 76% strongly agreed or agreed that uniforms have a positive effect on student behavior, while 24% were neutral. In many of the comments, participants reflected on out-of-uniform days, where students are able to wear their normal attire at school. One participant wrote, “I have noticed that during some of our out-of-uniform days, students are very distracted by what people are wearing.” Two other participants elaborated saying, “We see an uptick in student behavior when students are not in uniform. Attitude changes and students become very laid back in their performance” and “Out of uniform days are a whirlwind of hurt feelings and poor behavior. The uniform dresses the person for the role they need to fill for the day and helps remind them of expectations.” It is important to note that all of these comments mention out-of-uniforms days as the comparison. These days are limited to two or three days per school year. It is quite possible that students are behaving differently because their routine and “normal” has changed. One of the participants who rated the statement as neutral wrote, “If I compare the schools I have taught at that require uniforms and schools I have taught at that do not require uniforms, I have not seen that uniforms have made any difference on behavior.” It appears that staff that have only worked in uniform schools, see an immediate difference when students are not in uniform, but the same cannot be said for staff that have had experiences in out-of-uniform schools. In general, this statement requires more investigation and analysis of students throughout the school year, as it is difficult to determine the “why” behind participants’ responses and whether or not their reasoning is sufficient.



*Figure 4.* Representation of results of statement 4 on staff survey: Uniforms have a positive effect on student behavior. Scale ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The fifth statement of the staff survey stated: *Uniforms have an effect on student academic achievement.* This statement directly correlated to the question from the administration and teacher interviews that asked: *Do you believe that uniform requirements affect students' academic performance?* From the prior statements, I was able to get a clear understanding of staff members' opinions on uniforms in general. Their answers to this statement; however, determined if, at my charter school, staff felt that uniforms affect academic achievement. Given the results of the initial interviews, I anticipated that many of the staff would agree with the survey statement, as 86% of the interviewed staff had felt strongly that there was a connection between the two concepts. The responses covered all five ratings, but had a favorable leaning. The results (see

Figure 5) revealed 12% or 6 individuals answered strongly agree, 42% or 21 individuals answered agree, and 30% or 15 individuals answered neutral. The remaining eight participants answered disagree (7) and strongly disagree (1). The surprising aspect of this survey statement, given the number of strongly agree/agree responses, was that more than half of the comments were from those individuals who had answered unfavorably towards the connection. A few comments mentioned that uniforms lead students to act responsibly and have a more clear focus during the school day, but most comments revealed that participants were unsure or had no data to back the claim. One participant noted, "There are a lot of factors that go into student achievement. School uniforms help socially, but I am uncertain on academics." While there was uncertainty from some, others felt that there was no connection, as one participant stated, "Students' skills and test abilities are not affected by their appearance." As with the staff interviews, participants lacked evidence to back the claim but many felt that it did impact student academic achievement. This information led well into the sixth and final statement of the survey, which asked participants to think about experiences they had personally had with uniforms in correlation to academic achievement.

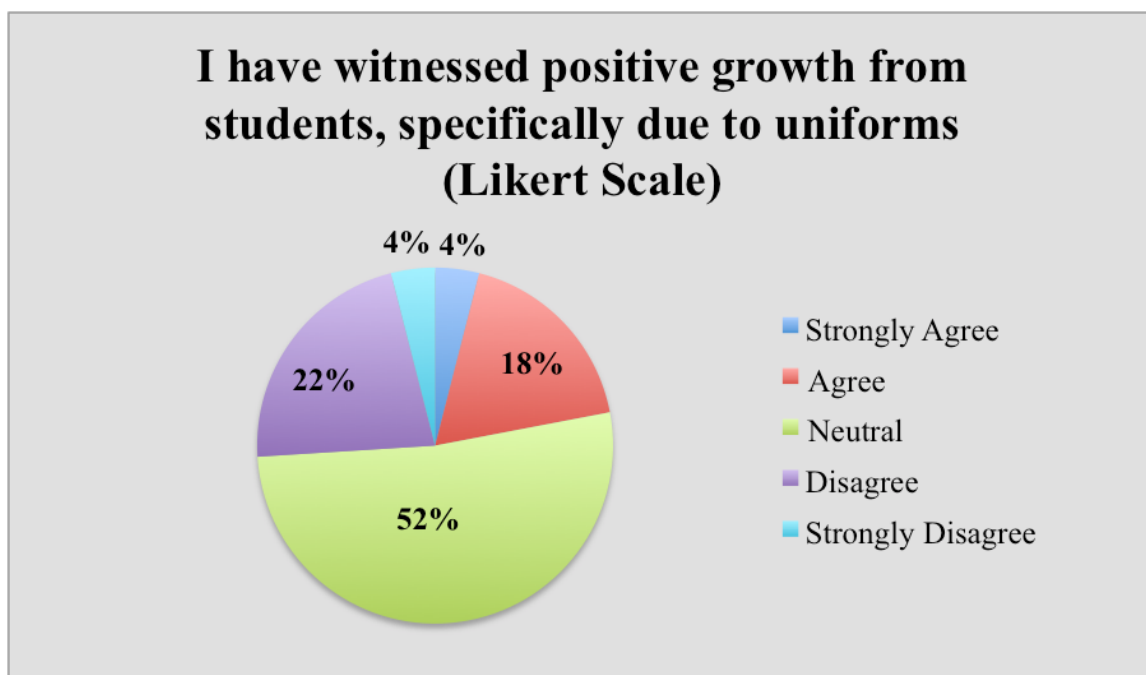


*Figure 5.* Representation of results of statement 5 on staff survey: Uniforms have an effect on student academic achievement. Scale ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The sixth statement on the survey read: *I have witnessed positive growth from students, specifically due to uniforms.* The growth in question could have referred to social or academic growth; however, given the prior statement, I felt that participants would see the statement as referring to academic growth. The results of this statement were telling and, yet again, connected with an interview question: *Have you seen any instances of academic achievement directly correlated to student attire?* The interview answers clearly showed that, while staff believe there is a correlation, it is not something that can be clearly witnessed. The same could be said from the answers to the final staff survey statement. The results (see Figure 6) indicated that 4% or 2 individuals answered strongly agree, 18% or 9 individuals answered agree, 52% or 26 individuals answered



neutral, 22% answered disagree, and 4% or 2 individuals answered strongly disagree. There were the fewest comments for this statement, but they all mentioned the same thing: lack of data. As one participant stated, “I don’t have any data to back up this notion.” Another participant elaborated saying, “I have seen students who have had a lot of positive growth, but I can’t say that it’s specifically due to uniforms.” Other comments mentioned witnessing new students to the school doing better as the year progressed, while others thought that the combination of strict expectations and uniforms might contribute to positive growth. Ultimately, this statement revealed that while many staff members at the school find uniforms as an effective tool in some way, they don’t necessarily have direct evidence to prove that the uniforms are the factor that is contributing to the positive learning environment.



*Figure 6.* Representation of results of statement 6 on staff survey: I have witnessed positive growth from students, specifically due to uniforms. Scale ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The staff survey was a vital aspect of the case study. It provided a great amount of data on how the charter school staff felt about uniforms, in general and in relation to academic achievement. Like the interviews, there were some staff members who didn't approve of uniforms and/or thought they didn't contribute to the learning environment at the school. However, in analyzing all of the statement responses and comments, I found that a large quantity of staff felt positively toward uniforms. There many not have been direct evidence that proved uniforms impact students' behavior and learning, but staff felt that they did make some difference. To believe in something is a strong notion and one that, many would argue, is as powerful as actual evidence. Many staff believe that the uniforms make a difference and, therefore, there is an overwhelming collective thought-process at the school that they do correlate positively to student behavior and academic achievement. With the information gathered from key stakeholders and a large number of staff, it was time to explore the opinions of the students. The research question refers specifically to students; therefore, it was only natural to interview the subjects of the case study. Staff at the school felt positively about the effects of uniforms, but would that be the same for students?

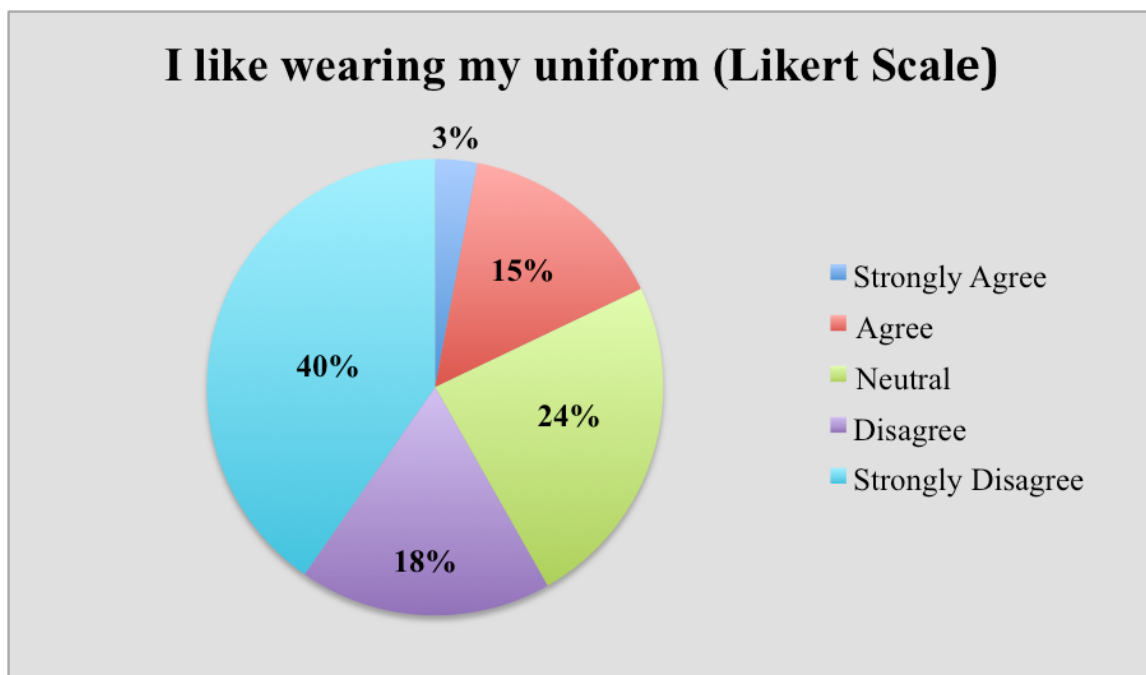
### **Student Survey**

The student survey was administered to four classes during the time period of April and May 2018. The classes were chosen based on the teachers who completed the interview process. This meant that a 1<sup>st</sup> grade, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, 5<sup>th</sup> grade, and 6<sup>th</sup> grade class were surveyed. Prior to completing the survey, a parental consent form was sent home to all students in the four classes. Their teachers indicated a deadline of about one week to

receive the signed forms. After the deadline date, teachers administered the surveys to students who had turned in the consent form. The paper survey consisted of three statements, where students could rate each statement, based on a 1-5 scale with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. Participants were also able to comment on each statement. It is important to note that there were two versions of the survey, one for K-2 and the other for 3-8 (see Appendix C and D). Although the statements were the same, the way the information was presented differed. For example, the K-2 survey used a range of five expressive faces to show strongly agree to strongly disagree, while the 3-8 survey used a typical Likert Scale format. The completed, anonymous surveys were returned to me and kept separated by class. There was a total of 67 completed student surveys, or an average of about 17 surveys per class. For 1st, 2nd, and 5th grade, this yielded a response rate of about 68%. For 6th grade; however, the consent form was sent home with the entire grade versus one class. This resulted in a lower response rate of about 34%.

The first statement of the survey stated: *I like wearing my uniform at school*. This was an important statement to start with, as it gave me a general sense of how students felt about their uniforms. The staff at the school had shown that they generally approved of the uniform, but they are not the individuals wearing the required clothing. The students' opinions were equally, if not more, relevant to the case study. The results (see Figure 7) were that 3% or 2 individuals answered strongly agree, 15% or 10 individuals answered agree, 24% or 16 individuals answered neutral/neither, 18% answered disagree, and 40% or 27 individuals answered strongly disagree. The ratings were similar across

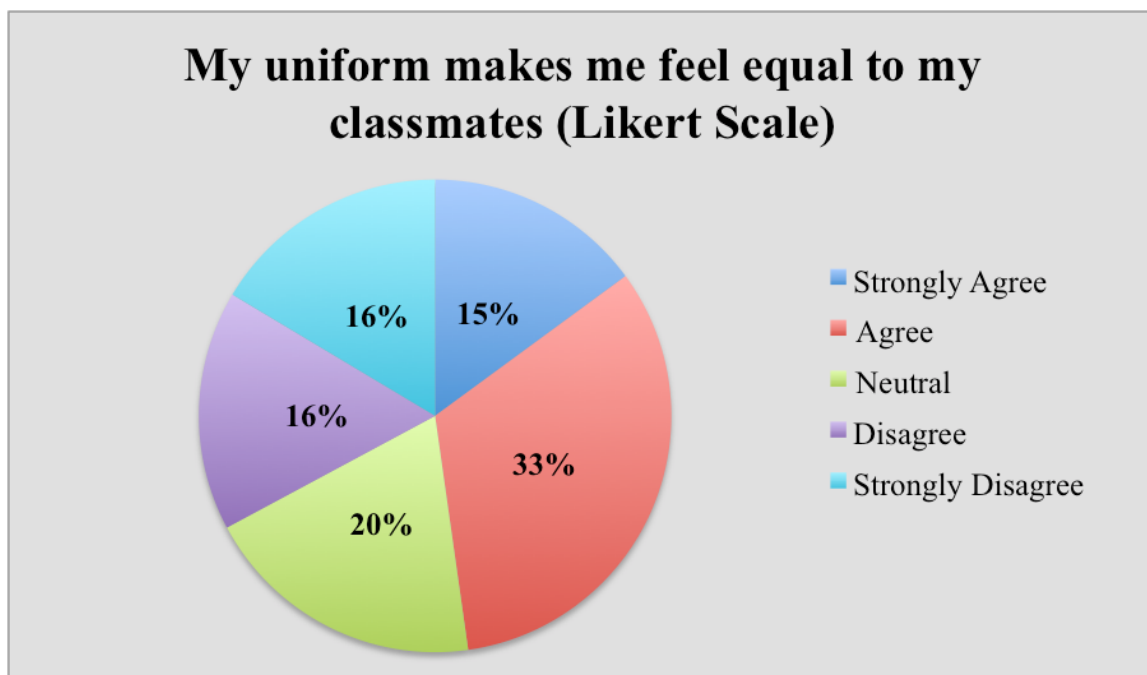
grade levels; however, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade was the class that rated most favorably toward uniforms and 5<sup>th</sup> grade was the class that disliked the uniforms the most. The 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade classes did not comment, but the older students did have various comments regarding their opinions on wearing a uniform. Many students mentioned that the uniforms take away the ability to express oneself. As one 5<sup>th</sup> grade student wrote, “I don’t like it because I can’t be myself.” A 6<sup>th</sup> grader agreed stating, “I can no longer purchase clothing that I want to wear or show them off to my friends.” The most repeated comment; however, was the lack of comfort and style of the uniforms. A majority of the comments mentioned the uniforms being uncomfortable and unattractive, especially the pants (khakis) and the black dress shoes. One student made a very interesting comment stating, “I don’t really like to wear it because it gets dirty and I run out of clothes to wear.” This is an argument that was overlooked by staff. Some students’ families cannot afford many uniform options, which leaves some students coming to school in the same clothing each day. Wearing dirty clothing can be embarrassing and uncomfortable, especially for students going through puberty. One other statement that was reflective and interesting to note came from a 6<sup>th</sup> grade student. She stated, “It also affects teachers because they constantly have to check our uniforms.” This was a comment made by my staff as well. It is difficult to check uniforms each day and be consistent in the effort to make sure all students are dressed appropriately per the dress code. Overall, 58% of students surveyed disagreed or strongly disagreed with liking their uniforms. It is with that information that I could investigate the next two questions, which sought to determine if uniforms affected the students’ attitudes/behaviors towards one another and their academic achievement.



*Figure 7.* Representation of results of statement 1 on student survey: I like wearing my uniform. Scale ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The second statement of the survey was designed to help determine if students felt that their uniform allowed for equality amongst their peers. Feeling equal or on the same “playing field” as others would show that uniforms were affecting student behavior and social interactions. The statement read: *My uniform makes me feel equal to my classmates.* The results (see Figure 8) were that 15% or 10 individuals answered strongly agree, 33% or 22 students answered agree, 20% or 13 individuals answered neutral/neither, 16% or 11 individuals answered disagree, and 16% or 11 individuals answered strongly disagree. The 5<sup>th</sup> grade class answered most favorably with the statement, while the 6<sup>th</sup> grade class had the most students who disagreed or strongly disagreed. A majority of the comments, as with the first statement, came from the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade students. It could be assumed that comments were more common for older

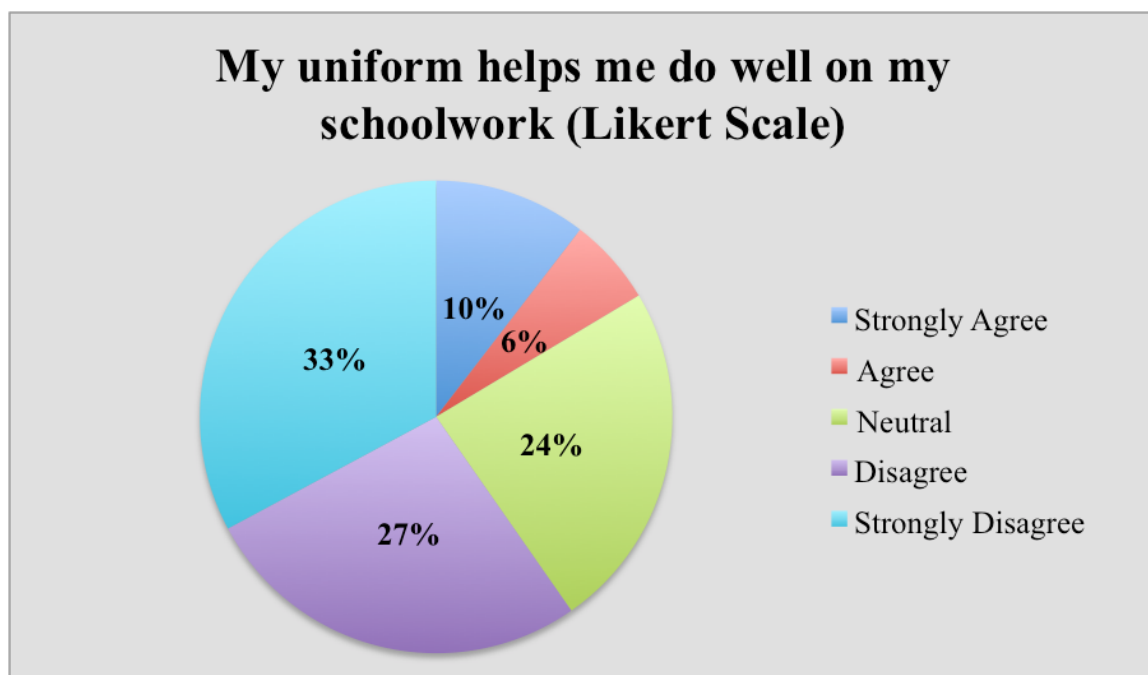
students because they were better able to articulate their thoughts into writing. One common theme was that students felt that uniforms made everyone look alike but that that did not calculate to being equal. For example, one student wrote, “Some students have great minds and some are interested in other things.” This student was stating that intellect or ability makes students different and that that is not influenced by clothing. Another student wrote, “I just feel some other people are above me and no uniform will change that.” In this student’s mind, he/she did not feel equal to his classmates regardless of what he/she was wearing. The remaining comments mentioned that the uniforms do make everyone look alike, therefore equal, but that that is not necessarily positive. As one student wrote, “We go to school to learn, not to show off our clothing. Granted, we all look the same, but our uniforms don’t let us express our personality.” There was only one positive comment, which was in line with what the staff hoped uniforms would create within students. The student participant wrote, “It (uniforms) make me feel calm and safe.” Although the student did not elaborate, one could assume that he/she felt calm and safe because there was no comparison with classmates. When everyone wears the same thing, clothing-related teasing and/or self-consciousness decreases. One of the main arguments of proponents of uniforms is that they create a community feel at school and allow for unity and equality. The results of this survey statement showed that, in the minds of students, that is not entirely the case. However, results were divided across the five categories, with a more favorable leaning towards agreement with the statement.



*Figure 8.* Representation of results of statement 2 on student survey: My uniform makes me feel equal to my classmates. Scale ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The final statement on the student survey was designed to directly correlate with the case study research question. It read: *My uniform helps me do well on my schoolwork.* The answers of this statement would determine if students at the charter school felt that their uniforms had an influence on their academic achievement. The results of this statement were very telling and not in line with a majority of staff opinions on the correlation between uniforms and academic achievement. The results (see Figure 9) reveal that 10% or 7 individuals answered strongly agree, 6% or 4 individuals answered agree, 24% or 16 individuals answered neutral/neither, 27% or 18 individuals answered disagree, and 33% or 22 individuals answered strongly disagree. The 1st grade class was, by far, the most favorable of the statement, while 6th grade had the most disagree and

strongly disagree ratings. One common theme within the comments was that uniforms did not make a difference in the students' schoolwork. As one 5th grader wrote, "I'd probably have the same grades no matter what I wore." A 6th grader elaborated saying, "Uniforms are not a dictionary or calculator." To many of the students, wearing a uniform does not equate to better academic achievement. The other common theme discovered was that uniforms caused distraction and lack of focus. One student wrote, "Uniforms make it harder to relax during reading and tests." Another student stated, "I'm too focused on my uncomfortable clothes and it distracts me." There was one 6th grade student who mentioned focus, but framed it in a pro-uniform way. He/she wrote, "I think it does because I'm never playing with my shirt or looking at sparkles or jewelry. In that way, I'm not distracted from my work." With the exception of that comment, the other comments revealed that students overwhelmingly believe that uniforms have no affect or a negative affect on their schoolwork and academic achievement.





*Figure 9.* Representation of results of statement 3 on student survey: My uniform helps me do well on my schoolwork. 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The results of the student surveys were not necessarily surprising, but were also not cohesive with the results of the staff surveys or interviews. While staff generally felt favorable towards uniforms, students did not. Staff do not have to wear the uniforms, so their perspective is undoubtedly different. Perhaps if staff were required to wear the same outfit each day, their responses would be similar to students. Instead, staff answers are based on theory, years of experience, and observation of multiple students, while students' answers are based solely on their own personal experiences. It could be said that teachers have a more well-rounded viewpoint of the topic; however, the staff's responses were largely based on personal opinions as well. The surveys showed that all parties have strong opinions on uniforms and that uniforms clearly impact both staff and students. The research question states: *Do school uniform requirements have an effect on overall student academic performance at one area charter school?* The results lead me to believe that, because staff and students have such strong opinions on uniforms, it does impact their academic performance, positively and negatively. For some, it creates a calming, safe environment and eliminates distractions, which allows for focus on schoolwork. For others, it causes resentment, which leads to lack of focus and inability to concentrate. It is with the results of the interviews and two surveys, that I investigate the final documents in my research. The school's family handbook with detailed information on uniform requirements, as well as the quarterly uniform infraction data, will provide

additional details into how uniforms are enforced at school and how that is affecting students.

### **Uniform Documentation**

After analyzing interview and survey results, I decided to examine the school's official family handbook from 2017-18 for details about the uniform requirements, as well as uniform infractions. Learning about these two areas could help one to better understand the reactions that the student surveys uncovered regarding uniforms.

There are two pages of the handbook dedicated to uniform guidelines. One is for K-5 and the other 6-8. These guidelines seem in line with other schools' uniform guidelines, which I examined in my initial research. There are; however, two areas that appear very strict and that students and staff mentioned in their interviews and surveys. The first area to examine further is shoe requirements. All grade levels have the same shoe requirements, with the exception of K-2. Students have specific black dress shoes that they must wear and then, during physical education, they are required to change into sneakers in black, white, or a combination of the two colors. In K-2, students may wear sneakers all day on their assigned physical education class days. According to student comments, the shoe requirements cause annoyance but also physical irritation. There are many requirements for the type of black dress shoes that are deemed appropriate and that has caused backlash, mainly from students.

The other area to examine is the requirement for middle school students' pants. In elementary school, students wear red shirts and blue pants. In middle school, students wear black shirts and khaki pants. According to Administrator A, at the beginning of the

school's history, there were two charter schools in one building. The two schools had different uniforms to differentiate. When the schools combined, it was decided to keep the uniforms to distinguish between elementary and middle school students. At first, the uniform dress code was very strict; however, that loosened up as the school gained students and moved from their first location. At one point in time, middle school students had a choice of either black or khaki pants. However, soon problems arose, as many students (mainly female) were wearing yoga pants and/or very form-fitting, inappropriate black pants to school. In order to regain control of the dress code and provide clarity to parents on expectations, the uniform requirements were, once again, made stricter and black pants were eliminated as a middle school option (Personal Interview, April 23, 2018). It is important to note that, although students may feel that the uniforms are unfair, the school board and the Parent Teacher Association deliberate and decide on all decisions regarding uniform changes.

Uniform infractions were another important area to research in the handbook.

According to the school's official family handbook:

There are two main purposes for our uniform policy: first, to focus students' attention on their work at school rather than their attire and second, to build a sense of community within the school that is neat in appearance and reflects our Character Education. (p. 35)

The handbook continues to explain that administration and faculty are employed to educate young minds, not spend time judging attire. When they are forced to check clothing, it takes away valuable teaching time. Therefore, the uniform infractions are in

place to uphold the school's uniform requirements and teach students about the necessity of wearing school-appropriate clothing. Non-compliance to the uniform requirements results in a uniform infraction. Students are given two warnings before the third and final offense. A third offense results in an office referral and a phone call to a parent/guardian by administration. Additionally, the student will receive a lunch detention. In 2017-18, there were 181 infractions in the first quarter, 214 infractions in the second quarter, 333 infractions in the third quarter, and 198 infractions in the fourth quarter. Many of the infractions are given to the same individuals; however, numerous students receive one or more infractions throughout the school year. Additionally, a majority of infractions are given to students for violating uniform rules related to shoes and socks. Of the 926 infractions during the 2017-18 school year, a vast majority were related to footwear. In regards to students receiving infractions, in my own 3<sup>rd</sup> grade class, by the end of the school year at least a fourth of the students had been given an infraction. In my class, a majority of the infractions were regarding footwear. I cannot say if that the same in all other classes; however, it was an ongoing issue for me and given the number of school-wide footwear infractions, I assume it was also an issue for most teachers. With that being said, when one of my students received a warning, it went home to their parents. Typically, the problem was then solved and I rarely encountered additional issues. Unfortunately, checking uniforms was a daily occurrence and resulted in uniform infractions each week. My experience has shown me that the students were not overly upset with infractions and, often times, expected them and/or told me they did not have the right parts of their uniform before school started. Again, this is my experience and

may not be the case for other classes. It could be assumed that the infractions were the catalyst, which caused students to be upset and have a negative response to the uniform survey.

### **Summary**

When I began researching school uniforms, I was struck by how many people were divided about the topic. Through my in-depth research, I learned about uniform history, successful and unsuccessful attempts to introduce uniforms into schools across the country, and the results of various case studies on uniforms and their effect on student behavior and academic achievement. It was with that information that I began my own case study, which was set up to gain another perspective into one school's opinions on uniforms. What I discovered was that, like the debate itself, the school was divided. Every person interviewed and/or surveyed had a unique perspective that was based on his/her own beliefs and observations. The research question set out to answer if uniforms had an effect on student academic performance. Ultimately, what I learned was that the effect uniforms have is directly correlated to each individual's mindset. A person either believes or does not believe that a uniform is beneficial. When a school decides to implement uniforms, the decision is based on who voting has a positive or negative viewpoint. Therefore, the research question is subjective. In the case of my charter school, staff generally believed that uniforms affected behavior and, in some cases, academic success. Students, on the other hand, mainly disliked uniforms, which caused them to not believe the uniforms had any effect on behavior or academics. In the forthcoming chapter, I will look back at my research and case study to reflect on my

research question: *Do school uniform requirements have an effect on overall student academic performance at one area charter school?*

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusion

### Introduction

The benefits of school uniforms have been hotly debated in the United States for decades. My personal life experiences, as well as my position as a teacher within a uniform-required school, have made me question the pros and cons of uniforms, specifically related to academic achievement. It is with that background that I desired to answer the question: *Do school uniform requirements have an effect on overall student academic performance at one area charter school?*

The journey to answer this question has been extensive and eye opening, allowing me to understand the topic from many perspectives. My initial literature review was essential to my research, as I learned about the history of uniforms worldwide and in the United States, the various arguments for and against uniform implementation, and the connection researchers have and have not made between uniforms and academic performance. My own case study, which I conducted following the literature review, allowed me to expand my knowledge in a more personal realm. I was able to see and hear first-hand how uniforms were impacting my specific charter school.

In the forthcoming chapter, I will revisit my literature review, which was the inspiration for and the basis of which my research was conducted. Next, I will reflect

upon my case study and discuss results and major findings, as well as the limitations I encountered. I will also consider the effects that my study could potentially have on the charter schools' key stakeholders and community, in general. Finally, I will discuss the possibility of relaying the results of my case study to the charter school's community, along with considering future research possibilities.

### **Literature Review Reflection**

Prior to beginning my research into school uniforms, a majority of my knowledge came from professors, classroom debates, and personal experiences. As mentioned in Chapter One, the United States' education system and all that it encompasses, is part of who I am. My parents are both educators, I attended public elementary and secondary schools, graduated from two private liberal arts colleges, and teach at a charter school. My background has allowed me to speak to a plethora of individuals about uniform requirements, as well as see first-hand how dress codes, or lack thereof, affect people (i.e. parents, children, teachers, etc.).

The literature review was an opportunity for me to flesh out my own thoughts and judgments, as well as learn more about the history of uniforms, the debates that persist worldwide, and the concept that uniforms may be correlated to academic achievement. The first portion of the review, on the history of uniforms, proved to be vital in my understanding, especially as it related to my later case study findings. In-depth research clearly showed me that the United States' opinions on uniforms differ significantly from many other countries. For countries with storied histories of uniforms, like England, uniforms represent tradition and unity. For other countries, like South Korea, uniforms



strongly correlate to the country's collectivist attitude. There are many countries worldwide that have a lack of stability in various areas of government. Therefore, implementation of uniforms creates a sense of safety, identity, and cohesion, which is appealing (Scott, 2014, p. 2). For the United States; however, uniforms are often seen as a way to impede on free speech and freedom of expression. Many Americans have positive views on uniforms; however, given the United States' individualistic culture, the debate on uniforms is passionate and ongoing. When reflecting on my own case study and survey responses, I was able to clearly see how students, especially, have grown up in a country where individualism is paramount.

The second part of the literature review that had a great influence on me was the portion that reviewed implementation of uniforms in American schools. What I discovered was that implementation, specifically related to uniforms, requires great thought, detail, and follow-through. Districts like Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) implemented uniforms systematically. Over a long period of time, all K-12 students were required to wear uniforms and that implementation is considered to be a main reason why issues, such as gang violence, decreased drastically. However, when schools are not careful with implementation, problems occur and success is unlikely. For example, Washoe County Schools were not successful in implementing uniforms and resolving their various school-related problems. This occurred because, unlike LBUSD, they moved quickly, did not require mandatory uniforms, and lacked significant follow-through (Daugherty, 2002, p. 392). When connecting to my own case study, I must consider that the charter school has shifted viewpoints over the years when it comes

to the strictness of uniform requirements and enforcement. In order for a school and/or district to be successful, the requirements and enforcement must be consistent and universally enforced.

The final part of the literature review that I will review is on proponents and opponents of uniforms, as well as the connection to academic achievement. Reading and researching about the pros and cons of the uniform debate was essential in my overall understanding of the topic. It also helped me to connect my case study participants' ideas and viewpoints to those that I had researched. Those opposed to uniforms generally believe that they impede on freedom of speech, are too costly, and/or do not solve behavioral and academic problems. On the other hand, those in favor of uniforms site elimination or decrease in peer pressure and gang violence, a greater degree of discipline and self-awareness in students, and improved concentration in academics. It is clear to see that the proponents and opponents have vastly different opinions, which in turn makes it very difficult for researchers to come to a general consensus on the effectiveness of uniforms. Various case studies have been completed to determine uniform effectiveness, in general and related to academic achievement. The two leading research reports by Brunnsma and Rockquemore (1998) and Bodine (2003) show that even through extensive studies and research, results vary significantly with one study showing no correlation and the other showing a clear and significant connection. However, it was John Huss' research from 2007 that connected with me the most. Huss determined, after examining past researcher's reports, that in order to determine if there was a correlation between uniforms and academic performance, it was imperative to rely on face-to-face

interactions and observations (p. 33). When beginning my case study, I knew that in order to get a well-rounded understanding, it would be necessary for me to utilize qualitative practices of interviews, observations, and thorough review of commentary made in surveys.

The literature review was necessary and extremely important in my quest to answer my research question: *Do school uniform requirements have an effect on overall student academic performance at one area charter school?* By the end of my research, my personal judgments were mainly eliminated, I had several researchers to look upon for inspiration and guidance, and a base knowledge that left me confident in conducting solid research of my own.

### **Major Findings of Case Study**

After extensive research through my literature review, I discovered that there is not a great deal of quantitative data to back either proponents or opponents of the uniform debate. Rather, there are many differing opinions and various case studies that show results on a small scale, either of a singular school or district. It was with that knowledge that I began my own case study. It was my goal to provide the academic community with another small-scale case study, which would show how one charter school felt about uniforms in general and in relation to academic achievement.

In the spring of 2018 I began my case study, using a mainly qualitative approach. My first step was to interview three administrators and four seasoned teachers at the charter school. I felt that the interviews would provide important background on key individuals within the school community and also allow me to get a thorough

understanding of each person's unique viewpoint. As I expected, the interviews provided me with a great deal of information and perspective. My main finding from the interviews was that although each person's opinions on uniforms differed slightly depending on their experiences, they were all deeply passionate about their school. The school strongly supports uniform requirements and, therefore, even if a participant's opinions were not entirely in line with the school's mission, he/she was still supportive and understanding of why the uniform requirements were in place. I also found myself struck by how the passionate responses of participants affected me. For example, Administrator A talked in great detail, and with great enthusiasm, about his experiences in education and his viewpoint on uniforms, in and outside of the charter school. By the end of our conversation, I felt more connected with the participant and more enthusiastic about uniforms. Administrator A's thoughtful, educated responses were influential. When thinking about the uniform debate, I can easily understand how someone who is undecided could easily get persuaded to be for or against uniforms. To me, that is not a negative statement. Instead, it shows how passionate the debate on uniforms is and how, depending on the person speaking/researcher being reviewed, viewpoints can easily change and/or be shaped.

The next aspect of my case study was to survey students and staff. While staff was surveyed via an online survey tool, students were surveyed on paper in their classrooms. The main finding of the staff survey was that a large majority of participants supported and/or were neutral about supporting the uniform requirements at school. While not everyone believed that uniforms affect academic achievement, most thought

that, in some aspect, uniforms were positively impacting students. As also seen with the interviews, most participants appeared to think highly of their school and felt that uniforms did not hinder the success of students.

The student survey, on the other hand, provided results that were in stark contrast to the staff survey results. The main finding of the student survey was that students were generally unhappy with uniforms. A majority of students surveyed did not like wearing their uniforms and did not feel that a uniform helped them to succeed academically at school. The results of the student survey allowed me to reflect back on the literature review and the idea of collectivism versus individualism. In the charter school community, it could be determined that staff has a collectivist attitude. Staff members believe in cohesiveness, work together to achieve common goals, and prioritize the school over their individual aspirations. As a teacher, I can say that this is true for me. In regards to uniforms, after speaking with staff and reading the staff surveys, I can see how uniforms are beneficial. Regardless of my personal beliefs on uniforms, I would support uniforms within my charter school because the school, as a whole, supports them and key stakeholders believe they make a difference. In contrast, students tend to have an individualistic attitude. The most frequent comments of the survey showed that students desired freedom to express themselves and felt that uniforms interfere with that. Additionally, the focus for students was largely personal. Few students wrote about how uniforms could affect the entire student body and/or make a difference (negative or positive) for all students. Whereas staff thought about the school as a whole, students thought only of themselves. When completing a case study; however, I believe that both

viewpoints are important. Learning about the students' viewpoints shed new light on the uniform debate, one that was largely ignored in other research reports and case studies.

The final aspect of my case study was investigating the school's handbook and reviewing the quarterly uniform infraction documents. My main finding in this area was that a majority of infractions and subsequent office referrals were due to students wearing non-uniform approved shoes/socks. Of almost 1,000 infractions, a vast majority were for footwear. It appears that most students, even the middle school population who dislike the uniform pants, follow the guidelines for tops and bottoms. The footwear infractions show me that something may need to be changed at the charter school to eliminate this problem. Perhaps different guidelines could be put in place or teachers could have discussions with students about footwear in the classroom. Although footwear offenses seem minor, students who are sent to the office for infractions are inevitably going to resent the uniform requirements, leading to overall negative opinions on uniforms.

### **Case Study Limitations**

The design of my case study was altered and edited over time, in order to ensure thorough, well-rounded results. However, after analyzing the results, a few complications were apparent. The first limitation was that results of the student survey may not have been representative of all students at the school. I chose to survey four classes, all of which had teachers whom I interviewed prior to the surveys. The teachers were chosen by teaching experience in grade level groupings (K-1, 2-3, 4-5, 6-8), which led me to have a 1<sup>st</sup> grade, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, 5<sup>th</sup> grade, and 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher represented. While the classes and teachers provided excellent data, it would have been ideal to have a better spacing of

grades. For example, a Kindergarten class, a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade class, a 4<sup>th</sup> grade class, and a 6<sup>th</sup> grade class. That spacing would have most likely led to a better range of survey results and answers. The developmental stages of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade and 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade seem too closely linked, making their results very similar. I wonder if interviewing more grades and/or choosing specific grades based on development would have been more appropriate.

The second limitation I found also related to the student participants. While I did receive only completed surveys, a majority of the comments were from 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade students. Additionally, I found that with the staff, I was able to connect on a deeper level, due to the interviews. Hearing people speak about a topic they are passionate about allows the interviewer to get a better understanding of that person and their viewpoint. Therefore, I believe that it would have been beneficial to interview student participants from all four, surveyed grades. I would have been able to expand on their answers and clarify areas that I did not understand. Additionally, it was apparent that some of the younger students may not have completely understood all of the survey statements. Speaking to students one-to-one would have allowed me to explain the statements to get a more accurate response.

A final limitation was that I was unable to get a large quantity of information about uniforms, specifically related to my research question: *Do school uniform requirements have an effect on overall student academic performance at one area charter school?* After completing my literature review, I knew this would be difficult. Many other published case studies lack in this area as well. However, it may have been

beneficial to include more survey statements for students on uniforms in relation to academic achievement. Additionally, the time frame of the case study did not allow for data to be collected over a long period of time. If that time frame were extended, perhaps more academic achievement related data could have been collected and studied.

### **Future Research**

The case study opened my eyes to how teachers and students view uniform requirements. I knew that it was a complex issue worldwide, but learned that it is complex even on the small scale of one charter school. Although I learned a great deal, I believe there is still so much knowledge to be gained about uniform requirements and their connection to student behavior and, specifically, academic achievement.

If I were able to continue doing research on the charter school, there are two main areas that I would focus on. First, it would be interesting to do the same surveys each year with a different group of students and the same staff. Opinions change over time and it would be fascinating to compare results over a number of years. I would also plan to interview staff, as I did with this case study, but also interview four students from the grades that were surveyed. The addition of student interviews would allow me to get a more comprehensive insight into both groups.

The other area I would want to focus on would be surveying new students to the school. This would require the case study to be year-round, but would provide better, more compelling data. I would determine who the new students to the school were at the beginning of the year and find out which of those students previously went to non-uniform schools. I would then give them a survey, similar to the survey from my



most recent case study. I would collect and record this data and then, at the end of the year, I would re-survey those students. I would then compare the results of their beginning-of-year and end-of-year surveys to see if their opinions on uniforms changed over time and as they were immersed in the culture of the school. The results would be interesting in that they would reveal if becoming a part of a new school community affects viewpoints on any given topic, in this case uniform requirements.

### **Personal Growth and Conclusion**

At the start of this journey, I was curious about the uniform debate. I had sat through numerous classes and witnessed drawn-on arguments about the pros and cons of uniforms. I did not feel connected to either side of the debate and could not fully understand why anyone else would care so much. I, admittedly, found myself annoyed during these debates, wondering why they happened so regularly. It was with that slight annoyance and curiosity that I decided it was necessary for me to see things from the other side – from the side of the people who were so passionate and determined to share their viewpoints on uniforms. I do not like being “in the dark” on subjects and knew that this research was what was needed for me to understand all these individuals that I questioned so much during my classes.

Being immersed in the rhetoric of uniforms is intense. My literature review taught me so much about why people care about uniforms. It represents their heritage, their ideals, and their hope for a better future of education. On the other hand, it represents feeling unheard, being a statistic instead of an individual, and being uncomfortable on a daily basis. Uniforms are complex; more so than I ever thought. They are not just

clothing – they are a way people are viewed and represented, whether that be to their peers, their school, their community, or to the world.

The subsequent case study allowed me to understand uniforms on a more personal level. I spoke to staff members who were educated on the topic and passionate about their viewpoints. I read surveys from staff who were happy, teachers who were frustrated, and students who were fed up. I reviewed logs of uniform infractions and discovered that this was a daily occurrence and that repeat offenders were all too common.

In the end, I learned a great deal about my school community. Can I confidently and definitively answer my research question: *Do school uniform requirements have an effect on overall student academic performance at one area charter school?* No, I cannot. But I can say, without hesitation, that uniforms have an effect. They affect every person involved, regardless if that person is aware. In the case of my charter school, I was able to assess perceptions and attitudes and, in turn, learn about the individuals who comprise the school.

It is my desire to share the results and key findings of my study with my colleagues in the next school year. Those findings include:

- The uniform debate is subjective and entirely dependent on a person's age, personal beliefs, and history.
- Uniforms are all encompassing and impact all individuals within a school community, whether consciously or subconsciously.
- Based on research and my case study, proponents believe that uniforms do impact academic achievement. The most common rationale is that

uniforms create community, which in turn eliminates negative behaviors.

Without negativity or worry, students are able to keep their focus on academics and improve their abilities.

I want the staff to understand where their colleagues are coming from, as well as their students. I am thankful that I chose to study a topic like this because, although it did not necessarily answer my questions, it made me view people differently and understand their various points of view. I believe that I will be a better teacher and member of the charter school community because I have sought to understand my colleagues and students beyond what I personally see in the classroom each day. As for uniforms, I now understand what all the fuss was about in my class debates. I will do my part to respect all of those diverse uniform viewpoints moving forward, as well as share and continue to obtain knowledge on the topic.

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## APPENDIX A - Administration Interview Questions

1. Describe your career. How long have you been an administrator and in what capacity?
2. Were you a teacher prior to working in administration? If so, for how long? Where did you teach?
3. What types of schools have you worked in (public, private, charter)?
4. Of the schools you've worked at, how many had a uniform policy?
5. Have you worked at any non-uniform schools that later implemented uniform policies?
6. Do you believe that student attire influences student behavior? Why or why not?
7. Do you believe that uniform requirements affect students' academic performance? Why or why not?
8. Have you seen any instances of academic achievement directly correlated to student attire? If so, explain.
9. You currently work at a school that strongly enforces uniforms. What role, if any, do you think that uniforms play in the school culture?



## APPENDIX B - Teacher Interview Questions

1. Describe your career. How long have you been a teacher?
2. Where have you taught? What types of schools have you worked in (public, private, charter)?
3. Of the schools you've worked at, how many had a uniform policy?
4. Have you worked at any non-uniform schools that later implemented uniform policies?
5. Do you believe that student attire influences student behavior? Why or why not?
6. Do you believe that specific uniform requirements influence student behavior? If yes, how so?
7. Do you believe that uniform requirements affect students' academic performance? Why or why not?
8. Have you seen any instances of academic achievement directly correlated to student attire? If so, explain.
9. You currently work at a school that strongly enforces uniforms. What role, if any, do you think that uniforms play in this school's culture?

## APPENDIX C - K-2 Student Survey Questions

Circle the face that best matches how you feel about each statement below.

1. I like wearing my uniform at school.



2. My uniform makes me feel equal to my classmates.



3. My uniform helps me do well on my school work.



## APPENDIX D - 3-8 Student Survey Questions

Based on a 1-5 scale with 1 being completely disagree and 5 being completely agree, please rate the following:

1. I like wearing my uniform to school.

Comments:

2. My uniform makes me feel equal to my classmates.

Comments:

3. My uniform helps me do well on my school work.

Comments:

\*Note that final survey was administered in a Likert Scale format.

## APPENDIX E - Teacher/Staff Survey Questions

Based on a 1-5 scale with 1 being completely disagree and 5 being completely agree, please rate the following:

1. I support the uniform requirements at this school.

Comments:

2. The uniform requirements are enforced and followed at this school.

Comments:

3. Uniforms should be implemented at all public schools.

Comments:

4. Uniforms have a positive effect on student behavior.

Comments:

5. Uniforms have an effect on student academic achievement.

Comments:

6. I have witnessed positive growth from students, specifically due to uniforms.

Comments:

\*Note that survey was administered on Survey Monkey in a Likert Scale format.