Cleavage in a Tank Top: Bodily Prohibition and the Discourses of School Dress Codes

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Abstract

In this article I explore the gendered assumptions in the new generation of dress codes that have swept through North American schools in response to how girls are dressing these days. Through a feminist poststructural examination of a particular case in Langley, British Columbia, I locate three contradictory discourses in one school’s dress code policy that positioned girls as irresponsible, deviant, and in need of help. I argue that these discourses reproduce dominant and oppressive forms of gender and sexuality. I conclude by suggesting that much work remains to be done on the minutiae of school policies such as dress codes given that they contribute to how the student(s) body is thought about, looked at, and treated.
Beyond hiding body parts, dress codes typically list a number of clothing items that students are not allowed to wear to school. The average dress code prohibits around 32 items (the maximum was 97). Here are snippets of what these policies look like:

- legging
- muscle shirt
- tank top

Most schools offer a few sentences at the beginning of their dress code to justify its existence. Others explain the reasoning for rules when discussing why particular items are prohibited. Here are a few examples:

1. DaCosta K. Dress Code Blues:
Most school dress codes allow for individualization. Dress codes restrict what type of clothing students can wear when going to school, but they have fewer restrictions on what accessories are permissible in the classroom. Most kids can wear earrings, necklaces, headbands, or bracelets that allow them to express their individuality. Some items may be specifically prohibited, like how the Tulsa school district restricts scarves, bandanas, or curlers inside of school buildings. It had no impact on the substance abuse behaviors in the classroom, and the impact on peer attitudes was found to be minimal. This study even found that some students performed worse on tests when uniforms were mandated, with the impact equal for elementary students and eighth-graders. Teens and School. Typical School Dress Codes. By Karen Frazier Youth Volunteer. Many dress codes call for clothing teens wear to school to be reasonably modest, meaning clothes cover the body well, and decent. Guidelines surrounding modesty seek to minimize distraction and improve the safety of students, but are often open to interpretation based on personal values. Related Articles. Bra straps under tank tops, underwear beneath baggy pants, or even undergarments showing through rips and holes in clothing are prohibited. The Oregon NOW Model Student Dress Code is meant to be modernized and inclusive, but prohibits visible underwear with the distinction that undergarment waistbands and straps showing are not a violation. Necklines.