

## Loc'd and Faded, Yoga Pants, and Spaghetti Straps: Discrimination in Dress Codes and School Pushout

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### Abstract

This article reviews dress code violations that have made national news in the United States and globally that spotlight racist and sexist issues embedded in common K–12 dress codes. It also analyzes all the school dress codes in one county in a Midwestern American state to examine the associated racist and sexist implications. The article ends with an assessment tool to help readers determine the levels of racism and sexism in their own K–12 district dress codes.

### Introduction

Some teachers and educational leaders believe that strict dress codes or school uniform policies can reduce bullying and peer pressure in school (Brunsma, 2004). Some suggest that uniforms can reduce gang-related activity. Others assert that dress codes are necessary to promote academic success. According to Kira Barrett (2018), some school officials view dress codes as preparing students for work and adult life. They theorize that students who comply with school rules are able to transfer compliance and become successful in other areas of life. Dress codes may have the intention of promoting consistent treatment for all, but they are by no means equitable. From the

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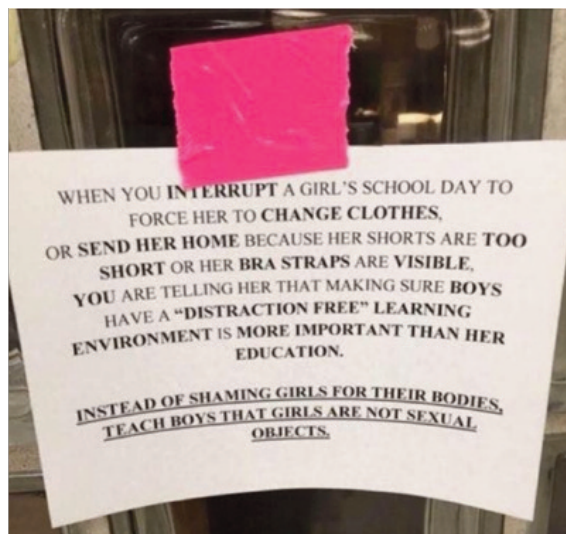
banning of natural and traditional African and African American hairstyles, as well as extensions, multicolored cuts, and unique hairstyles, to the policing of female bodies, the reality is that dress code violations disproportionately disadvantage minoritized students, including students of color, LGBTQ+ students, and females. This article investigates racialized and sexualized content in publicly accessed dress codes.

In the context of heightened media attention surrounding dress code issues (Pettway, 2017), a qualitative analysis of dress code language was conducted by examining the student handbooks in all the public schools in one county in a Midwestern American state to determine if dress codes are indeed equitable and fair to all students. These student handbooks were publicly available; they were posted online on school district websites. This analysis revealed racially coded language and sexist and outdated guidelines, raising the question of whether dress codes really are intended to promote academic success, or if they exist to maintain hegemonic White supremacist and patriarchal norms. This study also sought to determine if any school dress codes protect human rights, promote equality, and protect self-expression, or if they are mainly a mechanism for hegemonic discipline and control.

This preliminary study was inspired by a young adult book by Jennifer Mathieu (2015) called *Moxie: A Novel*. In the novel, the protagonist, Vivian, and her high school peers are subjected to dress codes that they perceive to be sexist and other differential expectations based on gender. Vivian finds a collection of her mother's riot grrrl zines in a box labeled "My Misspent Youth," and she gets inspired to replicate the DIY artistic form in order to assemble like-minded girls and fight the oppression they face in their school.

Vivian ultimately finds like-minded people through creative calls to action. For example, Vivian posts flyers around the school seeking solidarity with other girls who are fed up with what she perceives to be patriarchal differential norms and expectations within the school; she calls them to write stars and hearts on their hands with marker so that they will recognize each other. When the girls join forces, they begin to engage in collective actions against sexist comments and other more insidious problems. For example, they call attention to the "bump and grab," a practice whereby some boys pretend to accidentally bump into a girl and then assault her by grabbing particular body parts. The girls ultimately stage a walk-out protesting the school's dress code, because it "operate[s] on the idea that boys are helpless creatures with no self control. . . . They shame girls!" (Mathieu, 2015, p. 109), along with other sexist practices. In the novel, females are held to a higher standard in terms of dress code expectations, and males are not held accountable for a variety of sexist practices; instead of dealing with issues of sexism within the school culture, the administration shortsightedly chooses to focus on dress code violations, specifically for the girls—effectively blaming the victim in hopes that this will alleviate the issues.

Figure 1 is a real-life example of the type of protest in which the characters in the novel engage. Change does not occur without action, and action does not occur without individuals willing to engage in action: activism. At the end of this article, a tool is provided to analyze dress codes for unfair expectations based on race and gender (see Appendix). This tool aims to provide aspiring activists with the information they need to make a difference in the lives of students and in their schools.



Note: A dress code protest (Fox6news, 2017)

## Literature review

The authors of school dress codes may not overtly aim to be discriminatory. Overall, dress codes provide guidelines for what is acceptable dress in various institutions. According to Reuben May (2018), “Dress codes are legally permissible as long as they discriminate against only clothing and not against people on the grounds of race, color, religion or national origin” (p. 48). School dress codes should not be used to directly discriminate on the basis of race or sex, but, often, the rules in place do appear to target specific students through coded language.

Barrett (2018) argues that many school dress codes are written from the default perspective of a White male and tend to be more punitive to females and people of color, thus further constraining females of color. Dress code language that polices and sexualizes female bodies is a form of victim blaming, insinuating that certain forms of dress are “distractions to learning.” Female anatomy—including breasts/cleavage and girls’ backs, shoulders, and legs (these examples are considered sexually attractive/provocative in the U.S. in the current milieu (Pettway, 2017)—is the focus of many school dress codes. Moreover, the current state of public school dress codes does little to protect female students; it targets them through objectification. According to Rouhollah Aghaseleh (2018), the use of school dress codes teaches students which bodies matter and which do not. As Aghaseleh (2018) argues, “Objectification creates a hierarchy in which objectified bodies are less human, less valued, and less privileged than others” (p. 97). The rules of dress codes often mention how long certain garments must be and that midriffs must not be exposed. They explain how there must not be any use of fishnet or other so-called provocative material in school outfits. These particular rules are coded in a way that demonstrates they are intended for the female student body. Is it unlikely that heterosexual male students will wear clothing that exposes their midriffs. It is also unlikely that they would wear an outfit containing fishnet or transparent material. Dress codes attempt to prevent girls from wearing “revealing clothes that might give off unintended sexual signals” (Aghaseleh, 2018, p. 97), which places the responsibility of the action of those assuming sexual signals on female students only. Many dress code rules are interpreted to show female students as distractions and sexual objects (Aghaseleh,

2018). Dress codes may perpetuate rape culture and female compliance through victim blaming. They also may fuel the idea that women who “appear sexy are less competent, intelligent and moral than those who dress appropriately” (Brickner, Gurung, Leet, & Punke, 2018, p. 218).

Coded language is used in general to mask controversial issues. The dress codes evaluated in this study made mention of prohibiting clothing and hairstyles that target people of color (e.g., loose-fitting clothing, braids, and unnatural hair colors, which can be used to stereotype people of color in the U.S. (Pettway, 2017). The literature suggests that racism may be an implication of dress code enforcement (May, 2018). For instance, administrators may be fearful of the behavior of students of color and may try to control anticipated “bad” behavior, such as gang affiliation and bullying based on style of dress, through dress code rules and enforcement. While White administrators may work and interact with people of color daily, it is not uncommon for many to have very few people of color within their friendship circles, which allows for stereotypical ideas to thrive (May, 2018; Morris, 2016). The media and stereotypes may feed into the racial prejudice of those creating dress codes (May, 2018).

Research indicates that students of color are constantly under surveillance in schools (Ancy Annamma, Anyon, Joseph, Farrar, Greer, Downing, & Simmons, 2019; May, 2018). It is not uncommon for students of color to feel that the staff in their building know of them before they ever introduce themselves. Students of color are often criminalized before they make a mistake. (Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta, & DiTomasso, 2014). Racially coded dress codes place a spotlight on students of color in anticipation of any supposed infractions. Kimberlé Crenshaw (African American Policy Forum, 2015), Monique Morris (2016), and Subini Ancy Annamma, Yolanda Anyon, Nicole Joseph, Jordan Farrar, Eldridge Greer, Barbara Downing, and John Simmons (2019) argue that African American girls are the student population most subjected to differential discipline based on gender *and* race, vulnerable to subjective practices such as dress code infractions, including sanctions for their hairstyles (e.g., often natural hair), references to voice volume, and allegations of “disrespect.” The system of education in the United States has a history of institutional racism, which is revealed in differential discipline favoring White students and disadvantaging students of color (e.g., Black, 2016). What is not as clear is how this differential system of discipline is gendered. Kimberlé Crenshaw (African American Policy Forum, 2015) and Monique Morris (2016) have raised the call to evaluate how African American girls are disproportionately disciplined and controlled over their appearance, often in informal ways, with the end result being the demonization of Black girl aesthetics, such as natural hair, dreadlocks, or braids; in general, their appearance is deemed as “disruptive.”

To wit, in 2019, a third grader in Michigan, Marian Scott, was turned away from school pictures because of her natural hair (NBC News, 2019). Scott’s hair was braided with red ribbons and then fastened into a bun. The school objected to the red color intertwined with her braids. The school did not let her take her third-grade school picture and did not notify her parents. The charter school’s student handbook indicates that students’ hair colors must be “natural,” in order to have their pictures taken. However, the course of action to be taken if students violate this policy was

not explicitly stated. Marian Scott was not allowed to have her picture taken, but she was allowed to return to class. As her father stated, “If she’s not a disruption to the class, then why is she a disruption to the picture?” (NBC News, 2019).

Recent U.S. news stories are rife with students of color being targeted for supposed dress code violations. For example, Texas high school student DeAndre Arnold learned that he would have to cut his locs to be allowed to walk across the stage at his graduation (Richards, 2020). According to Ashley Terrell (2020), a sixteen-year-old Texas student named Kaden Bradford was directed by his school to cut his locs, which he had been growing since the sixth grade. When Bradford refused, he was suspended. This disciplinary action is inherently racist because Bradford is Trinidadian and his hairstyle is a cultural symbol. Often, schools are sites of discipline and control; teachers and administrators create rules and make determinations that are purported to apply to all students in the interest of fairness and equality. However, these rules often serve only to perpetuate the status quo; they often do not take the racial, linguistic, and cultural differences of students into consideration—causing cultural mismatches between students and schools.

Cultural mismatch (Darling-Hammond, 2010) impacts differential school discipline. Cultural mismatches between students and teachers contribute to misunderstanding that harms students. For example, differences in everyday interactions may be perceived as disrespect, a lack of interest and enthusiasm, or even lack of cognitive ability, and can account for the larger percentages of students of color receiving behavioral referrals and referrals for special education services from White teachers (Milner, 2013). Schools with the highest populations of non-dominant or minority students refer more students for special education services; this mislabeling affects African American children twice as much as White children (Smitherman, 2006; U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). These differential expectations are also apparent in the enforcement of dress code expectations. White adults often perceive students of color as criminals, as thugs, as loud and disrespectful. Thus, by their very existence, students of color are often perceived by White adults as doing something wrong; they are othered and thus the first to be targeted in terms of dress code violations and other subjective discipline infractions such as “disrespect” (Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta, & DiTomasso, 2014).

Additionally, students possessing other non-dominant identities, such as LGBTQ+ status, are also negatively impacted by differential, binary, and exclusionary dress code practices (e.g., prohibiting anyone other than a biological male from wearing a tuxedo to prom, or clothing being deemed “unladylike”). Females and racial minorities most often bear the brunt of differential dress code expectations. Dress codes often police female bodies through different rules for female students, while ignoring similar standards for the heterosexual male population (Pettway, 2017). Again, dress codes also target non-dominant styles of dress and hair, making anything outside White, heterosexual standards and norms violations of dress code standards (Pettway, 2017).

In the U.K., a teacher with extensive experience working with a large African-Caribbean student population reported that:

I saw boys with cornrows and afros being told by senior school leaders that they won’t be taken seriously if they didn’t adopt a more

“professional” hairstyle. I consoled young black girls placed in internal exclusion rooms for wearing a black protective cloth over their recently styled braids. Black students being sent home for adding blond or red streaks to their hair, while white students who did the same went unreprimated, shows how racialized school uniform policies can be. (Rigby, 2019, para. 2)

As Holly Rigby (2019) continues to assert, she has tried to educate herself on the history and politics of “afro hair” (para. 5) in order to understand how White beauty standards have co-opted more traditional racial and cultural standards of beauty, and how these ideals impact her students. What is important about Rigby’s narrative is that she attempts not only to advocate for her students, but also to assist “to support them to communicate their experiences for themselves” (para. 5). Rigby’s insights are significant to this investigation because they speak to the fact that racism in the form of controlling the hair and appearance of young people of color is a global problem.

At Pretoria High School for Girls (PHSG), a prestigious school in South Africa, a 17-year-old student named Malaika Maoh Eyoh was told that her afro distracted other students from learning (Nicholson, 2015). As a result, Eyoh was fearful of returning to school. Ultimately, Eyoh and over 100 of her classmates protested the school for coercing Black students to straighten their hair. In another instance, a student at the school was removed from class and provided Vaseline to flatten her hair. A teacher at the school also referred to Nelson Mandela as a terrorist. Historically, PHSG was a “Whites only” school, only admitting Black students post-apartheid in 1994. Another student at the school, Leago Mamabolo, 18, sported locs, which educators referred to as a “bird’s nest” (para. 11). PHSG’s dress code contains a list of rules about hair, but it does not specifically mention traditionally Black hairstyles, yet Black girls are repeatedly targeted because of their hair—it is often deemed “unladylike” (Morris, 2016; Nicholson, 2015).

Students of color in Australia who were forced to cut their afros or remove “protective hairstyles” in order to comply with dress code policies are advocating for anti-discrimination hair policies (Truu, 2020). Restrictive dress codes often include the prohibition of “braids, alongside undercuts, steps, cuts less than a number two, streaks, noticeable dyes, and gel or styling products” (para. 15). Leading this initiative is James Emmanuel, age 21, who was forced to remove his braids while attending a private high school in New South Wales. In another example, a private Christian school in Brisbane was found to have discriminated against a five-year-old boy in 2020 by threatening to expel him for having long hair, which was grown for cultural reasons. As cited in Maani Truu (2020):

“Where students of African heritage may once have been a rarity in Australian schools, in recent years their numbers have grown and a greater understanding of their needs is emerging,” Kinross Wolaroi School principal Andrew Perry told SBS News in a statement. “Existing school grooming standards which do not accommodate the natural hair texture and growth of African and Indigenous stu-



dents have been identified as one issue faced by these students ...  
A student's natural hair is central to their identity and there should  
be room for negotiation to accommodate this during their school  
life." (para. 20–21)

Two of the most egregious recent hair incidents in the U.S. were leveled against Black males. The first incident occurred on December 19, 2018, when Black high school wrestler Andrew Johnson was repeatedly harassed over his locs, which had taken him years to grow and were an integral part of his cultural identity (Ortiz, 2019). At a wrestling match, a White referee, Alan Maloney, informed sixteen-year-old Johnson that his hair violated the rules and would have to be cut if he wanted to compete. Moments before he was due to wrestle, Johnson was offered two choices: cut his hair or forfeit. Not wanting to let his team down, Johnson chose the former. He cried as his White female coach cut his locs, on the mat in front of the audience and cameras, which was both degrading and humiliating. The incident was without precedent. Johnson had wrestled the weekend before without an issue. Maloney, however, was once accused of leveling a racial slur against another referee in 2016 and was suspended as a result of the incident with Johnson (Ortiz, 2019). Johnson had wrestled the weekend before without an issue. Maloney was once accused of leveling a racial slur against another referee in 2016, and was suspended as a result of the incident with Johnson (Ortiz, 2019). As famed director Ava Duvernay (2018) famously tweeted, "I don't just wear locs. They are a part of me. A gift to me. They mean something to me. So to watch this young man's ordeal, wrecked me. The criminalization of what grows from him. The theft of what was his. Two hours of calls w/ officials yesterday. Two hours of heartache."

The other incident occurred on April 17, 2019, when a 13-year-old seventh grader named J.T. got a "fade haircut with a design line" (Fieldstadt, 2019, para. 3) resembling the letter M. According to Elisha Fieldstadt (2009), "The haircut did not depict anything violent, gang-related, obscene or otherwise offensive or inappropriate in any manner. J.T. did not believe the haircut violated any school policy" (para. 4). Despite this, the then assistant principal of Berry Miller Junior High School, Tony Barcelona, informed J.T. that he was to report to the discipline office for being "out of dress code" (Fieldstadt, 2019, para. 5). The discipline clerk, Helen Day, subsequently gave J.T. the choice of in-school suspension, which would result in him missing his classes and potentially jeopardizing his position on the track team, or having the line design "colored in" (Fieldstadt, 2019, para. 6). J.T. had never been in trouble at school before, and he felt pressure to comply with school officials. During this time, school administration made no attempt to contact J.T.'s parents.

Three White educators, Tony Barcelona, Helen Day, and Jeanette Peterson (a teacher), participated in this "disciplinary action" (Fieldstadt, 2019, para. 19). While Barcelona stood by, Day colored in the shaved line in J.T.'s hair with a permanent black Sharpie marker. Peterson eventually finished the job. It was reported that all three educators laughed as J.T.'s haircut was colored in (Fieldstadt, 2019). According to Fieldstadt, "The jet-black markings did not cover the haircut design line but made the design more prominent and such was obvious to those present at the very beginning of the scalp blackening process" (Fieldstadt, 2019, para. 10). Sharpie ink

was visible on J.T.'s head for days after, and contributed to his being bullied and experiencing increased levels of anxiety. His parents have filed a lawsuit citing “mental anguish.” (Fieldstadt, 2019, para. 12).

The district released a statement after the lawsuit was filed indicating that it did not condone the Sharpie incident and “the administrator in question” was placed on administrative leave. Tony Barcelona, however, was promoted to school principal at the end of the 2018–2019 school year. The school district ultimately changed its dress code at the end of the school year to “identify and remove any perceived racial, cultural and religious insensitivities” (Fieldstadt, 2019, para. 20). Restrictions on fade haircuts were also removed (see Fieldstadt, 2019). The outcome of the lawsuit is yet to be determined.

Although punitive examples of dress code implementation abound, some school districts are attempting to be more culturally sensitive. One recent example of this is the Roanoke County Public Schools district in Roanoke, Virginia. According to Julie Scagell (2019), Roanoke County Public Schools recently devised an equitable dress code based on gender after acknowledging that they were largely policing girls via their dress code—holding girls to a higher standard than their male peers and effectively holding them responsible for “distract[ing] the boys” (Scagell, 2019, para. 3) from learning. Beginning in the 2019–2020 school year, *all* Roanoke County Public School students were required to wear clothing that “cover[s] areas from one armpit across to the other armpit, down to approximately 3 to 4 inches in length on the upper thighs,” and “tops must have shoulder straps” (Scagell, 2019). This culturally affirmative, gender neutral school dress policy provides a road map for the future.

### **The Crown Act: Creating a respectful and open world for natural hair**

The U.S.'s CROWN Act (which stands for Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair) protects against discrimination based on hairstyle, extending legal protections for hair texture and protective styles in the Fair Employment and Housing Act (FEHA) and state Education Codes (CROWN Coalition, n.d.). Senator Holly Mitchell introduced the CROWN Act in California in January 2019 to expand “the definition of race in the Fair Employment and Housing Act (FEHA) and Education Code, to ensure protection in workplaces and in K–12 public and charter schools” (CROWN Coalition, n.d., para. 2). The CROWN Act was first enacted by Governor Gavin Newsom, taking effect in that state on January 1, 2020.

New York was the second state to institute the CROWN Act. Governor Andrew Cuomo signed it into law on July 12, 2020, with the legislation taking immediate effect. Governor Phil Murphy of New Jersey signed the CROWN Act into law on December 19, 2020—on the one-year anniversary of Andrew Johnson's locs being forcibly cut.

On December 5, 2019, Senator Cory Booker (D-NJ) and Congressman Cedric Richmond (D-LA) introduced the CROWN Act of 2019 in both chambers of Congress, which would, if it passes, offer federal protections. Twenty-two additional states are currently considering the CROWN Act and have either pre-filed, filed, or formally stated an intention to introduce their own anti-discrimination of natural hair bills, including Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky,



Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. The cities of Cincinnati, Ohio, and Montgomery County, Maryland, have also passed the CROWN Act at the local level.

## Methods

This article investigates school dress codes through an intersectional feminist critical race lens (Crenshaw, 1991). This necessitates a critique of the institutions that ignore, seek to correct, discipline, and criminalize non-dominant identities; it also allows for the interrogation of social, educational, and political factors that impact this current reality (Chapman, 2007), with the end goal of social justice (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Exploring dress codes through this lens seeks to determine how oppression is perpetuated within schools, in order to undermine all forms of bias within educational institutions.

The preliminary investigation for this study involved analyzing school dress codes for all 14 school districts located in one county in a Midwestern state. School dress codes were sought for all the districts via public information on their websites. However, only nine of those districts reported this information publicly, and thus only those nine districts were included in the study. Since these nine dress codes were district-based, it is assumed they apply to students at all grade levels.

The study explores racialized or sexualized content in publicly accessed dress codes and the discipline sanctions associated with dress code infractions. It investigates how subjective these dress codes were, the arbiters of said dress codes, and the associated sanctions.

The codes used in this study were derived from the literature; they include the 10.5-inch line (this is used to judge the length of shorts, dresses, and skirts, which should be no shorter than 10.5 inches from the student's waist/hips to the end of the garment when standing), leggings or yoga pants, pierced body parts, unclean or ragged clothing, hoodies, sagging pants, natural hair/dreads, references to women's shoulders, references to sexuality, and so-called unnatural hair color. Sexist and racist language was also considered, including differential language and expectations based on sex, gender, and race. Finally, the study sought references to consequences for dress code penalties and the word "distractions" with regard to dress code violations. It examined whether consequences were posted and whether they were subjective.

All school district names are concealed for the purpose of maintaining anonymity; they have been labeled with numbers. The districts that were closed but still appear on state/public school directories were omitted from the study.

For each school district, a subjectivity quotient based on a sex-based dress code assessment and a race-based dress code assessment (see Appendix) is reported. In order to establish this quotient, coded language was taken into account; for example, a code prohibiting baggy clothes could be read as "clothing must be well-fitting." School dress codes with quotients of +3 warranted more discussion. School dress codes with a quotient of +5 or more in either sex or race were problematic.

Based on the literature, a sex-based guidance was created with corresponding numerical assessments: bra requirement (+1), female-only references to tank top

straps (+1), references to fishnet tights (+1), references to piercings (+1), references to yoga pants/leggings (+1 or 2), references to the 10.5-inch rule (+1), references to body parts based on sex (add + as needed), references to subjectivity in review (by the principal, etc.) (+1).

Based on the literature, a race-based guidance was created with corresponding numerical assessments: references to hoodies (+1), references to sagging (+1), references to natural hair<sup>1</sup> (+1), references to piercings (+1), references to hats (+1), racialized language (e.g., gangster, thug, etc.) (+1), other references (add+ as needed), references to subjectivity in review (by the principal, etc.) (+1).

## Results

### ***District 1***

This district comprised 1,539 students, 96 percent of whom were White. The overall dress code guidance includes the following language: apparel should be “neat, clean, and well-fitting ... [students] are not permitted to wear apparel that is distracting or obscene.” This dress code also indicates that the principal, or a designee, has the right to ask a student to change their clothes if, *in their opinion*, this change is necessary in order to maintain “school decorum.”

This dress code focuses on issues impacting female students, such as short and skirt length, and prohibits fishnets, spaghetti straps, tank tops, cropped tops, and clothes that expose undergarments. Additionally, clothing with rips above the knee and ragged or cut hemlines are prohibited, which are popular fashion trends. In terms of racially coded language, oversized, extremely baggy, or improperly fitted clothing is prohibited, as is “sagging” and “bib overalls” with unfastened straps.

*Sex-based assessment.* Bra requirement (+0), female-only references to tank top straps (+1), references to fishnet tights (+1), references to piercings (+0), references to yoga pants/leggings (+0), references to the 10.5-inch rule (+1), references to body parts based on sex (+1), references to subjectivity in review (by the principal, etc.) (+1).

*Sexist bias quotient:* +5

*Race-based assessment.* References to hoodies (+0), references to sagging (+1), references to natural hair (+0), references to piercings (+0), references to hats (+0), racialized language (e.g., gangster, thug, etc.) (+1), other references (+1), references to subjectivity in review (by principal, etc.) (+1). *Racist bias quotient:* +4

### ***District 2***

This district comprised 4,283 students, 89 percent of whom were White. Incidentally, the student handbook was very difficult to find on the district website. The overall dress code guidance includes the following language: “Students are expected to wear clothing in a neat, clean, and well-fitting manner that is conducive to the student’s health and safety while on school property and/or in attendance at school sponsored activities. Students are to use discretion in their dress and are not permitted to wear apparel that causes a substantial disruption in the school environment.” This dress code included the following statement:

Student dress (including accessories) may not defame, degrade or be offensive to a gender, gender identity, race, color, religious creed, sexual orientation, national origin, ancestry, age, a physical or mental impairment, body type/size or culture.

This was the one example of a dress code statement that prohibited explicitly racist or degrading images. Although not without its problems, this was the most responsive and affirmative student dress code in the study.

*Sex-based assessment.* Bra requirement (+0), female-only references to tank top straps (+0), references to fishnet tights (+0), references to piercings (+0), references to yoga pants/leggings (+0), references to the 10.5-inch rule (+1), references to body parts based on sex (+1), references to subjectivity in review (by the principal, etc.) (+1). *Sexist bias quotient: +3*

*Race-based assessment.* References to hoodies (+1), references to sagging (+1), references to natural hair (+1), references to piercings (+1), references to hats (+1), racialized language (e.g., gangster, thug, etc.) (+1), other references (+0), references to subjectivity in review (by the principal, etc.) (+1). *Racist bias quotient: +7*

### **District 3**

This district comprised 796 students, 96 percent of whom were White. This was the most prescriptive dress code found in the study. It is also known as the “Dress for Success” code. Some verbiage from the dress code includes

We are committed to preparing students for success after high school—whatever their post-secondary plans may include. Part of that preparation includes the understanding of the importance of context as they begin navigating the world. Choosing the right attire for different contexts is an important life skill.

Although this dress code claims to encourage students to maintain their individuality, it should be in “an appropriate manner” that the “straightforward Dress for Success Norms apply equally to both male and female students.” Although the powers that be claim to “strive to enforce these rules respectfully and without judgment,” these purported “fair, balanced, and gender-neutral” dress codes norms were nothing but. This Dress for Success code went beyond the normal school day, including all school activities, field trips, and school-sponsored after-school programs.

The Dress for Success code included the harshest consequences for non-compliance of all the dress codes in this study. The first offense for violating dress code includes not only a detention but also a change in clothes. Offending students are asked to remain in the office until a parent can bring them a change of clothes. The second offense for violating the dress code includes detentions and/or a Saturday detention and/or a one-day suspension. Offending students are asked to remain in the office until a parent can bring them a change of clothes. The third offense for violating dress code includes Saturday detentions and/or a one-to-five-day suspension. Offending students are asked to remain in the office until a parent can bring them a change of clothes.

Notably, the dress code includes racially coded language with regard to hair. For example, “Hair styles, dress, and accessories that pose a safety hazard are not permitted in the shop, laboratories, or during physical education.” This stipulation is highly subjective.

*Sex-based assessment.* Bra requirement (+0), female-only references to tank top straps (+1), References to fishnet tights (+0), references to piercings (+1), references to yoga pants/leggings (+0), references to the 10.5-inch rule (+1), other references to body parts based on sex (+1), references to subjectivity in review (by the principal, etc.) (+1). *Sexist bias quotient:* +5

*Race-based assessment.* References to hoodies (+0), references to sagging (+0), references to natural hair (+1), referencing to piercings (+1), references to hats (+1), racialized language (e.g., gangster, thug, etc.) (+1), other references (+1), references to subjectivity in review (by the principal, etc.) (+1). *Racist bias quotient:* +6

#### **District 4**

This district comprised 705 students, 98 percent of whom were White. Its dress code was found to be the most stringent. With regard to sexism, the dress code implements the 10.5-inch rule for shorts and skirts and has a bra requirement for all female students. A reference is also made to female buttocks being covered, especially pertaining to yoga pants.

Piercings are only allowed in the ears, and if students have other piercings, they are not allowed to wear clear studs, effectively causing the piercing to close. Another interesting aspect of this dress code is reflected in the following statement, “Writing on body parts is not appropriate and therefore is subject to disciplinary action.” This prohibition harkens back to the novel *Moxie* introduced at the beginning of this analysis. If it had been in effect at the fictional high school depicted in the novel, the students desiring change in their school’s sexist dress codes would not have been able to find each other. This prohibition is a troubling silencing of student self-expression. Moreover, this dress code goes beyond the traditional school day, including extra-curricular banquets, band and choral concerts, and field trips. Perhaps more harshly, it states: “If students do not adhere to this code at these events, they will be sent home to change.” A final troubling aspect of this dress code is its references to “proper hygiene” and the mention that students “shall not wear unclean or ragged clothing.” Depending on their socioeconomic circumstances, some students do not have access to running water. This dress code requirement is more than problematic.

With regard to racism embedded in this dress code, there are several specific references to “baggy clothing,” and “hoodies” are prohibited. However, there are no references made to natural hair.

*Sex-based assessment.* Bra requirement (+1), female-only references to tank top straps (+1), references to fishnet tights (+0), references to piercings (+1), references to yoga pants/leggings (+2), references to the 10.5-inch rule (+1), references to body parts based on sex (+1), references to subjectivity in review (by the principal, etc.) (+1). *Sexist bias quotient:* +8

*Race-based assessment.* References to hoodies (+1), references to sagging (+1), references to natural hair (+0), references to piercings (+1), references to hats (+0), racialized language (e.g., gangster, thug, etc.) (+1), other references (+0), references to subjectivity in review (by the principal, etc.) (+1). *Racist bias quotient:* +5

### **District 5**

This district comprised 796 students, 96 percent of whom were White. This dress code made it explicit that a student's dress and grooming "are the responsibility of the individual and his/her parents. ..." This dress code also indicates that a school's dress code is in place in order to prepare students "for life as an adult." However, this dress code does much to discourage student creativity and individuality with regard to clothing and style in general. For example, tattoos in general are forbidden, and "... must be covered at all times while the students are on school property and/or in attendance at school sponsored activities." Additionally, this dress code indicates that all clothing must be "worn as designed without undue modification." Again, this may defeat student creativity and individuality.

Surprisingly, there were not many racially explicit or coded prohibitions. In fact, there were no references to hair whatsoever.

*Sex-based assessment.* Bra requirement (+0), female-only references to tank top straps (+1), References to fishnet tights (+2), references to piercings (+0), references to yoga pants/leggings (+0), references to the 10.5-inch rule (+1), references to body parts based on sex (+1), references to subjectivity in review (by the principal, etc.) (+1). *Sexist bias quotient:* +6

*Race-based assessment.* References to hoodies (+0), references to sagging (+0), references to natural hair (+0), references to piercings (+0), references to hats (+0), racialized language (e.g., gangster, thug, etc.) (+0), other references (+1), references to subjectivity in review (by the principal, etc.) (+1). *Racist bias quotient:* +2

### **District 6**

This district comprised 1,442 students, 90 percent of whom were White. This district also adheres to the "Dress for Success" norms, which includes many of the aforementioned rationales and prohibitions. But, this district addresses dress code violations in a different way. This district's rationale for selecting Dress for Success is that "Choosing the right attire for different contexts is an important life skill" and goes on to state that it will address noncompliance with the Dress for Success norms in a respectful and professional manner. This dress code explicitly states, "Our intent is not to shame individual students for their wardrobe choices." This dress code prohibits visible tattoos, hats, and head coverings (except those worn for religious purposes). This exemption for religious purposes is culturally responsive.

Again, this district implements consequences for the Dress for Success code a bit differently than the aforementioned district. When a student's outfit does not meet the Dress for Success norms, he or she will be asked politely to address the issue. This can be done in whatever way the student feels works best for him or her. Options include

1. Adjusting the fit of the clothing (if it is possible to do so and still meet the guidelines)
2. Putting on something else that is already at school (e.g., gym clothes, a jacket, etc.)
3. Calling home and requesting a change of clothes or for permission to go home to change (which will be treated as an unexcused absence)

Nevertheless, this district's dress code was not unproblematic. There were numerous coded references to dress code stipulations impacting females, as well as students of color. There were specific prohibitions against visible tattoos, as well as any apparel choices that could be considered gang affiliated.

*Sex-based assessment.* Bra requirement (+0), female-only references to tank top straps (+1), references to fishnet tights (+0), references to piercings (+1), references to yoga pants/leggings (+0), references to the 10.5-inch rule (+1), other references to body parts based on sex (+2), references to subjectivity in review (by the principal, etc.) (+1). *Sexist bias quotient:* +6

*Race-based assessment.* References to hoodies (+1), references to sagging (+0), references to natural hair (+0), references to piercings (+1), references to hats (+1), racialized language (e.g., gangster, thug, etc.) (+0), other references (+2), references to subjectivity in review (by the principal, etc.) (+1). *Racist bias quotient:* +6

### **District 7**

This district comprised 14,063 students, 42 percent of whom were White. This was one of the most racially diverse schools in the study, with one of the most prescriptive dress codes, including a multitude of prohibitions (e.g., gang symbols, sagging, hoods of any type, clothes with holes, baggy clothing, etc.). Interestingly, this district also sent out a specific dress code reminder targeting girls that still appears on its website:

Parents - Dress Code Reminder :

Girls — Yoga pants/leggings are allowed however they must be worn with one of the following:

1. Dress
2. Shorts
3. Skorts
4. Skirt

Long shirts — t-shirts or sweaters/ sweatshirts are not acceptable. ...

Thank you for your cooperation

*Sex-based assessment.* Bra requirement (+0), female-only references to tank top straps (+0), references to fishnet tights (+2), references to piercings (+1), references to yoga pants/leggings (+2), references to the 10.5-inch rule (+1), other references to body parts based on sex (+1), references to subjectivity in review (by the principal, etc.) (+1). *Sexist bias quotient:* +8



*Race-based assessment.* References to hoodies (+1), references to sagging (+1), references to natural hair (+0), references to piercings (+1), references to hats (+1), racialized language (e.g., gangster, thug, etc.) (+1), other references (+1), references to subjectivity in review (by the principal, etc.) (+1). *Racist bias quotient:* +7

### **District 8**

This district comprised 575 high school students, 92% of whom were White. This district was one of the most explicitly racially biased in the study. For example, there were explicit prohibitions against sagging, do-rags, and overalls. Violations of the dress code were worded in a punitive manner, but the consequences were not laid out explicitly. It stated: “Students that are found to be in violation of dress code will be subject to consequences. Failure to comply with staff request will be considered an act of insubordination.” This code did provide for religious exceptions of head coverings. Although it was one of the most racially biased dress codes, its sexist bias quotient was still higher.

*Sex-based assessment.* Bra requirement (+0), female-only references to tank top straps (+1), references to fishnet tights (+0), references to piercings (+0), references to yoga pants/leggings (+1), references to the 10.5-inch rule (+1), references to body parts based on sex (+2), references to subjectivity in review (by the principal, etc.) (+1). *Sexist bias quotient:* +6

*Race-based assessment.* References to hoodies (+1), references to sagging (+1), references to natural hair (+0), references to piercings (+0), references to hats (+0), racialized language (e.g., gangster, thug, etc.) (+1), other references (+1), references to subjectivity in review (by the principal, etc.) (+1). *Racist bias quotient:* +5

### **District 9**

This district comprised 418 students, 94 percent of whom were White. In this code, the school was referenced to as a business, “Parents shall keep in mind that school is a business of youth, and dress shall conform to standards appropriate to a business. We expect and need parental cooperation in this matter.” This dress code included prohibitions on baggy or oversized clothes, and sagging. However, the dress code was more explicit based on gender. It stated that “if a student is able to touch skin on the leg with his/her arms extended straight down along the side of the body, the clothing is considered to be too short.” Typically, the principal has the final say, and, in this district, “Students will be provided alternate clothing if an article of clothing is deemed inappropriate.”

*Sex-based assessment.* Bra requirement (+0), female-only references to tank top straps (+1), references to fishnet tights (+1), references to piercings (+0), references to yoga pants/leggings (+0), references to the 10.5-inch rule (+1), other references to body parts based on sex (+2), references to subjectivity in review (by the principal, etc.) (+1). *Sexist bias quotient:* +6

*Race-based assessment.* References to hoodies (+0), references to sagging (+1), references to natural hair (+0), references to piercings (+0), references to hats (+0), racialized language (e.g., gangster, thug, etc.) (+1), other references (+1), references to subjectivity in review (by the principal, etc.) (+1). *Racist bias quotient:* +4

## Thinking about dress codes: Discussion and conclusions

In every single district examined in this study, the sexist quotient was higher than the racial quotient. However, these quotients are intersectionally intertwined, disproportionately targeting female students of color. In fact, African American girls are the most targeted group for dress code violations (Morris, 2016).

While students are still being reprimanded for some of the clothes they wear to school, some districts have worked to provide solutions that do not target one specific student group. The Roanoke County School District worked with a committee of parents, teachers, and students to create an inclusive, gender-neutral dress code that took effect during the 2019–2020 school year. It requires shirts to go from armpit to armpit and “down to approximately 3 to 4 inches in length on the upper thighs” (Adkins, 2019, para. 5). All shirts are required to have straps (Adkins, 2019). The old dress code was acknowledged to have sexist language, explicitly banning shirts with spaghetti straps, but the new version is gender-neutral. It does not penalize female students more than males. All students are expected to have the same amount of coverage and are given the freedom to execute this coverage in a way that works for them.

According to Anghaseleh (2018), dress codes teach students how to follow a code of conduct, “Codes of conduct operate as a form of governmentality, where students are socialized to regulate their bodies as docile, and therefore, good citizens both in the school and in society” (p. 98). Although dress codes are created to diminish student differences, data from this study indicates that they disproportionately impact girls. Rules that prohibit undergarments showing and mandate particular lengths for shorts and skirts are more often geared toward girls. White male students are among those most protected by public school dress codes.

As this research shows, common punishments include a change of clothing being delivered by a family member, a change of outfit provided by the school (usually a gym uniform), students having to leave the building to change, and even detentions and/or suspensions. Overall, because of the more frequent infractions, girls are losing more class time because of dress code violations. The punishments are not always consistent, and the enforcement of the dress code rules becomes confusing for students, particularly females.

School dress codes can be powerful tools that foster compliance and a safe learning environment for students (e.g., wearing closed-toed shoes in a woodshop or in any other class where power tools and sharp objects may do harm, or goggles in chemistry class). Students should learn different forms of dress and what is acceptable in various settings. Students do not need to be objectified and subjectively disciplined because of coded verbiage in school dress codes. Utilizing the tool supplied here will help to determine if particular dress codes are fair to all students. Using the tool as evidence can be effective in convincing school administrations to create

dress code rules that are concise and fair. An additional finding of this investigation is the similarities across district dress codes in this particular county. It is reasonable to assume that this could occur because administrators collaborate on policy and procedure issues and meet to exchange information.

Our major recommendation to readers, particularly if they are in positions of advocacy in schools or districts, would be to create a committee of parents, teachers, and students (similar to the one utilized in Roanoke County School District, Virginia). This study points to the importance of activists, particularly if they are in positions of advocacy in schools or districts, creating a committee of parents, teachers, and students to address this issue (similar to the one utilized in Roanoke County School District, Virginia). This committee should be representative of all stakeholders of the district and mission-centered toward diversity and inclusion—working to embrace racial and cultural differences. The committee should be diverse in its membership, and could utilize the instrument supplied here (see Appendix) in conjunction with school discipline records to determine problem areas and work toward more inclusive dress code policies. Such policies should be reviewed every few years in conjunction with the instrument and school discipline policies.

## Note

1. “Natural” hair refers to hair that has not been treated with chemical straighteners. Natural Black hair varies from wavy to kinky, with vast differences. This definition includes traditional styles of natural hair, including, locs, braids, afros, knots, twists, and cornrows.

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## Appendix

### Dress code assessment: How racist/sexist is your dress code?

Martin & Brooks

*Discrimination in  
Dress Codes and  
School  
Pushout*

#### ***Sex-based assessment***

District population		District information/score
Sex demographics		
Bra requirement	+1	
Female-only references to tank top straps	+1	
References to fishnet tights	+1	
References to piercings	+1	
References to yoga pants/leggings	+1 or 2	
Reference to the 1.5-inch rule	+1	
Other references to body parts based on sex	Add as needed, +?	
Other	+?	
References to subjectivity in review (principal, etc.)	+1	
Subjectivity quotient		

#### ***Race-based assessment***

District population		District information/score
Racial demographics		
References to hoodies	+1	
References to sagging	+1	
References to natural hair	+1	
References to piercings	+1	
References to hats	+1	
Racialized language (e.g., gangster, thug, etc.)	+1	
Other	+?	
References to subjectivity in review (principal, etc.)	+1	
Subjectivity quotient		