

Girls need more than skirts and dresses

Uniform policies at many schools in Australia require girls to wear skirts or dresses as the only option for their formal day uniform, and lack options for female students who would prefer to wear shorts or trousers in situations other than during sporting activities. Journalist Sara El Sayed explores the implications of not offering girls alternative school uniform options.

According to co-founder of Girls' Uniform Agenda, Dr Amanda Mergler, very few schools in the non government sector either currently allow shorts and pants for girls or are making the change.

With the agenda having been in operation since February 2017, Dr Mergler said the past months had seen successes for government schools in some states, but more was needed.

"We don't want individuals to have to fight this fight every time they see the need for change.

"We want the overarching bodies that govern and work with those systems to put policies in place that mean schools must offer girls a range of suitable choices."

Girls' Uniform Agenda is committed to supporting parents and girls who seek to have uniform policy changes implemented in their schools.

They encourage school leaders to recognise that girls should be offered a range of suitable formal and informal uniform options, including shorts and long pants. They work with uniform suppliers to increase the range of girls' shorts and pants options and campaign for legislative and policy change in this area.

Dr Mergler said a key mandate of any school principal was to prepare students for their future – that includes preparing students for the world of work.

"In most industries we see that women are choosing to wear shorts and pants to work."

"As we are preparing young people for their futures, we need to be considering the clothing that we are forcing them to wear."

Teachers can play a role

Girls are not just missing out on sport and physical activity because of restrictive clothing, their classroom learning is also being inhibited.

Simple tasks such as plugging in a computer charger underneath a desk can be a hassle for girls who don't feel confident or comfortable in skirts.

When students feel uncomfortable, they are less likely to pay attention to their lessons and less likely to want to be in the school environment.

Teacher and IEUA-QNT Equity Committee convenor Louise Lenzo said the impact of not having uniform options was present both in the playground and in the classroom.

"It is common for young children to sit on a carpet area with their legs crossed during class time.

"Teachers need to constantly remind girls to place their dress or skirt over their knees with their hands in their laps.

"As the children move from the carpet to their desks, they need to be conscious of how they get up off the floor – a consideration boys wearing trousers or

shorts need not make.

"When a range of uniform options are provided, it seems that parents and children are much happier.

"Female students have stated that pants are more comfortable and provide better flexibility for them.

"Skirt wearing, consciously or unconsciously, has the potential to impose many considerations of modesty and immodesty in ways that trousers do not.

"Girls are inhibited in their ability to participate in a wide variety of sports, social interactions and playground activities," Ms Lenzo said.

Dr Mergler said teachers can facilitate discussions with their students regarding their rights as young individuals: what they have a right to wear, and their right to feel comfortable.

"Teachers can then take those students' voices back to school leaders and open up a bigger discussion," Dr Mergler said.

Ms Lenzo said our Union, acting as a collective voice of teachers and school support staff, can further help bring this to the attention of school boards across Australia.

"We need to ensure we continue to raise awareness of the impact of Girls' Uniform Agenda and the positive impacts this has on all students – boys included," Ms Lenzo said.

Teachers can access resources provided by Girls' Uniform Agenda at www.girlsuniformagenda.org/resources to help facilitate these discussions with students.

Changing the school culture

Dr Mergler's personal experience of trying to make change at her daughter's school resulted in school leadership simply removing the terms 'boy' and 'girl' from their uniform policy – a disingenuous attempt at providing gender neutral options.

"When schools do this they immediately create a situation where girls have to be brave and wear the uniform designed for boys, which all students and parents consider the 'boys' uniform', if they wish to wear shorts or pants," said Dr Mergler.

"They have to cross a gender line that is policed fiercely by societal norms held by other students and some of the community."

Testimonials from girls who have pushed for change at their schools and been forced to wear the boys' uniform as their only option if they want shorts or pants highlight the stigma, including that of Koda – a 14 year old student who described her experience on the Girls' Uniform Agenda website.

"I have received some backlash from other students at the school. I have been jeered at by other students and had people I've never met before walk



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past and say to their friend, 'there's that weirdo'," Koda wrote.

Dr Mergler said schools can do a lot more when it comes to changing the internal culture.

"Girls need to be involved in decision making to ensure appropriate options are provided.

"Some schools have worked with their female students and have brought in options. They've asked their uniform supplier for a variety of shorts and pants and the girls have worn them for a few weeks, and have decided which ones they are most comfortable with.

"This is a much better strategy than forcing girls to wear a boy's uniform that was designed and intended for boys to wear.

"Additionally, communicating to parents as to why this matters is important to ensuring a smooth transition," Dr Mergler said.

A collective voice for disparate people

Dr Mergler pointed out that it can be very isolating for girls and their families

if they try and combat a problematic school policy on their own – with schools often claiming to have never had the issue brought up before.

"This is an unlikely reality for a school in modern times.

"If no one has truly requested shorts or pants for girls, communication channels at the school are likely to be limited or intimidating – acting as a deterrent.

"Girls' Uniform Agenda gives girls, parents and the school community a supportive space and a practical platform to voice their concerns.

"Young supporters of Girls' Uniform Agenda are very passionate and they are simply saying change is needed," Dr Mergler said.

"They want the right to wear shorts inside the school yard, just as they do outside the school gate".

To find out more about Girls' Uniform Agenda and to access resources to start the conversation at your school, visit www.girlsuniformagenda.org.