

May 24th, 2014

Edwardsburg Board of Education  
69410 Section Street  
Edwardsburg, MI 49112

Dear Members of the Board,

I would like to bring your attention to the issue of our dress code. The parts of the dress code I am addressing exclude the obvious and objective rules such as wearing shoes, taking off sunglasses in school, etc. This dress code supports misogyny and conformism, is hardly necessary, and is a major inconvenience to those affected by it (female students). Keeping in place a series of arbitrary and subjective rules dictating what students can and cannot wear will only negatively affect those students forced to follow them.

Let me paint you a picture. A girl walks in to school wearing a pretty sundress. She's feeling confident and beautiful; her self-esteem is at an all-time high. This dress makes her feel positive about her body image, which she hasn't felt in a long time. As she approaches her first hour class, a teacher pulls her aside. The teacher tells her that the dress is too revealing; it's shorter than dress code standards, and her shoulders show a bit too much. The girl disagrees; she shows the teacher that the sundress ends just above her knees and her shoulders hardly show. The teacher just says, "I'm sorry but that's the dress code. Call your mom to bring clothes for you to change into." When the girl calls her mom, who is at work, her mother is irritated. She can't leave to bring her daughter clothes, and even if she could miss work, it would be extremely inconvenient for her, considering she is the manager of the company she works at. Because of all this, the girl now has to wait in the office until her mom goes on her lunch break, missing her classes, being forced to have her teachers reiterate instructions, and finish work at home, on her own time, that was supposed to be completed during the hour she missed. On top of all this, she has been shamed and told that what she is wearing is not okay, which is harmful and slightly abusive. Her day and her mood is ruined as she sits there, frustrated at the unnecessary of this ordeal.

One might respond to this that it was her choice to wear the dress, and she must have known it might not adhere to the dress code. However, I ask you this: why is the dress code in place? Part of it can be explained as safety reasons and health concerns, but there is another explanation for the more arbitrary rules: so that male students are not 'distracted' by their female peers' attire. I am aware that the principals and faculty will explain that the way we dress is supposed to be professional, and that is why we have a rule for it. But if this were the case, why aren't we

enforcing a more professional attire? Why are we allowed to wear jeans and tee shirts; these aren't really in the category of "formal clothing".

Now that we've dismissed the false alibi, we must find a more feasible reason for this dress code's existence. According to my vice principal, some clothing can be distracting. But who are we distracting? (When I say 'we', I am referring to the female population of our school system, because a very large majority of the dress code is addressed to women.) I suppose some of our clothing can be distracting to our male peers. But, why should we be penalized because the opposite sex can't control their hormones? By taking girls out of class because their attire may arouse/distract boys, we're silently telling girls that we value boys' education over theirs. On top of that, we are teaching girls to cover up their bodies because it might affect other people, which is outrageous. Telling girls to cover up their bodies in general is teaching girls to be ashamed of what they have. Shouldn't we be promoting a positive outlook on our appearances? Shouldn't we be telling girls that what they wear is their business and if they feel comfortable in it then that's all that matters, regardless if others dislike their clothing choices or are distracted by it? By holding young women accountable at such an early age for males' actions, we are supporting misogyny. It's the same mindset as this that causes police officers to ask as one of their first questions in a sexual assault case what the victim was wearing. Constantly blaming women for someone else's actions is not fair or just, and by doing so, we're raising a generation to believe that they need to cover up their bodies to make sure they don't offend or arouse, and even if they do so and wearing PG-rated attire isn't enough, we're still taught to believe that we're never completely innocent. This is called rape culture, and although the dress code seems like a small issue, it is part of a very large issue.

Apart from the sexism that we are supporting by keeping this rule in place, our school's dress code is very inconvenient for those young women forced to adhere to it. If you were to go to Edwardsburg Middle School on a hot day like those we've recently been experiencing, you would notice that hardly any girls are taking advantage of the recent lift on the shorts ban. Why is this? Why would they possibly want to wear full length jeans and tee shirts in the 90° heat? The reason is simple; there is no place to find shorts that are both aesthetically pleasing and complying with dress code. As well as this, most of the tops we would like to wear do not cover the majority of our shoulders, so we are forced to sweat all day in the hot, hot school, causing our learning abilities to be diminished and our need for water breaks and the amount of class disruption to increase. Suppose for a minute that we were able to buy clothing that falls under the category of 'school appropriate', we most likely wouldn't already possess these items in our wardrobes. We must buy clothes explicitly to wear to school, simply because our bodies are either too offensive or too attractive for such a place. It's an unnecessary expense we have to add to our parents' budgets, which many families can't afford.

Finally, by having such a strict and subjective dress code, we are subconsciously learning that we have to conform to standards presented to us. Our individuality through our clothing choices is suppressed at school. One might respond to this skeptically, saying that wearing short-shorts isn't being an individual. This person would be right, in a way. No, wearing short-shorts doesn't make you unique, doesn't make you different. But your clothing choices and the many things you do with your life, that's a part of you, that's what makes you special, that's what makes you, you. If a person wears short-shorts and they feel comfortable and happy in them, what's the problem? Taking away a person's ability to wear what they want is taking away their right of expression, of individuality, of their own happiness. School is supposed to be a positive environment, so why are we depriving students of that very necessity? There are no studies that show having a strict dress code directly affect grades, attendance, or behavior issues; so what is the true need for taking away students' freedoms?

An after-effect of being forced to think inside the box (as far as our clothing goes) is that we grow up believing that we should follow standards and rules without question, never working outside of the cookie-cutter outline we are prescribed. This mindset cuts off almost all creativity, and when this happens, works of art, intuitive new inventions, activists stepping out of social norms to bring justice, all get diminished. By taking away our right to individuality, we lose all these things that will forward the world. Yes, I'm aware that this argument is about the clothes we wear to school, but if you look at the big picture, you'll see, once again, that this is a bigger problem than it seems. Does our school really want to be part of that problem?

An alternative to the dress code is obviously needed. Because of this, the following alterations should be in place for the middle school's dress code as well as the high school's dress code:

- Eradicating the ban on shirts, blouses, and dresses that don't cover at least half of one's shoulders.
- Allowing skirts, shorts, and athletic shorts to be worn throughout the year if they are at least two hand's widths above the knee, regardless of whether or not their seams are frayed.
- Allowing hats unless they bear vulgar words/connotations.
- Permitting yoga pants and leggings without the accompaniment of a skirt that adheres to dress code.
- Allowing any form of clothing adhering to the previously stated requirements to bear any religious references so long as they do not attack another person's religion. This includes clothing symbolizing "satanic cult material," as Satanism is a religion.

I hope I have conveyed to you how serious an issue this is, as well as how necessary the change of the dress code is, and that the current state it is in does more harm than it helps. Our school is a blue ribbon school, it's one of the best schools in our area, so why shouldn't we make it better?

Allowing the students to express themselves through their clothing, not having to search all over and spend extra money on unflattering clothing that adhere to dress code or sweat in jeans because you couldn't find or afford the clothes previously listed, as well as refusing to support misogyny and sexism, will all help our school to become even greater than it already is. The only question is, do we want to become greater, or stand aside while another school does? Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,  
Natalie Adams,  
9th grader

P.S.

I have enclosed a petition with the names of students, parents of students, and community members who believe this is an issue and agree with making the dress code more lenient. A copy of this letter (with alterations) was also published in the Edwardsburg Argus on June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2014.