

# THE CALL

Schools, Picard tout dress code for city students

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WOONSOCKET — Schools officials are hoping to turn back the clock and bring dress codes back to local schools.

And while it will take an act of the General Assembly and School Committee approval to accomplish that goal, School Superintendent Maureen Macera has already put those wheels into motion. State Rep. Roger A. Picard has prepared a bill for consideration in the General Assembly at Macera's request that would allow the district to adopt such a policy after giving parents three months notice prior to it going into effect.

A school's principal, staff and parents would be given a role in determining the clothing requirements and students would also be granted exemptions from the code on certain nationally recognized days.

The district last had an active dress code in the 1990s, but the new option would set a specific style of school uniform for elementary schools, the middle school and the high school, Macera said Tuesday.

"We would need a general law to do it, otherwise school uniforms are not allowed in public schools," Macera said.

Districts in other states such as Connecticut have already taken that step and put uniform policies into place, Macera noted.

The local policy would actually be created by a subcommittee of the School Committee that would include a number of parents.

The committee would decide an appropriate style of dress, such as khaki pants and polo shirts, at each school level and then report those recommendations back to the School Committee.

The policy change could address some of the styles of dress that appear to be inconsistent with a school environment, according to Macera. "Some students are wearing clothing that is not appropriate attire for school and they are a distraction to other students," she said.

School Committee Chairman Marc A. Dubois said he has long supported a move to bring school uniforms to the city's public schools and sees several advantages to that change.

Parents, he said, would find a uniform policy actually saves them money because a standardized, inexpensive style of clothing would be required for all students.

"We have some students coming into school with \$200 to \$300 pairs of jeans and sneakers," he said.

Some students wear their jeans low on their hips while showing their underwear as one style, some the goth look of dark clothing decorated with chains and other metal furnishings and creative hairstyles to go with the look, and others their expensive professional athlete gear.

But the differences in dress can also create differences in attitude between students and that can lead to behavior problems and fights, according to Dubois.

"There's a lot of jealousy about clothes between students," Dubois said, while noting that it is frequently a problem found behind some of the student misbehavior at the middle school level.

Different styles of dress can also influence adults in their view of a particular student and uniforms would help students avoid stereotyping toward the negative while in school.

“They may be an honor student, but like it or not you are judged by what you wear,” he said.

While the option for adopting school uniforms has been discussed by several past local school committees, the district never actually carried out a bid to adopt such a change.

Dubois, however, believes the current committee is willing to pursue the creation of a uniform policy and adopt one if the General Assembly concurs.

“I think we have a majority on the School Committee that supports it,” he said. If approved, Dubois said the policy would be implemented on a trial basis for about a year to see how it is received.

“I will be interested to see if student grades improve and if student behavior improves because of this,” he said.

Picard said Tuesday he has already submitted the bill to the House and hopes to have a hearing on the legislation sometime after the February school vacation.

While a first for Rhode Island, Picard said his work on the bill showed that 43 other states already have some form of school uniform legislation in place.

“Woonsocket would be the trial community for rest of Rhode Island,” he said of the bill. A similar measure is expected to be introduced into the Senate, Picard said.