



Adding Masks Isn't the Only Part of the School Dress Code that Needs Updating

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Mask mandates have become a source of tension. The governors of Texas, Florida, and Arizona have issued mandates banning masks from being mandated which have put school districts in those states in a challenging position. Arizona Governor Doug Ducey also recently announced that he would withhold funds from schools who implement a mask mandate.

Educators are known for making a way out of no way. Paris Independent School District in Texas found a way to circumvent Governor Abbott's mask ban by adding masks to their dress code. They posted the following notice on the district's website.

The Board of Trustees is concerned about the health and safety of its students and employees. The Board believes the dress code can be used to mitigate communicable health issues, and therefore has amended the PISD dress code to protect our students and employees. The Texas Governor does not have the authority to usurp the Board of Trustees' exclusive power and duty to govern and oversee the management of the public schools of the district. Nothing in the Governor's Executive Order 38 states he has suspended Chapter 11 of the Texas Education Code, and therefore the Board has elected to amend its dress code consistent with its statutory authority.

If dress codes are being updated to add masks, they should also be updated to remove problematic guidance. The PISD school board cited concerns for students "health and safety" as reasons for updating the dress code. Dress codes should support both physical and emotional health and safety.

The standard for dress codes should not be white children. When dress codes ban hairstyles typically worn by Black people such as braids, dreadlocks, afros, and twists, the unintended message sent to Black children is there is something wrong with their hair. It sends the message that Black hair is unacceptable. Making children feel as if a part of them is unacceptable negatively impacts their mental health.

Reasons behind some guidance about hair does not hold up to scrutiny. Afros obstructs the views of the board. Let's problem solve. Maybe a desk or two could be shifted to solve that problem. Those hairstyles look unkempt. Don't get me wrong there are some Black people who are not caring for their hair like they should but most people do. Labeling Black hair as unkempt is a personal issue and those people need to think about why straight hair is their standard.

What about hoodies? Some schools ban sweatshirts with hoods or even ban students from putting hoods on their heads. A common reason is being able to see students' faces. How does this guidance stand up to scrutiny when students are being required to cover part of their faces with face masks? Surprise, surprise teachers can still see enough of the students' faces to be able to teach them. Sometimes children are more comfortable with a hood on their heads. Putting the spotlight on a child's hoodie is unnecessary and could impact the student in a negative way.

It is great that schools have found a way to ensure students have a low risk of catching or spreading COVID-19, but it is just as important for schools to take a complete inventory of their dress codes and update them to ensure students won't be harmed emotionally either.