

## CHAPTER I

### The Problem

The current belief that fashionable clothing worn to school by students influences their attitude and behavior is the major impetus behind the adoption of stricter dress policies, including uniforms (Behling, 1994). As school districts across the nation look to uniforms as a means to improve student behavior, evidence to support the use of uniforms remains invalid or unreliable because few rigorous research studies have actually been conducted (Caruso, 1996; LaPoint, Holloman, & Alleyne, 1992). Paliokas and Rist (1996) attribute this lack of evidence to the fact that uniform policies in the public schools are a recent development. They concluded that data now available in the United States do not support any specific conclusions about the effects of school uniforms.

#### Statement of the Problem

A mandatory uniform dress policy was implemented at William H. Ruffner Middle School, but no data had been collected to measure its impact on student outcomes.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of a mandatory uniform dress policy on attendance, discipline, grade point average, and self-esteem. Information was collected to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between a mandatory uniform dress policy and attendance?
  - a. Did the average attendance rate change?
  - b. Did the average attendance rate change for students labeled “behaviorally at-risk” because they were suspended from school as 6<sup>th</sup> graders?
  
2. What is the relationship between a mandatory uniform dress policy and discipline indicators?
  - a. Did the total number of discipline referrals change?
  - b. Did the total number of discipline referrals change for students labeled “behaviorally at-risk” because they were suspended from school as 6<sup>th</sup> graders?
  - c. Did the total number of rule violations (attendance, electronic devices, inappropriate personal property, misrepresentation, tobacco products, disruption, disrespect, insubordination, profanity, harassment) change?
  - d. Did the total number of rule violations (attendance, electronic devices, inappropriate personal property, misrepresentation, tobacco products, disruption, disrespect, insubordination, profanity, harassment) change for students identified as “behaviorally at-risk” because they were suspended from school as 6<sup>th</sup> graders?
  - e. Did the total number of out-of-school suspensions change?
  - f. Did the total number of out-of-school suspensions change for students

labeled “behaviorally at-risk” because they were suspended from school as 6<sup>th</sup> graders?

3. What is the relationship between a mandatory uniform dress policy and academic performance ?
  - a. Did the cumulative grade point average in Mathematics, Communication Skills, Science, and Social Studies change?
  - b. Did the grade point average in Mathematics, Communication Skills, Science, and Social Studies for students labeled “behaviorally at-risk” because they were suspended from school as 6<sup>th</sup> graders change?
4. What is the relationship between a mandatory uniform dress policy and student self-esteem?

### Background

William H. Ruffner Middle School was considered by administration to be a poor performer on every indicator imaginable and thus suffered from having a negative reputation. School climate, for example, was always rated the lowest of all eight correlates of effective schools by faculty, staff, and students, using the school system’s needs assessment instrument. Discipline, a key component of school climate, was perceived to be the primary problem. This belief was echoed in numerous interviews conducted by the new principal during transition with faculty and staff, parents and students. Other archival information such as the new principal’s teacher survey, parent complaint letters, and customer service cards seemed to support the belief that

students also lacked self-respect which was attributed in part to the current dress modes of students.

### Student Dress

The predominant fashion trend of today's youth mirrors a style from the "rap" and "hip-hop" movement, which is strikingly similar to styles that gang members typically wear. The problem of not being able to distinguish gang members from look a likes predisposes students to a level of violence that could be lethal. "Due to increased presence of gang violence on campuses, parents and children fear that their safety will be threatened based upon clothing choices because certain clothing worn by students is correlated with an increase in gang violence" (Alvarez, 1995, p. 13).

Prior to the dress policy, Ruffner students wore baggy jeans or khaki pants riding low on the hips (known as a busting a sag), patterns shaved into their heads, bandanna or colored rags hanging from their pockets, or untucked flannel shirts.

### Uniform Policy Development

#### Student Support

A mandatory uniform dress policy was implemented at William H. Ruffner Middle School in 1995-96 with the full support of teachers, parents, the superintendent, school board members, and most students. The process for adoption began in 1994-95 with a student survey initiated and created by the Student Council Association (SCA) made up of student representatives from all home rooms and elected class

officers. The survey, developed by the SCA was designed to collect information on why students did not come to school regularly. Dress, or the lack of stylish clothing was identified as one of the main reasons for poor student attendance. When asked how to improve attendance 90% of the students respondents believed that a dress code would be beneficial. Sixty-five percent believed that uniforms were a good idea, and 80 % would support wearing uniform garments if they could help to select the garments.

### Parental Support

A town meeting was then held in January 1995 to ask parents if they were interested in pursuing a mandatory uniform dress policy for their children in the upcoming school year. Follow-up meetings were then held in key neighborhoods based on current feeder elementary schools to Ruffner. At the end of each meeting a survey was administered. Results from these surveys indicated that 92% of the parent respondents supported requiring uniform dress in the upcoming school year.

### Administration Support

In May, 1995, the school board adopted a resolution allowing Ruffner to pilot a mandatory uniform dress policy. No opportunity to decline participation was provided for families who were not in favor of the policy. Indigent families received department store gift certificates or free uniforms from donated or purchased items using funds raised or received as contributions. A uniform closet was established after the first

year of implementation to provide new or used clothing items for students in need.

William H. Ruffner Middle School's uniform program was considered exemplary and was featured as a model program in the "Manual on School Uniforms" published by the United States Departments of Justice and Education (USDJE), 1996. The school was also featured in June 1996 on an national satellite town meeting on school discipline sponsored by the Department of Education. The principal served as a guest speaker for this event.

### Definitions and Terms

There are several terms that will be used throughout the study which are critical to the investigation. These terms and definitions are provided in Appendix A.

### Significance of the Study

Kast and Rosenzweig (1996) suggest that "practitioners should be included in the search for new knowledge because they control access to an essential ingredient-organizational data, and they are the ones who ultimately put theory to the test" (p. 313). The results of this study may prove beneficial to schools or school districts considering the adoption of a mandatory compliance school uniform dress policy because the researcher is also a school administrator.

### Limitations of the Study

The scope of this study will be limited to the students in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade in 1997-98

who attended William H. Ruffner Middle School for three consecutive years from 1994-95 through 1996-97. According to Campbell and Stanley (1963), when studying the impact of an experimental factor over time, “there are 12 major threats to the internal and external validity” (p. 40). The confounding or intervening variables applicable to this study were history and maturation.

### History

#### Leadership

A change in principal leadership between 1993-94 and 1994-95 coupled with a change in composition and number of discipline administrators between 1994-95 and 1995-96, could have influenced data collected. A new principal was appointed to the school in 1994-95 during the pre-uniform or control year. Differences in leadership style between the present and former principal could have had an impact on the behaviors of the faculty, staff, students, and administrators.

The new principal increased the number of administrators handling discipline from two in 1994-95 to three in 1995-96 and 1996-97 respectively. The addition of a 3<sup>rd</sup> administrator increased the efficiency of recording discipline referrals. Each administrator’s leadership style could have affected the rate at which discipline infractions were recorded in support of the new principal’s initiative. However, one administrator was present during all three years of this study, and was responsible for 6<sup>th</sup> grade students in the non-uniform year (1994-95), and followed the cohort as 7<sup>th</sup>

and 8<sup>th</sup> graders during the uniform years (1995-96 and 1996-97). This should have provided some consistency in discipline philosophy.

#### Attendance Policy

A new district-wide attendance policy with clear procedures to monitor student attendance was also introduced during the first year of uniform implementation in 1995-96. Changes in student behavior as a result of this new policy could have had a competing impact on attendance results.

#### New Discipline Category

The introduction of a uniform policy resulted in the creation of a new discipline category. This code to identify discipline infractions relative to the new dress policy was not available until late March 1996. Additionally, the uniform policy increased the available opportunities for students to be disciplined.

#### New Alternating-Day Block Schedule

An alternating day block schedule replaced the existing block schedule in 1995-96. This new arrangement provided four, alternating 90-minute blocks of instruction each day, with odd bells on one day and even the next, as opposed to varying amounts of blocked time across grade levels, with each bell occurring each day. Accompanying this change was the requirement of faculty to use a structured lesson plan format, developed by administration, to improve the teaching and learning process because of

the new schedule. The net effect could have led to improved teacher effectiveness as measured by improved student academic performance.

### Maturation

A class of variables designated maturation covers all of those biological or effects of learning processes and environmental pressures of the total daily experience, which would be operating even if no X had been introduced (Campbell and Stanley, 1963, p. 9). Students were provided with etiquette training during 1994-95 which may have affected their behavior.

### Organization of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter I contains the introduction, statement of the problem, background, definition and terms, the study's significance, and its limitations. Chapter II contains a review of the literature regarding school climate, the influence of clothing on behavior, self-esteem, uniforms in schools, uniform studies, and legal considerations. In Chapter III, research methodology is presented. Findings and discussion are reported in Chapter IV, with Chapter V providing a summary and recommendations for further study.