

David Brunnsma is the leading researcher in the field of school uniforms. His [*The School Uniform Movement and What It Tells Us About American Education: A Symbolic Crusade*](#), the most comprehensive work on public school uniforms, appeared in 2004, and in 2006 he published an important compilation of research in Brunnsma, David L. (ed.). *Uniform in Public Schools: A Decade of Research and Debate*. This conversation occurred by phone between Mark L. Schoenfield, PhD (USCal), and Professor Brunnsma on April 4, 2007. Dr. Brunnsma has reviewed the interview for accuracy.

MLS:

Referring to the “Brunnsma Study,” our SSA Committee reported “According to a recent phone interview conducted with Dr. Brunnsma by one of our committee members, this study was found to be inconclusive” [The slide with this text appeared in the Board Meeting presentation and on the Channel 3 reruns, but it silently disappeared from the version posted on the MNPS website; Dr. Brunnsma spoke to Sarah Moore on Feb 14, 2007] Would you mind clarifying this statement as it seems contrary to your published work:

Dr. Brunnsma:

Well, that isn't something I would have said, but I've actually seen this happen before. In my research, I find no positive effects for uniforms on any of the measures of student performance and behavior, and, while I do find some small negatives that are statistically significant, they are not very substantial. So one can say that my research didn't show uniforms doing anything, and I have seen that used to imply that the work is inconclusive. But that isn't accurate; the research concludes that the uniforms don't have the looked-for improvements.

But my book [*School Uniform Movement*] sets out definitely some potential pitfalls and harms of a wider sort. The attention uniform programs require, and the discourse over uniform policies, can take the eye off the ball, including funding, equity issues, and various other significant tasks and challenges school districts face. And, of course, it raises serious issues about personal expression, student rights, and so forth.

While I did not say that my study was inconclusive, it is certainly true that more carefully controlled research, more longitudinal data, will be useful to a researcher of any phenomena. But after the amount of study that has gone into this, by myself and others, it is unlikely that such data will show anything dramatically different – yet, we continue to pursue evidence.

What would you characterize as the state of the current research? Has any caused you to qualify the findings of your 2004 work?

No, the state of current research has largely corroborated my work. In *Uniforms in Public School*, various researchers presented work that is methodologically all over the place. But the bottom line is that the 2004 book is still the most extensive study and no subsequent study has challenged the basic findings presented therein. In a small study in Ohio, Virginia Draa, found that uniform policies correlated to increased graduation rates, but only at six schools, far too small a number to extrapolate from.

Just to clarify, the SSA Committee said that your research concerned uniforms and did not apply to the “Standard School Attire” that Nashville is contemplating. Would a standard school attire that allowed three colors of pants, no jeans, and 6 of solid colored polos or dress shirts still be a uniform to which your work was applicable?

Yes, in fact I told Dr. Moore that. I said, be careful of semantics. “Standard School Attire” is a uniform, that is, it is a policy which tells students what they must wear, rather than a dress code which tells what they can’t wear. The reason for this semantic shift away from uniforms, and other places are doing it as well, is to try to avoid financial responsibility and litigation. But this is messing with people’s lives unnecessarily when there is no evidence to begin with that you are doing anything good for them. All you are doing with such semantic shifts is trying to save your hide.

And so, yes, the basic conclusions of the research would most definitely apply to SSA. The SSA is in fact actually the typical public school uniform.

Is there any evidence that implementing a Uniform at the District-wide level is more or less likely to succeed than as a school-by-school approach?

No, there is no evidence. No one has done such a study, and it would be interesting to look at. Long Beach is the only case where a school district has been studied, and their published results are much too problematic. Even the original researcher cautioned against drawing any conclusions of uniform effectiveness applicable to other schools.

Do you have any opinion on this question of District-wide or School-by-school?

My guess is that a district-wide adoption would, by definition, not take into account individual school variation, and so could do more harm at some schools. One policy would not resonate with each school. This would tend to increase implementation and compliance problems, as well as be more disruptive.

What would you regard as an appropriate opt-out clause, if a District were to decide to implement such a policy?

There are lots of reasons why a parent might want to opt out: philosophical, religious practice, religious belief, reasons related to cost. On that last point, there is no evidence that uniforms save money. Also, there may be constitutionally protected reasons, especially with high school students, where the issue has been less explored. An appropriate opt-out clause would understand the nature of citizenship in the US as a rights-based democracy and the particularity of given families – the realities of their lives. An opt-out clause should respect all these elements, especially with a policy that hasn’t been proven to do anything.

Given the state of the research, how would you explain the increase in uniform programs?

There are a lot of difficult problems faced by schools, large structural issues, and uniforms seem a way to shift the responsibility onto the kids and their parents, rather than deal with the real issues. It is also, in ways, a post-9/11 phenomenon, in which fear and control have become larger parts of our public discourse – discourse with real consequences for American children and their families.

Yes, we've had a number of parents point out the resonance between the Patriot Act and SSA.

[chuckles] Yes, I can see that.

The parents were surveyed through a phone call system. Do you think that is an adequate way to judge parent sentiment? In our own survey, there were about 50,000 households, about 30,000 were reached, and of those, about 12,000 didn't respond, 11,000 said they were for a District-wide approach, and 5500 said they were against it.

The initial phases of these uniform programs are so despicable. A return rate of 20 to 30 percent—this is typical and not at all valid to draw even a guess from. With such low returns, one must do the analysis of non-responders. That takes resources, and of course Districts often lack that, but there are also political reasons not to do so. This is not a good way to involve parents in the decision-making process. In fact, ultimately, it doesn't involve them at all.

In a lot of this process, when Uniform policies are established, it reverses an old research cliché. For researchers, seeing is believing; that is, it is the empirical evidence, carefully analyzed, that forms our beliefs. But often policy is done the other way around. They believe something will work, and then they see, in anecdotes, what they wish to see. But there is no analysis.

One of the reasons that the SSA Committee voiced for why this had to be district-wide, was that a program could only succeed if everyone was in it together. How would you assess this argument?

The world was deemed flat for a long time because everyone was told that it was, and that they needed to be in agreement together. Of course, being on the same page about the flat world, did not make it any less round.

This is a bit off-topic, but how would you assess the contribution that requiring all students to tuck in their shirts, regardless of the style of shirt, to an educational program?

[chuckles] Do we really want to spend time thinking about this? Is it worth spending research dollars to investigate the educational contribution of tucked-in shirts when there are more fundamental questions to be asked, so many more crucial dialogues that we (all of us) need to have regarding the structural, material, political, and social realities of our

public school system? This does not answer the question directly, but, really, our kids deserve better than this.

I would like to thank you for your time. I know that you are incredibly busy.

Thank you.