Can girls wear shorts and trousers too? A review of South Australian school uniform policy following mandated requirement for choice

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ABSTRACT

Background: School uniform options such as skirts and dresses can impact physical activity and psychological wellbeing of girls. Restrictions that exclude trousers/pants or shorts as uniform options for girls can promote inequality in comfort and engagement in school activities. The South Australian Department of Education and Child Development (DECD) School Dress Code Procedure mandates school dress codes provide flexible uniform options with the right to choice, regardless of gender. This review examines public school adherence to DECD guidelines, and compares girls' uniform options between public and private school sectors.

Method: The proportion of girls shorts and pants/trouser options provided in school uniform policies collated in 2018 were compared across 486 public and 193 private primary, secondary, and combined schools within South Australia. Policies were grouped based on the choice they provided girls for shorts, and separately for trousers/pants. The groups were gender specific choice/open choice, unisex choice, restricted choice, or no option.

Results: Overall, 98.6% of public and 26.4% of private school policies included shorts as a uniform option for girls. Of these schools, about nine in ten public, and just over half private, policies listed gender-specific or open choice shorts options. All public primary and high schools, and a majority of combined schools (98.8%) provided girls pants/trouser options, with 93.4% providing gender specific or open choices. This compared to 34.2% of private school policies including girls' pants options. In total less than 1.0% of public, and 45.5% to 66.7% of private schools provide no opportunity for girls to wear shorts every day. Similarly, 56.0% of private schools do not provide any trouser/pant option.

Conclusion: The results highlight a small proportion of public schools fail to follow mandated uniform policy procedures set by the DECD, specifically in context of shorts. Moreover, this report clearly demonstrates the discrepancy in girls' uniform options between the public and private school sectors. We present suggestions and recommendations with the aim to improve current policy, as well as a need to advance adherence to policy and South Australian anti-discrimination legislation in public and particularly private schools.

INTRODUCTION

Research into school uniform policy has largely focused on the question of the impact of requiring any uniform versus no uniform. This is highly relevant to countries such as the United States of America, where it is commonplace for schools to provide dress codes rather than specific uniforms. In contrast, in countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom, school uniforms are relatively standard and in place at a vast majority of schools (Bennett, 2015).

Toward the end of 2016, Active Healthy Kids around the world including the U.S.A., Australia, Ireland, Wales, England, and Scotland released Report Cards on Physical Activity of Children and Young People. In all these countries grades of D (or worse) were assigned for Overall Physical Activity, and C (or worse) for Sedentary Behaviours (Active Healthy Kids Australia, 2016). The reports argue a cultural shift is required, prioritising physical activity every day (Active Healthy Kids Australia, 2016). This reflects initiatives aimed at getting children, particularly girls, to be more active, such as the Australian Government “Girls Make Your Move” and Sport England's "This Girl Can" campaigns in 2016; campaigns that were a direct response to girls not engaging in sufficient physical activity (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

It remains quite common for uniform requirements to differ between genders, resulting in uniforms that can be restrictive, particularly for girls. Many schools in Australia require girls to wear skirts or dresses, with no shorts or trouser option for girls within their everyday uniform choices. Such restrictions can be problematic, indicated by emerging research in physical activity engagement. One Australian study showed the number of steps taken by primary school girls, but not boys, in recess and lunch over a one-month period was associated with the type of uniform worn. For two weeks students wore formal uniform (dress for girls, shorts for boys), and for two weeks they wore sports uniform (shorts for both genders). Girls’ physical activity levels were lower when wearing a dress relative to shorts, while no difference between formal or sports uniform was seen in boys’ activity levels (Norrish, Farringdon, Bulsara, & Hands, 2012). Two qualitative studies in Australian older children (10 – 13 years) have identified explicitly that uniform is a factor impacting on girls’ ability to engage in lunchtime play at school (Watson, Elliott, & Mehta, 2015), an issue boys did not identify as a limitation in their play (Stanley, Boshoff, & Dollman, 2012). In terms of competitive sport, sport uniforms themselves that show greater skin and body detail for girls versus boys, have also

been as an inhibiting factor in teenage sport participation due to body image concerns (Slater & Tiggemann, 2011). This restriction in active play and activity is pertinent in the context of long-term health and current obesity rates. Girls wearing shorts only once or twice a week as their sports uniform sees schools unwittingly undermining physical activity of girls, something which needs to be prioritised on a daily basis for children (Active Healthy Kids Australia, 2016).

Skirts and dresses have other practical impacts significant in everyday schooling activities. They are inherently more restrictive relative to shorts and trousers, with certain postures, positions and activities not able to be easily performed (or advised against performing) (Happel, 2013). For example, the best sitting posture is an upright back with knees slightly apart - a position usually adopted by men (wearing shorts and trousers); girls and women tend to sit with knees together or crossed. As well as physiological aspects, restricting girls to wearing skirts or dresses can impact their psychological wellbeing and educational attention. For example, these types of uniform force girls to take care to not show their underwear if sitting cross-legged on the floor, serving as a potential distraction from their lesson (Happel, 2013). Even with tights, the shape of the individual's legs are displayed, regardless of the child's preference. Some girls consider their legs to be “too fat” or “too thin”, and children facing body image challenges are afforded no opportunity to cover up if they would prefer.

Societal issues and challenges need to be reflected in policy development. Whilst school uniform policy may appear relatively innocuous, it does have potential to fuel gender inequality (Happel 2013). Where differential uniform restrictions are in place for children at school they learn that girls and boys should look and behave in a particular way dictated in part by how they dress, with boys able to behave in a manner that allows them more physical freedom (Spencer, 2007). School uniforms can unintentionally reinforce these gender biases. Providing girls the choice in uniform asserts at the outset that girls are equal to their male peers; equal in the playground and types of play they can comfortably engage in, equal on the sports field, and equal in the classroom.

In line with these issues, in 2016 South Australia was the first state in Australia to draft a procedure that explicitly mandated public (state) schools to afford choice to students. The DECD School Dress Code Procedure (DECD 16/00229) states: “Regardless of a student’s gender, the dress code should be flexible, and allow the right of choice. This includes the choice

of clothing that allows for freedom of movement, level of comfort, safety, consideration of climatic factors, and specific circumstances such as pregnancy.” The procedure was to be implemented from 2017 onwards, and it is important to determine if public schools’ uniform policies adhered to this procedure in 2018. How private schools perform in providing choice to girls, despite not being mandated to follow this policy, is also important in describing the "state of play" for girls and uniform choice in South Australia. In this, there are different ways to implement the procedure, with some schools providing choice simply by specifying children can wear any uniform item, but not provisioning shorts or trousers that have been designed for girls (i.e., girls can wear trousers or shorts, but only from the original boys’ uniform). Potential problems with such “gender-neutral” uniforms include that girls and boys have different body shapes, requiring different cuts for maximal comfort in movement. In addition to comfort (specified in the DECD procedure), girls wearing what their peers consider to be boys’ uniform may risk adverse commentary or bullying.

The aim of the present study was to investigate adherence to the 2017 mandated procedure, and collect data across all schools, public and private, throughout South Australia. Specifically, we sought to establish whether specific uniform options for girls and boys are provided for shorts and for trouser/pant options, and to identify what further changes may be beneficial to ensure full and fair choice for students within the educational system in South Australia. This analysis has the potential to impact and inform school uniform policy nationally and internationally.

METHODS

Sample

A database of all state-wide public and private South Australian schools was retrieved online from the South Australian Department for Education (DECD) website. Schools were categorised by type comprising the following sectors: public primary schools ($N = 355$), public high-schools ($N = 64$), public combined (R-12) schools ($N = 13$), private primary schools ($N = 107$), private high schools ($N = 23$), private combined (R-12) schools ($N = 69$), special education schools and divisions ($N = 57$), area schools ($N = 48$), indigenous schools ($N = 16$) and 'other' educational units ($N = 6$). The ten sectors encompassed a broad range of demographic areas, student body populations and secular and religious schools of various denominations (e.g., Catholic, Anglican, Uniting Church), and included twenty single-sex schools (female only, $n = 13$; male only, $n = 7$). Uniform policies and dress codes were accessed through school websites or requested from the school's administration via telephone. A follow-up request including an explanation of the study was emailed to schools that were initially unresponsive. School uniform pricelists were used to supplement data where policies were unavailable or lacking key information. This study was approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (SBREC) project number 7914.

Data

Data were gathered from current uniform policies, dress codes and pricelists, which were publicly available or obtained via email between May 2017 and July 2018. All available information pertaining to school uniform clothing was collated and sorted by school sector (e.g., public primary school), item of clothing (e.g., pants/trousers) and gender availability (e.g., boys only) (see Supplementary Materials Table 1). The percentage of shorts and pants/trouser options were tallied and graphed across each sector to visually demonstrate the sector-specific information on the proportion of schools providing choice for girls and gender-specific options.

Data on shorts and trouser/pant options were collected separately, meaning a school could be classified as providing a girls' option for one (e.g., trousers/pants), but not the other (e.g.,

shorts). The data were divided into four broad categories: ‘girls option available’, ‘restricted options’, ‘boys option only’, and ‘no option listed’.

Schools classified as ‘girls option available’ specifically allowed girls to wear trouser/pant or shorts options. Within this category they were further categorised into ‘gender-specific’, ‘open-choice’, or ‘unisex’ categories. Policies containing ‘gender-specific’ options listed shorts or trouser/pant options specifically designed for girls that differed in style/cut from boy options. ‘Open choice’ refers to shorts or trouser/pant options of personal choice (although often adhering to school colours) that could be selected and purchased outside the school (e.g., from independent retailers). This option also included schools with no recommended or mandatory uniform policy. ‘Unisex’ refers to policies where boys and girls had the same cut of shorts and/or trouser/pant option, including tracksuits within the trouser/pant analysis.

Schools classified as providing ‘restricted options’ fall into two broad categories. The first included schools that provided some alternative to a dress or skirt (e.g., culottes or skorts), but not the formal shorts or trouser/pants options that were allowed for boys (where the school was co-educational). The second restricted girls choice by year level or season, or allowed girls to purchase shorts or trousers/pants in addition to the mandated skirt and/or dress as an ‘optional alternative’. In these instances, skirts and/or dresses were required for formal school occasions (e.g., school assemblies), whereas pants/shorts were permitted on ‘normal’ school days.

Data from area, special, and indigenous schools, and ‘other’ educational units were merged into relevant main groups (public/private, primary/high/combined schools) prior to graphing to help visualise public versus private sectors. Only schools with available uniform policies/dress codes were included in the final proportion calculations. To maintain anonymity and confidentiality according to the approved ethics protocol, the findings are reported as group data, with no school identified by name.

RESULTS

The number and percentage of schools with uniform policies or dress codes are provided in Table 1. Overall, we obtained documented uniform regulations for 90.5% of the 750 operating schools and equivalent educational institutions registered state-wide. We obtained uniform policies for over 81.0% of public primary, public high, combined, and area schools, and for private primary schools. In contrast we secured policies for 69.6% of private high schools. However, this was due to the substantial proportion of private high schools (26.1%) with no mandatory uniform. To date, no indigenous schools have recorded uniform regulations. The majority of policies were published between 2004 and 2018 with 68.1% updated within the last three years (2016 – 2018). Only schools with uniform policies that we received were included in all following analyses.

Table 1. Number and percentage of school uniform policies received for each school sector.

	Schools approached N	Policy not available/received N (%)	School no longer operating N (%)	Policies received	
				Uniform N (%)	No uniform N (%)
Public Primary Schools	355	45 (12.7)	2 (0.6)	289 (81.4)	19 (5.4)
Public High Schools	64	2 (3.1)	-	58 (90.6)	4 (6.3)
Public Combined Schools	13	-	-	12 (92.3)	1 (7.7)
Area Schools	48	4 (8.3)	1 (2.1)	42 (87.5)	1 (2.1)
Indigenous Schools	16	3 (18.8)	1 (6.3)	-	12 (75.0)
Special Education Schools	57	6 (10.5)	2 (3.5)	41 (71.9)	8 (14.0)
Other Educational Units	6	4 (66.7)	-	1 (16.7)	1 (16.7)
Private Primary Schools	107	3 (2.8)	2 (1.9)	102 (95.3)	-
Private High Schools	23	1 (4.3)	-	16 (69.6)	6 (26.1)
Private Combined Schools	69	3 (4.3)	-	63 (91.3)	3 (4.3)
Total	758	71 (9.4)	8 (1.1)	624 (82.3)	55 (7.3)

Formal uniform choice - shorts

Figure 1 shows the percentage of schools providing girls the choice of wearing formal shorts within their policy/dress code. Over-all 98.6% of public, and 26.9% of private schools listed shorts as a uniform item available to girls, with 90.5% public and 15.5% private schools

providing gender specific, or open choice options. Specifically, 99.4% of public primary schools offered a girls' option, whereas only 29.4% of private primary schools did so. Similarly, 96.3% of public high school policies specify shorts options for girls compared to 45.5% of private high schools. For combined schools, 97.6% of public and 15.9% of private schools offered girls shorts options.

Figure 1. Percentage of school uniform policies within each sector containing girls' formal shorts, boys only and restricted options. Numbers within the bars represent the number of schools for each section.

Policies including a female shorts option often specified either unisex (same as boys), or gender-specific, shorts (see Figure 1). Most schools providing access to shorts for girls did provide gender-specific, or open choice options. However, 17.1% of public high schools had unisex shorts listed as the only style for girls in their policy. This rate was similar for private primary schools (17.6%), and to a lesser extent, private high (9.1%) and public primary schools (7.2%).

Some schools that were not classified as providing a shorts option for girls, did allow what was classified as a 'restricted' options for girls. This meant that choices were restricted to skirts or

culottes, and/or by other factors (season/year level or as an optional extra uniform item) (see Figure 2). Culottes or skorts were listed as an ‘alternative’ to dresses or skirts in 2.9% to 9.8% of private schools. In contrast, less than 1.0% of public school policies contained similar specifications. Other restrictions, such as reduced access to girls shorts across year levels (i.e., kindergarten only) or seasonal restrictions (i.e. summer only for girls), were reported in a further 4.5% to 10.1% of private schools and up to 2.4% of public schools (Figure 2).

Formal uniform choice - trousers / pants

The frequency of school policies inclusive of female formal trouser/pants options are depicted in Figure 3. All public primary schools and public high schools, and all but one public combined school, incorporated unrestricted formal pants/trousers options for girls into their policies. Private schools present a large contrast, catering for female trousers to a much lesser extent. Over-all 34.2% of private schools provided female formal trouser/pant options, whereas 56.0% do not provide any trouser/pant option.

Figure 3. Percentage of school uniform policies within each sector containing formal girls' pants/trousers, boys only and restricted options. Numbers within the bars represent the number of schools for each section.

Although a majority of public schools across categories provided gender-specific or open choice trouser/pant options, approximately 6.6% of public schools still limited girls' choice to unisex and tracksuit pants, with two public schools providing a tracksuit option for girls, but both formal and tracksuit pants options for their male students. While the percentage of private schools classified within the unisex category was low (10.4%), this is in context with the gender specific choices also being much lower. Similarly, one school's policy specified girls could have the option to wear tracksuit pants every day, while the boys in the same school also had the option of formal trouser/pants.

Restricted pant options for girls were also evident in a proportion of schools across both public and private school sectors. Approximately 14.5% of private combined schools imposed additional seasonal and year level restrictions on girls pant options. These policy restrictions were also evident in private high (9.1%), private primary (6.9%) and in just one public combined (1.2%) school. Only one public girls school out of 13 girls' schools surveyed state-wide offer students the choice of wearing pants and shorts as part of their formal uniform.

Discussion

This paper describes the policy position of public and private schools across the whole of South Australia in 2018. For public schools, the mandated school uniform procedure was in place from the start of 2017, providing time to conform. We present for the first time data that demonstrate that a small number of public schools are failing to conform to the mandated procedure, in providing girls as well as boys full access to, in particular, short options: 2 primary, 3 secondary, and 2 combined, public schools. These schools provide no option other than skirts, dresses, skorts or culottes, or limit girls access to shorts by season or year level. These schools are therefore at risk of not conforming to the mandated uniform procedure, and (possibly unintentionally) creating discriminatory uniform environments.

Of those that do provide options for girls, there are many public schools that limit these options to unisex versions, i.e., the same shorts for girls as for boys. While unisex options may impact comfort less in primary school years, it may become problematic for older age-groups when body shapes diverge post-puberty. These practices, therefore, may not fully conform to the procedure that specifies comfort and freedom of movement as factors that should be incorporated in school uniform policy. This may reflect a "simple" move towards gender-neutral uniforms. Such an approach, however, fails to consider the need to allow for different shapes and needs of the average girl versus average boy student. It also fails to consider that the way students perceive the uniform matters. If the majority of students perceive an item of uniform clothing as the boys' uniform, that uniform clothing option is not a gender-neutral option. Girls who wear the unisex uniform may be more likely to face negative reprisals from their peers for transgressing the gender norms of clothing. A gender-neutral uniform is one where both genders can wear the uniform without being viewed as choosing a clothing option more suitable to the opposite gender. An example of this would be the sports uniform, where both genders wear the exact same shorts and polo shirt, and both genders perceive these items of clothing to be equally appropriate for girls and boys to wear.

Two public schools provided a tracksuit option for girls but provided formal and tracksuit pants options for their male students. Whilst this may be commended in terms of comfort and physical activity, schools may prefer 'smart' trousers over tracksuit pants and thus discourage girls from wearing their tracksuit pants as formal uniform. In such circumstances, it is imperative that girls are also afforded the same choice that boys have, to wear 'smart' trousers when formal occasions require them. This ensures the schools adhere to both South Australian

anti-discrimination legislation (the Equal Opportunity Act 1984 (SA)), and mandated school uniform procedure as detailed by DECD.

Whilst a majority of public schools adhere to the requirement to provide choice across gender, the school uniform landscape differs greatly in private schools. Private schools predominantly do not afford girls the choice of trousers / pants and shorts. This is despite public statements by the South Australian Equal Opportunity Commissioner that a lack of uniform choice contravenes the Equal Opportunity Act 1984 (SA) (Vincent, 2018; Vincent, 2019). Our data indicate not all schools, in particular private schools, are conforming to the Equal Opportunity Act 1984 (SA). It is not clear how to best address this broad failure of schools to provide equal uniform opportunities across the genders, however increased recent publicity (Niki's article) may improve awareness of schools and makes clear their requirements to uphold the Equal Opportunity Act 1984 (SA).

Private schools also tend to utilise more alternative, or what we defined as restricted options with skorts and/or culottes. While these may allow greater movement relative to skirt or dress options, these items are commonly cited to be less comfortable (Bennett, 2015), more expensive, and continue to discriminate between boys and girls (Vincent, 2018; Vincent, 2019). With public schools listing skorts or culottes as an alternative to skirts or dresses, instead of shorts and trouser/pant options, there may be a need to further clarify the expectations and requirements for school uniform policy. In the development of school uniform policy, there are some considerations that may assist to ensure choice is available to girls and to facilitate access to shorts and trousers/pants. From a comfort perspective, female-cut options should be provided, particularly in high-school environments, in addition to male or unisex options. Access to shorts and trouser/pant options should be available every day, and not just on sporting or Physical Education days, to encourage physical activity and opportunity. Removal of seasonal specifications could also be considered, as it is increasingly common to have warm winter days as well as colder summer days, where it may be more appropriate to wear the "non-seasonal" uniform option.

Although not documented in our results, when reviewing the school policies we noted additional aspects that are worthy of discussion and may benefit from explicit statements within governmental policy that aims to improve opportunity for choice for girls with school uniforms. For example, the majority of girls' schools fail to provide pants and shorts options within their

uniform policy. Only one public girls school out of 13 girls' schools surveyed state-wide offer students the choice of wearing pants and shorts as part of their formal uniform. Girls' schools need to recognise the practical and emotional implications of restricting uniform choices to traditional norms and may not be exempt from Equal Opportunity Act 1984 (SA) regulations. Some schools select materials that are very heavy for the female-option trousers/pants, making them impractical and/or uncomfortable, or undesirable to wear (Bennett, 2015). This creates more an "illusion" of choice, as an impractical choice does not reflect a genuine choice for the female students. Some schools provide a choice for all days, but not for "formal events" such as school photos, or graduation. On those days it is expected the girls do not wear trousers or short options, but skirt or dress options. This reinforces a stereotype that girls need to wear skirts or dresses to be "smart", and puts a requirement on additional uniform for girls but not for boys. Some schools claim they allow a choice because girls may apply for an "exemption". However this generates barriers, because girls who want to wear more practical trousers/pants or shorts are then required to get permission from their parents, and also be willing to stand out from their peers. These are significant barriers for many girls, particularly through the complex developmental years.

Wearing skirts and/or dresses has been demonstrated to have a significant negative impact on girls' engagement with physical activity (Norrish et al., 2012; Stanley et al., 2012; Watson et al., 2015; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011). It is important to improve physical activity among children (Active Healthy Kids Australia, 2016), and limiting access to shorts and trouser/pant options may impact the longer-term wellbeing and health of children, particularly girls. Here we establish the current "state of play" for choice in shorts and trouser/pants uniform options for girls across the state of South Australia. Future research may extend this investigation to include the quality of the actual implementation of uniform policy, the choices children actually engage in within particular schools, and the wellbeing of the children involved. While we report that a majority of public schools conform to mandated procedure, a sub-set continue to not provide choice to girls, particularly with shorts. This is important to inform where policy clarifications may be required, and the potential need for further communication across public schools. A minority of private schools provide girls the options of shorts and/or trousers/pants, indicating a significant gap in choice between public and private schools. We present suggestions and recommendations with the aim to improve current policy, as well as a need to advance adherence to policy, and the Equal Opportunity Act 1984 (SA), in public and particularly private schools.

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Conflicts of Interest

A/Prof. Sarah Cohen-Woods is the State Representative for the uniform advocacy group, Girls Uniform Agenda. Girls Uniform Agenda has not been involved in this research, and does not have access to the data collected beyond what is presented in this manuscript.

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