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Education

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■ How do local parents really feel about school uniforms?

By Dee Ann Campbell
The Choctaw Sun

GILBERTOWN — Nearly three quarters say that they approve of them — at least in part.

It's been a debate in the county for past several years, garnering opinions on both sides of the issue. But for students in Choctaw County, there is no debate each morning — when they get ready for school, they will invariably don their khakis and uniform shirts, just like everyone else at their school.

When it comes to school uniforms, local residents run the gamut of opinions on the subject. From those who think they are a great idea to those who want to throw them out altogether, parents of students in all six schools in the county have varying thoughts about the positive and negative factors that come with uniform dress codes.

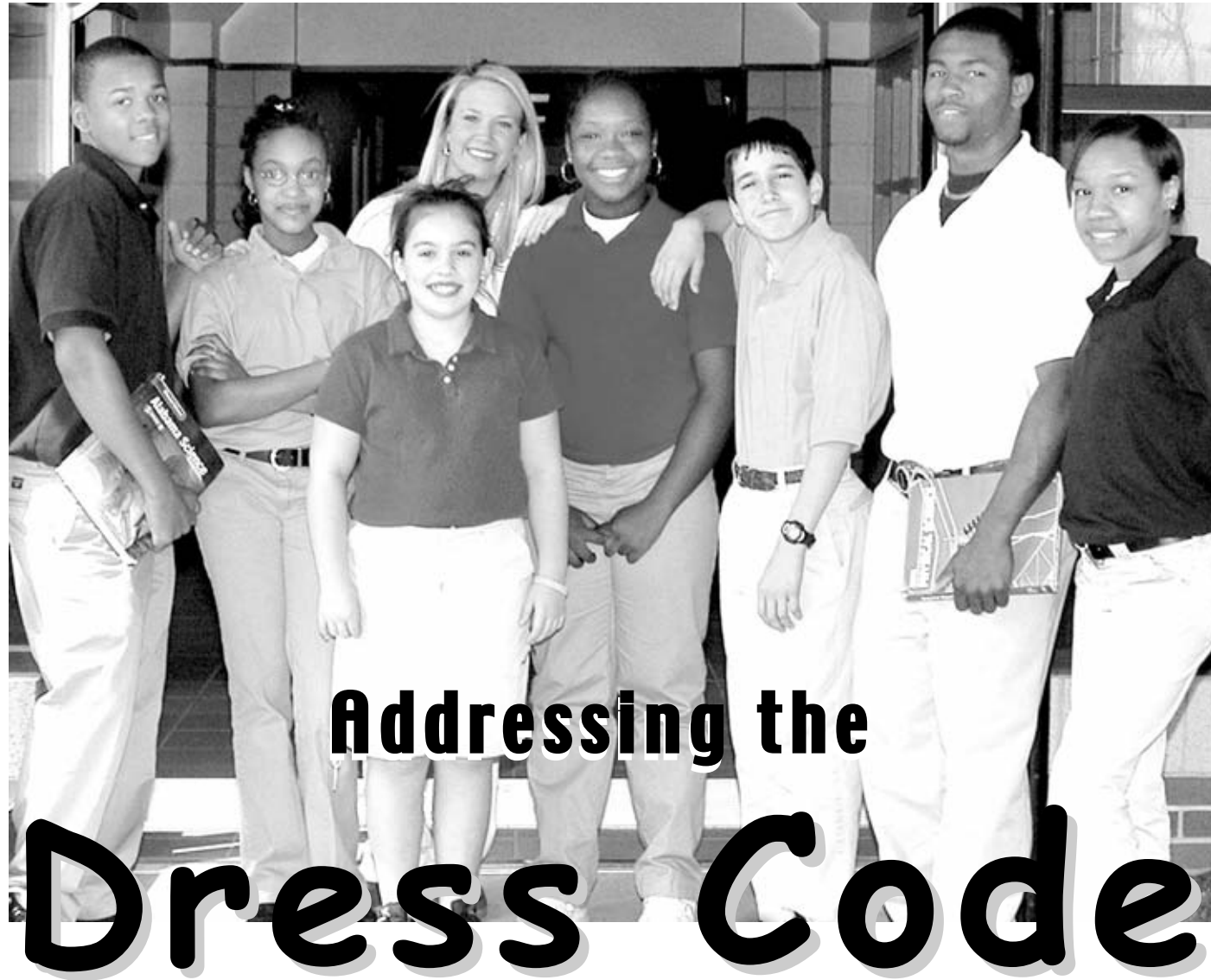
In a Choctaw Sun survey of parents of local 3rd and 8th graders, nearly 300 responded, with many eager to share their opinions and even offer their comments on the subject.

And the results were definitive. A large percentage of Choctaw County parents from both public and private schools favor the mandating of school uniforms for their children.

Among those responding to the Sun's survey, a large 74% stated that they considered school uniforms a 'good idea', with a large number of those parents agreeing that they help with such issues as safety, peer pressure, and clothing costs.

School uniforms were first implemented in Choctaw County six years ago when the public school system put them in place, followed by the two private schools. South Choctaw Academy was the last to implement school uniforms, following the trend of the other schools in the county about 5 years ago. But local schools were, by far, not the first in the state or nation to pass policies requiring school uniforms.

The implementation of school uniforms into public schools began to gain momentum in the late 1980's and increased steadily throughout the early 1990's. The movement received several



Students in all local schools, both public and private, have been following mandatory uniform policies for several years. The issue has been much debated, but nearly 3/4 of parents say they are relatively happy with the policies.

boosts in the 90's, the biggest being President Bill Clinton's endorsement of the use of school uniforms during his State of the Union address in January of 1996. Support also came through a statement of endorsement for such policies from the National Association of Secondary School Principals in February of that year.

Proponents of school uniforms cite a host of positive factors that are brought about by a uniform dress code, including security on campus, decreased feelings of inferiority, good behavior, and lower clothing costs. Others cite such issues as a more business-like approach to learning, a removal of the distractions normally present when students spend time considering what the other students are wearing, and an overall sense of discipline in the classroom.

Although no long-term studies have been done on the effectiveness of school uniforms, many schools have kept their own informal statistics. California's Long Beach Unified School District, for example, adopted a mandatory uniform policy in 1994. Since then, the system reports that school crime has dropped by 76%, and attendance has reached an all-time high. School systems in other states show similar statistics, but it is unclear just how much the uniform code may have influ-

What did they say?

When asked to choose which statement best describes their feelings about uniforms, parents said:

- I think they are a good idea — 33%
- I think they are a good idea, but would like to see some changes — 41%
- I think they are not a good idea, but I'm o.k. with it — 10%
- I think schools should throw out uniforms altogether — 12%.

enced the changes.

Among the issues often cited as positive factors brought about by uniforms, safety seems to be the factor most agreed upon by local parents, both public and private. A little over 60% of those responding to the survey stated that they believe uniforms help keep students safer, whether at school or on field trips.

Among public school parents, 58% see uniforms as a way to keep students from suffering from feelings of inferiority because of their families' inability to provide expensive name-brand clothing. But 38% disagree that uniforms help with that issue. Comments made by some survey responders suggest that students still suffer from such problems with or without uniforms.

For private schools like Patrician and South Choctaw, the issue of dress codes is often less

an issue of student inferiority and more about safety and good behavior. In fact, among private school parents responding to the survey, only 12% say that they feel that uniforms keep students from feeling inferior because of their inability to buy expensive clothes.

Although some opponents of uniforms cite the lack of individuality as reason for opposing policies, most Choctaw County parents do not see that as a problem. In fact, 59% say that uniforms do not, in fact, interfere with students' ability to express themselves as individuals.

But when it comes to cost, parents are divided on whether uniforms actually save them money. Just under 52% say that they save money on their clothing budgets because of uniforms, while 48% say they do not.

On average, local par-

ents say they spend between \$100 and \$300 per year on uniforms for each child in their households. Yet, many of those uniforms include name brand items. A large 73% of parents stated that they purchase at least some name brand uniform items for their children. Only 7.5% say that they do not buy any name brand items at all.

About 67% of local parents say that their children usually take off their uniforms and put on other clothing after school hours. But in addition to their uniform costs, about half of the parents say that they typically spend less than \$500 per year per child for clothes other than uniforms, not counting special attire for events such as proms or pageants. Another 36% say that they spend between \$500 and \$1000 per year on other clothing for each child, and 12% say that they spend over \$800 per year on clothing, in addition to uniform costs.

While Choctaw County public schools have been requiring uniforms for the past 6 years, other counties in the state have not yet taken that step.

Mobile County schools have strictly enforced a uniform policy for almost 10 years, with Baldwin following their lead a few years later. Combined, the two school systems include a total of about 95,000 students, all of whom wear uniforms.

The Mobile system cites positive results from their policy, with officials claiming that uniforms save their parents large sums of money, bring equality to the system, and aid in security matters.

Other counties already requiring uniforms include Bullock and Butler counties, to name a few. Counties bordering Choctaw that have implemented uniform policies include Clarke, Marengo, Washington, and Sumter.

Other systems without uniform policies allow individual schools to decide on the issue. In Madison County, for example, the school system itself does not mandate uniforms. However, several schools have implemented their own policies based on staff and parental input.

Some other counties are currently researching options to implement school uniforms in their systems. Crenshaw County, for example, is currently looking into the issue of uniforms for their own system, and Morgan County plans to implement a uniform policy on a trial basis for the 2007-08 school year.

But uniform policies are not without opponents in counties around the state, including Choctaw. About 12% of local parents say that they want to throw out the uniform policy altogether, and another 10% say that they are willing to put up with the policy even though they do not particularly approve of it.

Of the 74% of Choctaw County parents who say that uniforms are a good idea, many of those same parents say that they would like to see some changes — changes that they say would make the policies easier to swallow and more common-sense oriented. Among the comments made by surveyed parents, many stated that they would like to see less emphasis on the color of the students' jackets and coats in winter months, while others would like to add blue jeans to the list of allowable uniform items.

Other responders argue that, if their students have to wear uniforms, school personnel and staff members should face the same requirements.

But whether for reasons of safety or cost or to combat feelings of inferiority, for the large majority of parents, uniforms are widely accepted and even welcomed policies in Choctaw County's schools. Despite those who are against uniforms and those who would like to change the policies at least in part, students in local schools are unlikely to put aside their khakis in the near future.



Choctaw Sun photo by Dee Ann Campbell
Policy Committee Chairman B.K. Smith shows the committee a copy of the current policy manual during the first meeting of the committee selected to revise it.

Committee to revise outdated policy manual for school system

By Dee Ann Campbell
The Choctaw Sun

BUTLER — "This is going to be a large undertaking," Chairman B.K. Smith told members of the Policy Committee last Wednesday.

The conference room at the Choctaw County Board of Education office was filled to capacity for the first meeting of the committee organized to revise and condense the manual that sets down policies for the school system. From teachers to administrators to cafeteria workers, the meeting included committee members from various departments within the school system.

Acting on a state recommendation set down in June 2006 to revise school board policy manuals, the school system is embarking on what is expected to be an

extensive task — rewriting the manual that has been in place since 1987. Since that time, the manual has undergone numerous additions that have resulted in the large, often redundant and outdated set of policies that govern the system.

"We are expecting the size of the manual to be about half of what it is today," Smith told the group.

Smith showed the group a copy of the manual for Covington County, stating that the revised Choctaw County manual should be about the same size.

"Much of what is in our manual is just redundancy," added Superintendent Sue Moore. "We need to eliminate that."

Revisions, for example, may include deleting the complete texts of sections of the Alabama Code that deal with certain issues affecting the school system. Rather,

the manual would only reference those laws by number instead of including the text verbatim. Other revisions would simply be made to get rid of policies that are no longer viable after 20 years.

"Some of this is just outdated," Smith explained. "Some of it is obsolete. We have to get rid of what is not needed and condense it down to a much smaller manual."

More than 50 members of the Policy Committee were present at Wednesday's meeting. Members were divided into subcommittees to work with certain portions of the manual.

Yet, even with subcommittees, the project is expected to be a lengthy one.

"I appreciate all of you being willing to do this," Smith praised the committee. "This will take awhile. It won't be accomplished overnight."