

Charlottesville Schools revising dress code policies
written by Newspark Team | June 21, 2015



Charlottesville secondary schools are working to implement revised dress codes for the coming academic year. The changes will be most evident in the language used to describe what appropriate attire is and how enforcement is handled by teachers and administrators.

The effort to change the dress code arose at Charlottesville High School, where student activists collaborated with the administration to address their concerns of gender discrimination in the language, content and enforcement of the policy.

"The administration has been receptive and willing to listen," said CHS student Ariana Smith, a rising senior. "It has been extremely easy to work with them."

Smith is co-president of STEPup, a student club sponsored by the Sexual Assault Resource Agency. Members of the club began meeting with CHS' principal, Jill Dahl, last fall.

In December, Dahl also invited students from the University of Virginia's Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy to evaluate the dress code and propose recommendations for its implementation.

Debates about dress codes have surfaced in school districts nationwide, but involved parties in Charlottesville say the process has been marked by a willingness to work together.

"The desire of the administration to hear the students out is really beautiful," said Laurie Jean Seaman, a prevention educator at SARA who serves as an adviser for the STEPup club.

Following an initial discussion, Dahl asked the STEPup team to highlight aspects of the dress code they wanted to change and to present their revisions.

One concern was the lack of a clear justification for many of the banned articles of clothing.

“If you can’t find a rationale, then that policy shouldn’t be there in the first place,” Smith said.

The current high school dress code deems articles often worn by female students, such as tank tops or short shorts, “unacceptable due to distraction.” Smith said that such language cultivates a harmful sexual culture.

“We need to move away from presenting the body as distracting, objectified and that it is being put out there for everyone to see and comment on,” Smith said.

“The assumption that boys can’t control their mind if a female body is not covered up around them is unfair to both boys and girls,” Seaman said.

The current dress code for all city schools also mandates that clothing “should fit, be neat and clean and conform to the standards of safety, good taste and decency.”

Students said that such language is vague and subjective.

“We need to recognize that our schools have different cultures, and different ideas of being tasteful,” Smith said.

The STEPup team presented its revised dress code to Dahl and the students from the Batten Institute in February.

“One of the goals of our policy suggestions was for schools to have a chance to create new norms rather than continuing to reinforce old, potentially dangerous ones,” Seaman said.

After seeing their initial revisions, Dahl worked with the students to produce a collaborative draft of the dress code for the city schools.

The draft includes recognition of the “variety of perceptions in taste, decency and cultural norms” that exists in the diversity of the school. In addition, the revised code includes a written rationale for each policy, eliminates terms such as “distracting” and relies upon gender-neutral language.

Dahl said the code has not been finalized, as it is yet to be reviewed by the principals at Walker Upper Elementary and Buford Middle School.

In addition, questions remain over implementation, as students have long complained that current enforcement practices are arbitrary and often humiliating.

After conducting their analysis, four Batten students presented their recommendations in a report to the CHS administration in April.

According to their proposed policy, teachers and staff who witness a violation would send an email to an individual appointed by the principal to be the “designee” enforcer. The designees — one male, one female — would then be responsible for discreetly pulling students out of class. They would also record

data on the referrals by staff in an effort to maintain consistent enforcement.

The Batten students wrote that this approach would result in fairer enforcement of the dress code.

“Currently, the lack of equity in dress code implementation stems not from student behavior, but rather teachers and staff members who do not enforce the dress code consistently across the student body,” the report said. “As such, the recommended approach seeks to target the root cause in the existing equity gap.”

Although administrators have yet to confirm whether they will follow specific recommendations of the report, Dahl said the Batten students provided insightful and helpful input.

“The main idea is to find discrete ways of communicating with students about their attire so that all students are treated respectfully,” said Beth Cheuk, spokeswoman for Charlottesville City Schools.

The city School Board has requested that the principals of the three schools deliver a report later in the summer with their finalized dress code policies in place.

Although work remains, both students and the administration said they have been pleased with the process thus far.

“It’s wonderful to see students thinking critically about their environment and about larger societal issues,” Dahl said. “It was a very productive conversation about both practical and philosophical matters, and it was handled with maturity and intelligence.”