



W.G. Pearson uniforms about distinction

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By LEE BAKER AND SABRINA THOMAS Guest columnists

W.G. Pearson Gifted and Talented Magnet Elementary School is a unique school, particularly in its innovative curriculum and diversity of socio-economic backgrounds. We are among a group of committed parents who are engaged in a grassroots effort to implement a school uniform policy. It is a sincere effort to make W.G. Pearson not only unique, but distinctive and distinguished.

There is vocal opposition, however, that threatens to derail the initiative. This small minority of parents couches its concerns in terms of limiting a child's expression of individuality. We are afraid, however, some opponents may fear that if the school adopts uniforms, the school might be stigmatized as a school with discipline problems or gang-related activity because some schools have tried uniforms to abate these problems. Interestingly, the other stereotype, that uniforms foster a sense of elitism or entitlement, rarely came up in the three forums soliciting public comment. But then again, those equally spurious stereotypes are associated with predominately white schools that sport uniforms, and our school simply does not fit that profile.

The parents who propose that students wear simple uniforms, consisting of khaki pants or skirts and a collared shirt, neither want to encourage elitism nor impose strict discipline. We simply want to promote team work. We hope that this unified effort will enable students to develop more school pride and sense of community. Perhaps more importantly, we want students to understand, feel, and see that they are an integral part of a collective effort to make W.G. Pearson Elementary a North Carolina "School of Distinction," and in time, one of the few "Schools of Excellence." The symbolic function of military, athletic, and even employee uniforms is to engender a sense of solidarity and generate an appreciation that one is part of something that is bigger than any individual. In order for W.G. Pearson to achieve its potential, we will need a team effort and each student must feel that they are an important part of that team. W.G. Pearson is well on its way, and the school uniform initiative will hopefully enhance the strides that have already been made.

Last year, this grand old school that has been educating Durham school children since 1928 made some major changes. It took on a new principal, moved to a snazzy new eco-friendly building, adopted an elective-based curriculum, and hired a score of enthusiastic teachers. It also became a magnet school.

The magnet is the brilliant curriculum that centers around electives that enable students to accumulate and integrate knowledge. Each quarter parents select a number of electives for their children. Parents can have their kids try something new that integrates learning such as "how things work," "journalism" or "freaky fractions," or they can choose to have their children accumulate knowledge such as Spanish, piano or band over the course of the year and subsequent years. Students have the opportunity to discover their gifts but also develop their talents -- year after year -- with the same instructor. This unique curriculum really was a magnet and attracted parents from all over Durham County who entered the lottery for a chance to enroll their child in the school.

Although the school receives federal Title 1 funds because of the large percentage of students who receive free and reduced lunch, there is an incredible array of socio-economic backgrounds which enhances the school's diversity. It also makes for rich and productive parental involvement. Principal Sandy B. Chambers has been very effective in bringing parents and students together in a variety of formats, both social and academic. These are incredible social spaces that are rewarding, fun, and we all learn from each other and appreciate the diversity of experiences and perspectives. You never know if you are talking with a physician at Duke Medical Center or a cashier at Kroger, an immigrant day laborer or an executive at GlaxoSmith Kline. It does not matter, either, because the parents are there for the kids, and we want each child to succeed and make W.G. Pearson the very best that it can be. Students, however, might be more sensitive and sometimes cruel when it comes to income disparity. School uniforms also have the practical benefit of reducing the outward appearance of class difference.

The research is actually inconclusive with regard to learning outcomes, discipline, and enhanced performance. Often success or failure of a uniform initiative is contingent upon parental support, tradition, and the particular school's culture. On the one hand W.G. Pearson is a venerable school with a storied past, on the other it is an innovative new school that is willing to experiment and

craft a distinctive culture and identity.

We think school uniforms will enhance teaching and learning so students will feel like they are part of a team effort that will help W.G. Pearson achieve distinction. That is not only good for the W.G. Pearson community but the Durham community as well.

The authors are the parents of a child at W.G. Pearson. Lee Baker is associate professor of cultural anthropology at Duke University, and Sabrina Thomas is associate professor of human sciences at N.C. Central University.

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