

COMMENTARY

Put a sock in it



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No logos.

No untucked shirts.

No distracting haircuts.

Are you of the generation that endured the hair wars? No hair over the ears used to be the common rule for schoolboys 40 or 45 years ago, and a lot of adult energy went into enforcing it.

Remember that? And it did not one whit of good, because people became what they became, anyway. On the contrary, enforcement probably had a negative effect on some kids. Long hair, we all learned, had nothing to do with discipline, courage, goodness, loyalty, grace under pressure, patriotism, or talent.

But the rules I listed above are contemporary. No logos, no untucked shirts, and no distracting haircuts.

What exactly do public middle-school officials consider distracting? For their students, every single haircut is distracting because every single hair and each body part and all clothing labels and walking and running and sitting and standing and even just breathing are all major distractions.

When you're 13, you are both distracting and distracted. But you have that right, dissatisfying though both conditions can prove to be.

Too often in public schools, the insis-

tent authority of rule-setters beats needlessly on the shore of self-expression. And adult resignation parks its fat, middle-aged imperatives right up against the gate of youthful energy and passionate hankering, in an effort to wedge it shut.

But why?

In theory, the argument for a weed patch of grooming rules seems reasonable: "The purpose of a standardized dress code is to provide a proper educational environment for students and encourage students to focus on the learning process without distractions of inappropriate dress and grooming," according to a current rule book.

In practice, it can become ridiculous.

Any "learning process" should encourage creative self-expression. Kids, especially bright kids, have to be able to present themselves in various lights. That's essential if they're ever going to reach adulthood as steady, sane souls no matter what uniforms they choose to wear in life.

Of course, they also have to follow the rules. But a great teacher is like a great horseman: he or she will let out the reins just as far as necessary to urge the animal to its best self.

A great teacher, however, is not what my 13-year-old son encountered recently on the day he arrived at his middle school to take the state-mandated test known as the FCAT.

That's because D.P. wore his lucky sock.

A full-time gifted student and mem-

ber of the all-county honor band, he has twice represented his school in the county spelling bee. His verbal test scores rank him in the top 1 percent in the nation for eighth graders, and he runs three or four miles every day after school on country roads in his bare feet.

He went out the door in the morning with his hair washed and brushed, his shoes tied, his socks on, his shorts clean and his logo-free shirt tucked neatly into them. But one sock wasn't white — it was black and white, and striped. His lucky sock.

About mid-day he came around a corner and encountered a teacher, who might have become all she could be if she'd just joined the Army, instead of the ranks of public school teachers.

At this point, hundreds of students had seen D.P. in his lucky sock. None had thrown down their test pencils in distracted protest, or called home and demanded to be taken out, or stormed into the principal's office to complain that they couldn't think, what with the potentially life altering distraction of a striped sock in their midst.

But this teacher was thrown into a frenzy of distraction.

She pulled the startled D.P. aside, forced him to remove his sock and then took it away. But not before dressing him down both literally and figuratively, like a drill instructor.

Later, D.P. went to the school's rule book, just to make sure. There's nothing at all about socks of a different color — whether clean, dirty, striped or solid. So he brought the rule book into the teacher's room when she wasn't teaching, and showed her.

Instead of apologizing, she threw a temper tantrum. She accused him of insubordination, marched him to the front office, and told him he would be suspended from school.

Although no teachers or administrators called us to discuss the matter, D.P. got a message to his mother, who drove to the school and talked the matter over with the principal. No suspension has been forthcoming.

But no apology has been forthcoming either — and no sock.

A public middle-school teacher stole a 13-year-old's sock.

Which is patently absurd. Not only does the enforcement of a non-rule fail completely to provide "a proper educational environment for students and encourage students to focus on the learning process without distractions," but it creates a rather massive distraction for D.P.

Perhaps most disturbing of all is the notion that she, or anyone, would want to steal a teenage boy's sock in the middle of a warm Florida day.

I'm almost certain the public schools have rules about not exposing students and faculty to airborne toxins, and I'm absolutely certain she violated those rules.

So here's what I think: Uniformity is not the same thing as a uniform. Some of the biggest, most vivid personalities and creative thinkers I've ever known came wrapped in real uniforms.

Require a uniform, if you must, but do not insist on uniformity. At best it's a distraction, and at worst it suffocates creativity.

Besides, it threatens to create a whole new underclass of sock thieves. ■

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