

Thurstable School, Sports College & Sixth Form Centre

It is now three years since we announced our new school uniform (including the two part coat) following a thorough consultation process involving students, parents, staff and a number of local residents. Changes to school uniforms cannot be undertaken lightly or quickly, as they can involve a great deal of inconvenience and expense for parents, and so having selected the uniform that was preferred both by students and parents, we announced the changes in February 2007, and they were phased in over 6 months, becoming compulsory in September 2007. Following a parental survey via our website we introduced a knitwear v neck jumper as an optional additional item in September 2009.

The aims of our school uniform (including the school coat) are as follows (and not necessarily in order of priority):

1. To ensure that students are as warm, dry and comfortable in all weathers and in all seasons as possible
2. To ensure that students are suitably dressed for learning
3. To ensure that students look smart and to present a positive image for the school
4. To provide a visual manifestation of belonging - an indication that all students are part of the same community, whilst allowing some scope for students to be individuals
5. To minimise pressure on students in school to seek empty self esteem and illusory peer respect through dress
6. To minimise cost to parents
7. To minimise "child pressure" on parents to buy unsuitable items
8. To create an opportunity for educating children about choice, ownership of choices made, and the consequences that follow choices whilst minimising any consequent risk to them or to their education
9. To ensure that students are instantly recognisable as students whilst on site, and so allow any non-school members to be identified and challenged more readily

The school coat plays a key part in all of these aims, as follows:

1. Having the school coat does already ensure that more students are warm, dry and comfortable than they were prior to its introduction. More students now wear a coat, and far fewer wear totally unsuitable fashion items that provide little or no protection. The flexibility of the fleece/shell combination means that more students have the right coat for all weathers, because they can do so in a single garment. Even more students would benefit if more of them chose to wear the school coat, but this is a matter for them, and for their parents.
2. The flexible and practical features of the school coat mean that more students arrive to lessons warm and dry than was previously the case.
3. The fact that the school coat has completely banished the hoodie from the school site, and drastically reduced it on the journey into school has transformed how local residents and visitors to the school perceive the students and the school.
4. The fact that school uniform is now visible at all times on site rather than being covered by a non-uniform coat has greatly increased the perception of belonging experienced by students as well as the positive impact of the uniform on the school ethos.
5. The school coat has reduced peer pressure on students over dress.
6. The school coat offers parents the opportunity to purchase an all weather, all seasons coat for £24, which should last at least a year in normal use, and is good value.

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7. As a result of the fact that we specify the school coat as the only one we accept on site parents are free to “lay the blame” on us, or even better, simply refuse to consider undermining school policy. The school coat makes all arguments about what is or isn't a uniform coat redundant.
8. Schools should have as few absolute rules (as opposed to absolute values) as possible, to allow maximum room for responding positively to student views, and maximum flexibility for dealing with students as individuals. However, every school needs a few absolute rules to make sure that students know that in the end, for safety and educational reasons, children must do what they are reasonably asked to do by their teachers. Without this, any school with a socially balanced intake will rapidly become the kind of institution chosen by few or no parents for their children, and with very good reason. If children at such schools prosper, it is in spite of the school, and not because of it. Ideally, these absolute rules should be enforceable with minimum damage to staff/student relationships, with absolutely certainty and through completely consistent sanctions, which should ideally be “low tariff”. The school coat provides us with an ideal “absolute rule” which meets all these criteria.
9. The importance of the school coat is obvious here. Without it, the uniform is mostly covered.

Over the last two years a number of “myths” have grown up around the school coat.

Myth 1 - the uniform is not warm enough for cold weather

Our uniform is absolutely warm enough even for the current temperatures. It takes a layering approach, and with:

- a vest of students' or parents' choice (provided it is not visible - we do sell ones that are not)
- the school polo shirt
- the school knitted jumper
- the school blazer
- the school thermal fleece
- the school wind and shower proof shell

children are insulated enough for anything the British weather can throw at them. Students and their parents can choose their own trousers, provided that they are black and are school wear as opposed to fashion wear, and there is nothing to stop students wearing thermal leggings which can be bought readily from outdoor shops. We have no rules over hats, scarves and gloves, except that students must take them off in lessons if their teacher asks them to.

Myth 2 - The school has a school coat to make money

The only financial factor in the determination of our school uniform is to keep costs to parents down as far as our other uniform aims will allow. Quite rightly, schools are not allowed to profit from the sale of their uniform. We have never and would never do this. Where possible within our uniform aims, we allow parents to select their own supplier. Where this is not possible, we ensure items are "badged", and we bargain hard with suppliers to keep the cost of the uniform down. We charge all uniform items we sell to

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parents at cost, subsidising the costs for parents with more than one child in the school or whose children are in receipt of free school meals.

Conversely, it would be inappropriate and irregular to subsidise sales of our uniform from the taxpayer funds we receive to educate children, and we have never done so.

Myth 3 - The school could specify colours and designs for all uniform items (and in particular the coat) and still achieve its uniform aims

The result if schools with socially balance intakes such as ours take this route, and do not have at least key uniform items on a "badged and supplied by us" basis is that the uniform becomes ragged, divisive and impossible to enforce. I have seen this at work over 20 years in 4 different schools.

Parents come under unbearable pressure to purchase items that push the boundaries further and further, as children vainly seek for illusory peer respect and empty self esteem from the baggiest hoodie or the largest and loudest logo. As this happens, staff/student relations become more and more strained from attempts to enforce the unenforceable, the ethos of the school becomes more fractious and less ordered, and local residents and visitors to the school see what appears to be an ill disciplined, divided school, populated by children who appear to be disengaged and disaffected...and this becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy.

In a very real sense, schools and student bodies are what they appear to be. I am certain that the vast majority of parents wish the school to appear to be and so remain what it currently is: a friendly, open community, with a positive ethos and a clear set of values based around our core principles of belong more, achieve more, and be more.

Myth 4 – The school “disrespects” students by saying that hooded tops and heavily logoed coats lead the community to perceive students as threatening

We owe a duty to students, parents, the wider community and the school to recognise the reality of how young people in hooded tops and logoed coats are regarded by older generations. The fact that this perception is stereotyping and is not accurate is beside the point. It is the reality of the situation. Over time, as a school community, we can work to change this perception, but only if we first recognise how these types of dress affect others, and take the decision not to wear them because mistaken or otherwise, *other people matter*.

I would rather some children were annoyed at not being able to wear their own coats, and at worst were chilly when choosing to stand in the playground rather than wear the uniform (or get inside the school buildings) than have elderly residents live in fear as our students pass their houses on their way into school. The lessons that *we are what we appear to be*, that *any effort to make the world better must start with ourselves because that is what we control*, and that *other people matter* are absolutely key to the Thurstable values, and I am sure that the vast majority of our parents share them.

Myth 5 – Children suffer unreasonably from cold because of our school coat policy

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Students' coats are only confiscated on the school site. If they are left very exposed, we will offer to lend them a school coat. They are able to get under shelter or inside at all times when on the school site in very cold weather. We avoid confiscating coats at the end of the day because we don't want to prevent children wearing whatever coat they have brought to school on the journey home. We return coats to students at the end of the day the first three times their coat is confiscated, and we then write to parents explaining that they will need to pick the coat up from school the next time it has to be confiscated, asking for their support.

All this means that students suffer no more from our school coat policy than annoyance and self imposed short term chilliness. As their Head Teacher I regret their annoyance and chilliness, but as a parent myself, I believe that all the benefits of the school coat outlined above, and the all important developmental lesson that you don't get your own way by "cutting of your nose to spite your face" make this well worthwhile.