

Dress codes get tough on teenage fashions

Educators expect improved environment for learning

By MOLLY MURRAY, *The News Journal*

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Lucy Stack (left), 15, of Brandywine High said dress codes are OK, but Becca Pini, 16, of Concord High said flip-flops are a must. ([Buy photo](#)) *The News Journal*/SCOTT NATHAN



Julia Levasseur (center), 13, says she's upset by Cape Henlopen's proposed ban of blue jeans. ([Buy photo](#)) *The News Journal*/SCOTT NATHAN

In the world of fashion, flip-flops -- from the traditional colored foam to the leather, bejeweled and sequined type -- are hot.

But come September, they will also be prohibited -- at least in the Indian River School District.

Cape Henlopen schools, meanwhile, are considering a similar proposal to ramp up standards of dress -- no flip-flops, no blue jeans and no T-shirts or other collarless shirts.

For school officials such as Indian River board member Donna Mitchell, it's all about safety and limiting distractions.

She said the district hadn't revised its dress code since 1999 and what was in place was very generic. The revision comes as a committee is examining the possibility of a school uniform policy.

Meantime, board officials decided to update dress codes, let students and parents know what is expected before back-to-school shopping and then enforce the new rules, said District Superintendent Susan Bunting.

Students, such as Julia Levasseur, 13, who will be starting high school at Cape Henlopen's Ninth Grade Academy in September, aren't convinced that restrictions on dress are needed in her district or others.

"It upsets me a lot," Julia said. For a few months in fourth grade, she said, she attended a private school. "I don't like plaid."

Instead, she said, she likes the opportunity to express herself through what she wears.

Most objectionable to Levasseur is a proposal in Cape Henlopen to ban blue jeans. "I'm very upset about that," she said.

Last week, Levasseur was dressed like a typical teen -- cropped jeans, flip-flops and a short-sleeve cotton top.

If Cape Henlopen did decide on something like a uniform, she already had a solution in mind.

"I'd wear lots of accessories," she said.

School districts throughout Delaware have had dress codes for years.

At Dover High School, for instance, tank tops, muscle shirts and tops that reveal midriffs or cleavage aren't allowed.

The code doesn't specifically ban flip-flops, but it does ban slippers and says that shoes or other appropriate footwear must be worn at all times.

The district also bans headgear such as hats, bandannas, picks, combs and "bad-hair-day" kerchiefs inside school buildings.

Time to speak up

In the Red Clay Consolidated School District, there are similar, though slightly less detailed, standards of dress. But there is one specific exception: Pants worn in a sag-and-drag fashion (pants worn below the waist to the extent that the underwear or skin is exposed) are not permitted in school or at school functions.

Pati Nash, a spokeswoman for the district, said some schools within the district require uniforms.

The same is true in the Brandywine district.

Some schools require uniforms, but others, like Brandywine and Concord high schools, simply set limits such as no pants with hems that drag and no tank tops, and have length requirements for skirts.

Lucy Stack, 15, a junior at Brandywine High, said she doesn't have a problem with the code, even though, "I would like to be able to wear tank tops."

Becca Pini, 16, a junior at Concord High, said she would consider it a hardship if her high school banned flip-flops.

Cape Henlopen Superintendent George Stone said the latest proposal his board is considering is very similar to what is already in place.

School officials want to get input from teachers, parents and students, he said.

"We're just really getting started," he said. Among the biggest of the changes would be a restriction on blue jeans, he said.

Cape board member Peter Coveleski said the proposal "is just a throw-it-out, lay-it-out" way "to get comments."

So far, he said, the reaction hasn't been all that positive.

'A better environment'

But he also said he thinks discipline, achievement and climate are all linked to dress. "These days, a school has to create the most optimum environment for learning that you can. ... The intangible effect is it creates a better environment."

Some parents and students have already complained that the dress code limits personal expression, he said.

His reaction is: "Who you are should be defined by your behavior and not how you're dressed."

Even if the proposal doesn't move forward, Coveleski said, he believes schools in the district could do a better job of enforcing the current dress code.

Julia O'Neal, 14, who will be attending Sussex Technical High School when school resumes, said many schools already ban flip-flops, but youths wear them anyway with no repercussions.

Enforcement is a key element of any dress code, both Mitchell and Bunting said.

Some teachers have been reluctant to say anything. The difficult situations include male teachers saying something to female students about excessive cleavage or suggestive slogans written across the back of shorts or sweat pants.

"It's a very, very touchy thing," Mitchell said.

In the Indian River district, the new code takes effect the first day of school, Sept. 4.

Under the new code, teachers will be looking for violations in homeroom and will send possible violators to the school office for action.

"The key to all of this is enforcement," Mitchell said. "It's going to have to be enforced by the teachers from the get-go."