

School uniforms will not eliminate self-expression

OUR OPINION: Students need to learn that they are not what they wear

Individuality is out.

Conformity is in.

Don't panic. It's only on the surface.

In a speech about the state of the nation's schools last week, President Clinton resurrected an idea that has been circulating for years but has never taken off. In an effort to minimize gang violence in public schools, he said, the country should consider mandatory school uniforms.

Ever since children started getting knifed and shot by classmates and metal detectors replaced bookish hall monitors, concerned adults have considered removing the blue and red clothing symbols that mark gang affiliations and also create an atmosphere of rivalry and hate.

To date, these ideas have been tabled after students revolted against the attack on individual expression. They say uniforms violate their First Amendment right of free expression.

However, the U.S. Supreme Court has often restricted constitutional freedoms for minors (e.g. drug-testing, bearing arms, age-of-consent, etc.). At issue, then, is whether the good of school uniforms will outweigh the harm.

Yes, they will.

Aside from the reduction in gang violence in cities such as L.A., school uniforms eliminate the socioeconomic indicators that prevent children from getting to know each other as people.

Walk into any school in the country, and it is easy to

distinguish the rich from the poor, the preps from the geeks, and the punks from the popular.

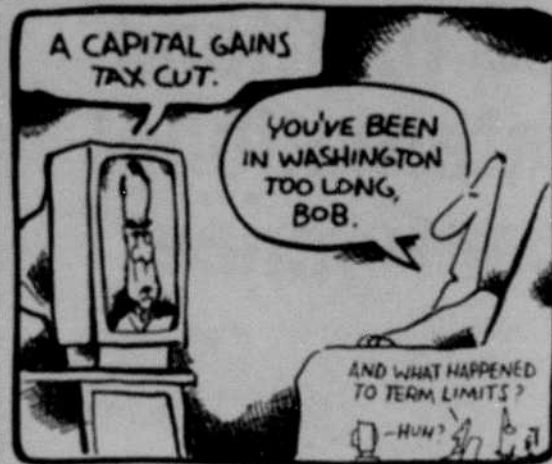
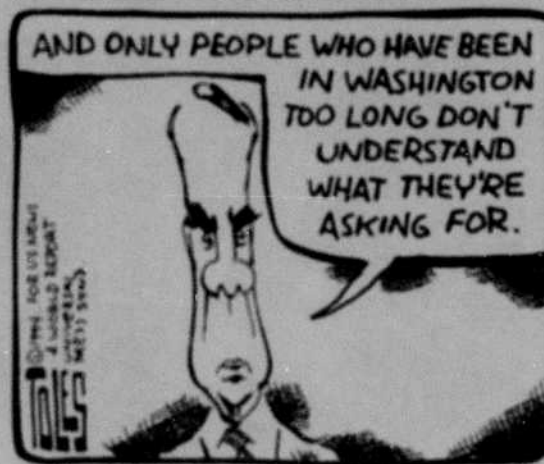
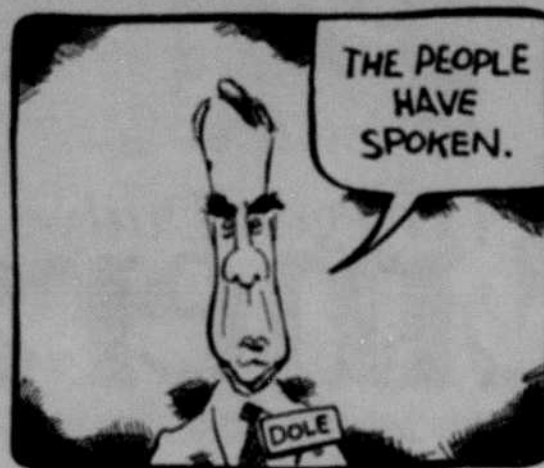
These visual differences not only keep children and teen-agers from socializing with people outside their established cliques, but they teach each generation that who they are is defined by how they look. They learn that they can tell who someone is on the inside by looking only at what's on the outside.

Critics contend that this superficial self-identification reflects the real world. Once they leave school, these kids will be judged by how they look. This argument misses the point.

If we teach children to learn about and like people for their senses of humor, their intelligence and compassion, their artistic or musical skills, or their leadership abilities, we will be producing a generation of people who do not judge others solely on their appearance. We begin to fix the problem rather than contributing to it.

In addition, school uniforms eliminate the economic pressure placed on parents to buy \$100 shoes and name-brand clothing so their children will be accepted. Teen-agers with sparkling personalities and brilliant minds scramble through the nation's malls each August in a prolonged anxiety attack, trying to find the perfect clothes that will assure them of fitting in for another term. All of this is unnecessary.

School uniforms won't eradicate individual expression. They will simply shift the emphasis toward the differences and similarities that matter.



Current system can't stop the violence

In 1994, two boys, ages 10 and 11, threw 5-year-old Eric Morse from the 14th floor of a Chicago public-housing project because Morse refused to steal candy for them. Two years later, the boys are headed for a maximum-security juvenile prison. Both will be released when they turn 21.

At the time of the murder, children younger than 13 could not be sent to prison. But the Illinois legislature quickly responded to the killing by lowering the age limit to 10 years old. The legislator who pushed through the lower age limit laws said he considered these killers to be more like "predators" and "hardened criminals" than children.

"If you do an adult crime, you should be treated like an adult criminal," he said. "That's my sense of what the public very much wants." (*Register-Guard* 1/31/96)

That legislator was right, to a degree.

I grew up and went to school in the middle of those housing projects. They are, essentially, vertical slums in the meanest of neighborhoods. Just walking down the street required a toughness that few who read this column can imagine.

Even the homeless of Eugene live in a far less threatening environment than the children living in the projects. And those projects have gotten meaner since the dope and guns flooded in after I left.

When children are forced to live surrounded by life-threatening violence, it becomes easy, almost natural, for them to use violence to get what they need or want.

If they see that their lives are not valued by others, it becomes easy for them to hold the lives of others equally worthless. It is easy for them to turn into "predators" trying to avoid being "prey."

None of this is an excuse for killing a 5-year-old boy. It is only a recognition that his death is unique only because of the age of the killers. Thousands of children are killed or crippled in those inner-city war zones each year and often with less provocation.

And "what the public very much wants" is punishment. Lock them up in hell holes even worse than the ones they come from. For a time, it's an American cultural value that keeps more than 2 million men behind bars. For a time.

American prisons today are schools of hard knocks for the advanced study of crime and violence, and the inmates are the captive students.

Like it or not, the prisoners become hardened against everyone around them. They are exposed to advanced practitioners of every criminal activity and learn to survive by "networking" with criminals more violent than themselves.

Is it any wonder that most of these people

leave prison more willing to use violence and more aware of criminal possibilities than they were when they were locked up? And most will be turned loose on society again. It's the law.

Under our current penal system, criminals are punished by being sent to hell. Yet, we ignore the fact that we are punished when the criminals complete their sentences. In our rush to punish, we sow seeds of further violence.

Don't misunderstand me. I am not opposed to locking up people who commit violent crimes. Nor am I opposed to eventually letting them loose.

What I am opposed to is the foolishness of a system that not only fails to rehabilitate criminals, but actually promotes the increase of violence.

The roots of criminal behavior are deep, complex and personal. The solutions to dealing with criminal behavior are just as deep, just as complex and just as personal. Our current solution of locking criminals up for a given period of time is not only too simplistic, but also one of the worst. Let me suggest three alternatives.

First, the "salvage or scrap" option: Lock criminals up in a facility where they can be rehabilitated. They remain in this facility until society can be reasonably sure they no longer pose a threat. Prisoners who prove to be incorrigible are transferred to maximum-security facilities where they spend the rest of their lives.

Costly, but relatively humane.

Second, simply "scrap" all violent criminals. Every sentence is a life sentence. Lock them up and throw away the key. Less costly and less humane, but it does solve the problem of releasing professional predators into an unprepared society.

Or finally, execute them. Far less costly and humane than the other choices, but effective. It also destroys much of our culture. As hideous as it is, it seems more rational than our current practices.

In nine years, the two boys who killed Eric Morse will be returned to society. They are supposed to receive psychiatric treatment in prison, but regardless of their condition, they will be back. As long as we continue to punish and release instead of rehabilitate, incarcerate or exterminate, we will continue to create an ever more violent society.

Catch-and-release keeps a fish population thriving. When used as a penal system, only criminals thrive.

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