

YOGA PANTS & THE SCHOOL DRESS CODE

As one student put it to me the other day: "Girls don't wear jeans anymore." While this statement isn't entirely accurate, it does represent the general shift in female apparel that has transpired at schools in the past several years. Jeans were formerly the most prevalent type of pants worn by both genders. But now, yoga pants and leggings make regular appearances for many female students.

Yoga pants and leggings are not new as far as apparel goes, but their newfound prevalence as a fashion choice has sparked concerns over how appropriate this attire is for school. And the arguments on both sides of the issue are far from dispassioned or careless. The conversation on feminism, women's rights, and gender equality has increasingly taken center stage in our public discourse, thanks in part to prominent individuals like Beyoncé and Emma Watson prioritizing the issue as well as a host of other modern factors. And the discourse on leggings is far from the typical deliberations that accompany school dress code policies – it has become riddled with considerations regarding women's rights, education policy, and freedom of self-expression.

The Troubles with a School Dress Code

Before we look directly at individuals on both sides of the pant leg, let's consider the difficulties that mire school dress code policy in the first place. On the one hand, we have to consider how difficult it is to make school dress code policy. What's considered "OK" as apparel by one person is considered "not OK" by another – there is often a wide array of perspectives just on one school board. And no matter what policy is set, some will feel it's too strict and some will feel it's not strict enough. Additionally, changes in fashion – like snap bracelets, saggy pants, and now leggings – require that the school dress code be reviewed on a consistent basis to keep up with new styles.

And enforcing the policy is another challenge. Teachers are expected to enforce the policy, but are they willing to let it cut into class time? When they need to "Pick their battles," is this one that they'll select? And what consequences are appropriate? Should students sit outside of the classroom or visit the principal? Should they get a detention, be forced

to change clothes, or even sent home? What if different teachers have different opinions on what qualifies as a violation? What about male teachers confronting female students, or vice versa? And what if parents don't agree with the dress code – who has final say?

Dress codes – as a rule, it seems – are challenging to compose and more difficult to implement. So it's no surprise, then, that one of the latest fashion trends has become a hot issue of debate.

Yoga Pants Difficult Fit for Some

Let's take some time to respect where multiple people may be coming from with this. First, there are those who favor a ban on all yoga pants, leggings, and otherwise tight-fitting legwear, like skinny jeans. Devils Lake High School in North Dakota recently issued a ban, and Niles High School in Michigan has similarly adopted restrictions. Some initially cite how girls wearing these figure-hugging pants "distract boys" and inhibit the learning process. There might be some shadow of truth to this – though I imagine boys would have little trouble being distracted by girls no matter what they are wearing. I don't entirely buy into this argument, though. What seems more consistent with precedent is the issue of modesty: Girls are commonly restricted from wearing spaghetti straps, showing too much décolletage, exposing midriffs, or wearing short skirts. To some, these tight pants are just as "exposing," and therefore inappropriate in the school setting.

Many envision schools as a serious academic atmosphere that should err on the side of conservatism when it comes to clothing. After all, many professional settings would not welcome these stretch pants for their immodesty (take, for instance, how few teachers wear these pants while in school), so why not help students dress more modestly if they wouldn't make that decision on their own? There is a precedent for restricting clothing choices already, and bringing these pants into the fold isn't really a large deviation from historic practice. Syndicated columnist and former teacher Esther J. Cepeda writes in favor of banning yoga pants on the premise that school is not about the "right to rock tight pants" but a place that ought to prioritize learning and maturity.

Proponents of the ban don't really buy into the "women's rights" perspective that many detractors insist upon. While many acknowledge being supporters of women in the public cultural sphere, they lament that individuals support this particular form of student expression. Young women in America's schools should be encouraged to explore STEM fields, develop their voices through writing and public speaking, have equal opportunities to participate in athletics and clubs, and go to college. But, they argue, protecting females' rights to express themselves in a sexual way (i.e. with revealing pants) is a self-defeating form of feminism.

Some, like Niles HS in Michigan, at least suggest a compromise: Maybe leggings can be worn as long as a student's derriere is covered with a long shirt.

Some Uncomfortable with Ban

The first thing someone may point out in defense of yoga-like pants is that they're extremely comfortable. Who wouldn't want a soft cotton hug all day long? Yoga pants and its allies were originally designed for flexibility, comfort, and performance. They seem like the ideal choice for someone who wants to be comfortable whether at home or in public. The notion that these pants are tight-fitting is secondary; girls do not wear them to flaunt themselves to boys – they wear them because they feel good.

But comfort aside, there is a wariness to allow the reason of these being a "Distraction to boys" as a valid argument. Boys will look at girls no matter what they're wearing, but more importantly, should girls be "punished" because boys can't control their eyes? Plus, some insist that telling females that they can't wear these pants because they're immodest is an antiquated form of female-shaming, unnecessarily pressuring females to conform to an alleged cultural code of conservatism that restricts female choice. Some, like Alternet contributor Jenny Kutner, decry any ban on this, stating that "dictating that young women change their appearance because they are 'distracting' men inherently objectifies them, and it teaches girls to be ashamed of their bodies."

Additionally, this policy only targets girls. Girls wear yoga pants, and so restricting them only places a restriction on females. Boys, it seems, have much

more leeway with how they dress. Plus, boys are being told through this ban that girls are dangerous and that they must be protected from the irresistible sirens of their schools. This, many argue, sends the wrong message: We want our boys to be stronger, and we want our females to not be the target of choice restrictions. What about the saggy pants, skinny jeans, or muscle-Ts that some males wear? Shouldn't these come under the same restrictive scrutiny?

Where On The Spectrum Are You?

Think of dress codes as a wide spectrum of possibilities: At one end of extremes is an ultra-conservative, ultra-restrictive allotment of what students can or cannot wear. At the other end is an ultra-liberal, anything-goes permissiveness. The line of what's allowed and what isn't has to get drawn somewhere, and no matter where it's drawn there will be individuals eager to push it forwards or backwards. What is or isn't OK for you might be based on your background, your feelings, your comforts, your perception of what's professional, appropriate, or distracting. And when we're making decisions on such subjective grounding, there's little wonder that we experience fierce contention each time the line is redrawn.

Perhaps this is what we call a "teachable moment," where we can open up to girls and boys alike and discuss why what we wear matters, how we can assess what apparel decisions we make, and host positive discussions that challenge students to think and to respect. I don't know if there's any "right answer" to this issue that satisfies all sides. There is only opportunity to use our heads and use our voices to work together for the best possible outcome. And from that perspective, this issue isn't too different from other issues we generally face in education.

Of course, there's always school uniforms, too.

Jordan Catapano is a high school English teacher in a Chicago suburb. In addition to being National Board Certificated, he also has worked with the Illinois Association of Teachers of English and has experience as a school board member for a private school. You can follow him on Twitter at @BuffEnglish, or visit his website www.jordancatapano.us.