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Gender-Neutral Dress Code Allowing Girls to Wear Pants, Boys to Wear Skirts if They So Choose Introduced by Board of Education

Education / **Published On August 04, 2022 05:42 AM /**

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Public school students will return to classrooms in the USVI on August 8, 2023. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

The V.I. Board of Education has codified new dress code uniform guidelines for public schools meant to be gender neutral, in what board chairman Dr. Kyza Callwood described to the Consortium as the U.S. Virgin Islands coming in line with broader trends on the U.S. mainland relative to the rights of individuals.

Speaking during a phone interview Wednesday evening, Mr. Callwood stressed that changes to the B.O.E.'s Dress Code Uniform Guidelines were not made in a vacuum.

"We met with the Department of Education and several administrators and we came up with the policy. We also sent it out to the department for them to work through it. They added some of their changes before the board approved it. So this is not something that the board just did arbitrarily in closed and secret meetings," he said.

The need for a dress code policy update arose from parents who had concerns with their girl children not being able to wear pants at certain public schools, according to Mr. Callwood. He said that years ago girls wore pants at school, "but somewhere down the line, depending on who was the superintendent at the time, different things, principals, rules changed, but that's where that came about."

The new policy, seen [here](#) and on the V.I. B.O.E. website [here](#), says "Students may wear either skirts or pants as uniform bottom wear."

That portion of the new dress code touched a nerve with some members of the community, according to Mr. Callwood, who said residents have been calling radio stations blaming him for the update.

Even so, the chairman sees the update as not only important but necessary, saying that lawsuits could have been brought against the board for what Mr. Callwood deemed an outdated policy.

"It had court cases where schools had to make their policies gender neutral where you can't violate and hold children hostage," he said. "You have to allow free expression once it's in a way that is professional, presentable and don't create disruption. Our [previous] policy didn't do that because remember they were created years ago. So we have to come now into the 21st Century where the policy needs to be gender neutral."

Mr. Callwood stressed that while the policy makes provision to allow for a boy to wear a skirt if he so chooses, the school administration has some leeway and a decision would be based on whether a skirt on a boy leads to adverse outcomes at the school in question.

The updated policy also allows boys to wear two earrings. "If I'm a parent I could take the board to court that you allowed girls to wear earrings and I'm a boy and I can't wear no earrings," Mr. Callwood said.

Relative to girls' choice to choose either a skirt or pants in the new policy, Mr. Callwood said some girls don't like wearing skirts because sometimes wind blows and lifts the skirts, leading to unwanted exposure. "Wearing pants, it allows you not to have to deal with that. But of course it also has provisions in there that the pants can't be fitted, it can't be tight, you can't wear no leggings, you can't wear no jeans. The shoes have to be either light or dark-colored, you know, different things in the policy," the B.O.E. chairman explained.

"The goal is to really educate our students — not to hold them hostage because they want to wear a chain, they want to wear an earring, they want to wear a green watch, they want to wear green glasses and [a school is] trying to hold them back from getting an education because of that. We can't allow that," he said.

Mr. Callwood also highlighted children with tattoos, saying those too are acceptable as long as there is no disruption to the school. "You could have your tattoo but it needs to be covered," he said. "I don't need to be in English class and I could see what tattoo is on your hand with a sunflower. That creates disruption. So it needs to be covered; nobody needs to you know you have a tattoo — it's not important in the school [setting]."

To assuage concerns on the matter of boys wearing skirts, Mr. Callwood stated, "We know in our community males don't wear skirts, so that's something known."

He added, "We had no cases in St. Thomas where any male wanted to wear any skirt to school. We have no cases with that, so all the males will be coming to school in a pants."

Other reasons for the update include [a recent law](#) called the Crown Act whose goal is to end hair discrimination in the territory.

What Mr. Callwood referred to as the Digital Learning Policy also influenced changes to the dress code. "At one point they didn't allow cellphones in schools, but since Sen. Donna Frett-Gregory did [the Distance Learning Policy](#), it allowed for those things because Covid came and students had to work from home, some of them don't have computers and they had to use their phones.

"Even with earbuds, you're allowed to have earbuds but you can't wear them in the cafeterias and some other places you can't use them. You could use them in class if you need to use them based on a particular instruction where the laptop is in front of them, to make sure they don't interrupt," Mr. Callwood said. Watches that utilize cellphones are also allowed for certain instructional purposes, he said.

Mr. Callwood said community members can petition the board if there are changes they disagree with. "Anything with any policy can be changed at anytime. No policy is set in stone. If community people feel that we shouldn't have this in the policy or that in the policy, then we have the opportunity to write the board or petition the board to make changes where they see fit," he said.