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Research explores 'appropriate' dress for teachers

BY K.C. JAEHNIG, SIUC University Communications

Friday, April 10, 2009 1:17 AM CDT

CARBONDALE -- Exposed midriffs, pajama bottoms and far too many jeans and flip-flops spell trouble in a school environment -- especially when worn by teachers.

"Students say, 'We have a dress code -- why shouldn't they?'" said Jane E. Workman, a Southern Illinois University Carbondale fashion design and merchandising professor...

The two longtime collaborators became interested in this problem when they noticed a flurry of news stories detailing concerns about the way teachers dressed.

"One article described a male teacher wearing a belt with a buckle shaped like a marijuana leaf," Freeburg said.

"Another one talked about a principal with multiple body piercings."

Intrigued, the pair searched out school employee handbooks and guidelines online, looking for dress codes related to teachers. They found 90 percent of those they examined had such rules, all of them vague.

"They'd say teachers should dress in an 'appropriate' or 'professional' manner but never defined what that was," Workman said.

Added Freeburg, "If you receive a reprimand from your principal for what you have on, you need to have some sort of clear-cut rule."

Both professors believe society's increasing acceptance of casual dress has something to do with why a teacher might show up to class in sneakers and sweats. But something else is at work here, too.

"With lots of retirements in the schools, there are a lot of new teachers, many of them not much older than the students," Freeburg said. "It's easy for them to be confused about what's appropriate."

Said Workman, "Also, new teachers are sometimes reluctant to give up their role as 'young people' to adopt the professional role."

Nonetheless, it's important that they do so, the pair stressed. Teachers serve as role models for students. More importantly, it's difficult to establish authority and discipline in the classroom if the teacher looks just like the kids.

But to dress appropriately, you have to know what that is. That's where the duo's project should prove helpful. Using 25 pictures of teachers dressed in a variety of styles, Workman and Freeburg have developed an online survey...

The difference between the two terms depends on context. Most folks would agree that a tailored suit and well-shined leather shoes look professional, where khakis and coveralls don't. But if the teacher spends a lot of time on the floor with autistic children...

If respondents label certain outfits as almost or not quite to standard, Workman and Freeburg will then try to identify the elements that don't make the grade. Once they've put it all together, they will develop an online seminar for new teachers...

"A standard definition of professional dress for teachers has been needed for a long time because everyone's been coming up with their own," Workman said.

"I think policy makers will find this very useful."

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areyoukiddingme wrote on Apr 10, 2009 1:39 PM:

" Bet they were looking at Murphysboro schools. The way some of those teachers dress is appalling. I agree that there are far more important things to worry about, like making sure we keep those teachers around but just because a teacher has to get down on the floor with an autistic child as mentioned above, in my eye, doesn't give them the right to look like they just rolled out of bed. Khakis or nice jeans would work just as well. "

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1st Amendment wrote on Apr 10, 2009 10:29 AM:

" doc- yeah, I agree with you. Someone close to me is a local teacher and she says the administration and other teachers wouldn't put up with that kind of nonsense. "

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doc wrote on Apr 10, 2009 10:16 AM:

" with all the schools i have been in, i haven't seen that...many things i have seen but there are more problems in the schools than some silly research on dressing for the schools by teachers....the question is "where are these so called under dressed teachers?" Again, where are these schools where there is this influx of new teachers? It is not in Southern Illinois unless i am badly mistaken, schools are cutting teachers and not hiring new ones by and large. "

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