

Why GAO Did This Study

In recent years, researchers, advocates, parents, and students have raised concerns about equity in school dress codes. Concerns have included the detrimental effects of removing students from the classroom for dress code violations.

A committee report accompanying H.R. 7614 included a provision for GAO to study dress code discipline. This report also addresses a request to study informal removals. This report examines (1) the characteristics of K-12 dress codes across school districts nationwide, and how Education supports the design of equitable and safe dress codes; (2) the enforcement of dress codes, and how Education supports equitable dress code enforcement.

To examine characteristics of dress codes, GAO analyzed a nationally representative sample of public school district dress codes. To assess the enforcement of dress codes and how Education supports school districts, GAO analyzed Education data; reviewed relevant studies on dress code discipline; and interviewed academic researchers and officials from national organizations, school districts, and Education.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations, including that Education provide resources to help districts design equitable dress codes and collect and disseminate information on the prevalence and effects of informal removals and non-exclusionary discipline. Education described steps to implement all four recommendations.

View [GAO-23-105348](#). For more information, contact Jacqueline M. Nowicki at (617) 788-0580 or nowickij@gao.gov.

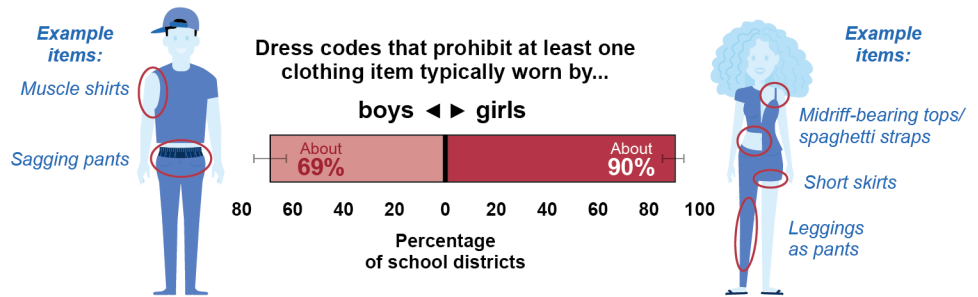
K-12 EDUCATION

Department of Education Should Provide Information on Equity and Safety in School Dress Codes

What GAO Found

While school districts often cite safety as the reason for having a dress code, many dress codes include elements that may make the school environment less equitable and safe for students. For example, an estimated 60 percent of dress codes have rules involving measuring students' bodies and clothing—which may involve adults touching students. Consequently, students, particularly girls, may feel less safe at school, according to a range of stakeholders GAO interviewed. According to GAO's nationally generalizable review of public school dress codes, districts more frequently restrict items typically worn by girls—such as skirts, tank tops, and leggings—than those typically worn by boys—such as muscle shirts. Most dress codes also contain rules about students' hair, hair styles, and head coverings, which may disproportionately impact Black students and those of certain religions and cultures, according to researchers and district officials. Department of Education (Education) officials told GAO they are considering options to provide helpful resources to stakeholders and the public, but as of September 2022, Education had not provided information on dress codes. Providing such information would align with the agency's goal to enhance equity and safety in schools.

Items Commonly Prohibited by School Dress Codes



Source: GAO review of school dress codes; stock.adobe.com (base artwork). | GAO-23-105348

Schools that report enforcing strict dress codes predominantly enroll Black and Hispanic students and are more likely to remove students from class. GAO's analysis of national data found that more than four in five predominantly Black schools and nearly two-thirds of predominantly Hispanic schools enforce a strict dress code, compared to about one-third of predominantly White schools. In addition, schools that enforce strict dress codes are associated with statistically significant higher rates of discipline that removes students from the classroom (e.g., suspensions). Further, an estimated 44 percent of dress codes outlined "informal" removal policies, such as removing a student from class without documenting it as a suspension. Education has recently noted challenges related to informal removals in guidance documents but has no information on the prevalence or impact of this emerging issue. Without information on the full range of ways children are disciplined—including informal removals and non-exclusionary discipline—Education's efforts to provide resources on the equitable enforcement of discipline will have critical gaps.