

# Uniforms in Three Middle Schools: Student Opinions

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*This quantitative study used an existing dataset with responses from 1,848 public middle school students' opinions on the benefits of wearing a school uniform. Efforts in favor of and against school uniforms are noted, and the analyses used to examine demographic variables (i.e., gender, grade-level, and race/ethnicity) reveals that students in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade and Hispanic/Latino students benefited from the uniforms as compared to their peers. These insights can help school leaders identify practices that promote positive responses to the factors measured by the Student School Uniform Survey. Positive increases in students' perceptions of the constructs identified in the Student School Uniform Survey could support efforts toward increased learning experiences for all students. This is especially important with the understanding that, when students' social-emotional needs are met within a school culture of learning, positive learning outcomes can transpire. A discussion of these findings is shared, along with a conclusion.*

*Keywords:* quantitative, opinions, survey, middle school, school uniforms

School leaders and teachers are increasingly under pressure to make schools safe from internal and external threats, close the achievement gap, and continuously improve the quality of education for all students (Fotheringham et al., 2020). These are daunting challenges under the best of circumstances but even more so in the face of budget reductions and ongoing demands for increased accountability. Since the mid-1980s, school officials began turning to school uniforms to address the issues plaguing United States (U.S.) public schools (Anderson, 2002; Brunnsma, 2004). Yet, our search for peer-reviewed literature using Academic Search Premier with the words “school uniform” resulted in only 119 articles, and that was with the inclusion of areas outside of the U.S. and in non-academic settings. This is still quite minimal in the context of U.S. public schools implementing school uniform policies to improve educational outcomes. For example, the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics ([NCES] Wang et al., 2020) accounted for school uniforms as part of school crime, safety, and security measures. Wang et al. (2020) detailed that 23% of elementary schools required students to wear uniforms, with lower percentages at the middle (18%) and high school (10%) levels.

The increased implementation of school uniform policies at the elementary level has been a long-standing pattern; Cherry Hill Elementary School in Baltimore, Maryland was among the first to actively publicize a uniform policy (Anderson, 2002). As an elementary school, Cherry Hill served predominantly students from African American families of low- to middle-income backgrounds and initiated a uniform policy in 1987 to reduce clothing costs and minimize social pressure on students (Brunnsma, 2004). Soon after, leaders at several other Baltimore area schools adopted a uniform policy known as The Uniform Project (Brunnsma, 2004). A year after this project, a pilot school uniform project was also proposed and then implemented in 1989 in New York. In turn, leaders in school districts across the country, including districts in Chicago, Detroit, and Los Angeles implemented uniform policies. Some were district-wide initiatives, while others were initiatives in individual schools. Yet, common factors among early uniform policies reflected schools with students from historically marginalized racial/ethnic groups and of low-income family backgrounds in urban areas (Brunnsma, 2004). Modern explorations of uniform policies link dress code or uniforms to violence, which is deemed an extension of school discipline (Baumann & Kriskova, 2016).

Nearly a decade after the initial push for school uniforms, in 1994, Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) was one of the first and largest school districts in the U.S. to require all students in the district to wear uniforms. It is in California and serves 67,700 students; their district information noted that they are listed as being among five of the world’s highest performing school systems (LBUSD, 2022). Long Beach received a great deal of attention from researchers and politicians, and the impetus for their uniform policy was, “To combat ‘gang wear’, or gang-related clothing, soothe the frenzy over designer clothing that highlights economic disparities and help pupils focus on learning” (Melvin, 1994, p. 7).

A year into the effort, LBUSD reported extensive gains in safety and improvement in student behavior (Stanley, 1996). In addition to the tremendous gains in safety, district officials noted that in some of the schools, there was a significant improvement in grades and student achievement. However, Stamison (2006) argued that no empirical studies were conducted with reliable data for LBUSD, which undermined the credibility of the results. Despite the credibility concerns, the results reported by LBUSD prompted presidential advocacy for school uniform

policies highlighted in the U.S. State of the Union with President Clinton's endorsement of school uniforms. This encouraged school district leaders around the country to implement mandatory uniform policies.

More recently, Baumann and Krskova (2016) sought to identify the linkages between school uniform policies and academic performance. They emphasized that one area largely overlooked in this effort is discipline, which uniforms aim to reduce. Ultimately, their findings demonstrated that school uniforms were associated with key elements of school discipline that reflect academic performance among students. In Sanchez et al.'s (2012) work, though, they indicated that students who were tasked with wearing the uniforms were commonly excluded from the evaluation process. Therefore, this study sought to empirically include student perceptions regarding the benefits of wearing a school uniform in alignment with decreases in disciplinary needs and improved school culture toward overall school improvement efforts.

### **In Favor of School Uniforms**

Despite aims toward school improvement, effects through school uniform policies are debated. One concern with the U.S. has been the dearth of empirical research on school uniforms, but school administrators highlight the need to implement mandatory school uniform policies to improve school safety by eliminating the clothing associated with gang membership (Ramirez et al., 2011). Because gang members identify themselves by wearing certain colors, accessories, or wearing clothing in a particular way, enacting a uniform dress code may minimize the overt symbols of gang activity (Holloman, 1995; Starr, 2000). Indeed, students' perceived benefits in all intended constructs have been noted (Sanchez et al., 2012), despite students' clear lack of preference to wearing a uniform, including critical decreases in discipline and school police data in the school's first year of uniform implementation.

Furthermore, advocates have pointed to evidence that school uniforms are more cost effective for parents (Caruso, 1996), and that they create an equalizing effect for students of different socio-economic status (Holloman et al., 1998). The implementation of uniforms is not only aimed to eliminate a sense of competition among students, but it also intended to lower the parental or family cost on clothing; students have also reported that it makes it easier for the to go to school, particularly for those from marginalized backgrounds (Sanchez et al., 2012). Ultimately, uniforms have continued to be used in schools to safeguard against a multitude of disruptions and issues (Gurung et al., 2018). However, there are many who indicate that mandatory school uniforms are not beneficial and are opposed to such policies.

### **Against School Uniforms**

Opponents to school uniform policies believe that uniforms are not the way to solve the much larger problems facing school leaders. Brunnsma (2006) argued that school uniform policies are mere quick fixes and do not address the deeper issues in U.S. schools. A plethora of existing research (Brunnsma & Rockquemore, 1998; Caruso, 1996; Isaacson, 1998) also emphasized that those against mandatory uniform policies believed the policies impede on students' First Amendment rights and stifled their creativity and developmental needs for expression. Opponents have argued that students will continue to find more subtle ways to distinguish

themselves with accessories that are not usually regulated by uniform policies (Caruso, 1996; Isaacson, 1998; Seigel, 1996). In addition, opponents have argued that families spent more on clothing because of the purchase of the uniform in addition to clothing needs outside of the school setting and over the summer months (Boutelle, 2008).

In an effort to identify specific uniform impacts, Hughes (2006) examined the role of uniforms in enhancing a sense of belonging, identity, social cohesion, safety, and security in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students in Houston and San Antonio, Texas. Hughes (2006) found that students who wore a school-specific identifying logo or uniform had a greater sense of belonging in their school community than did students in the standard dress group. The significance of this finding rested in earlier research that suggested a sense of belonging as a major motivational dimension of the school environment and an important role in the development of a student's sense of community within the school and in the larger community (Fosseen, 2006).

Tucker (2006) surveyed middle school teachers to assess the impact that a mandatory uniform policy had on teacher perceptions of climate and academic orientation. He found that teachers at schools with a uniform policy had a more positive view of the climate and safety of their school than teachers at a school without a uniform policy. Teachers indicated that outsiders were more easily identified, and students could not hide weapons as easily because there was less baggy clothing. In addition, teachers at schools with uniforms perceived a higher academic orientation among the students than teachers at schools without a uniform.

Focusing on international students and school uniforms, Kim and Delong (2006) compared student, parent, and teacher attitudes in the U.S. and South Korea on various school uniforms issues. Parents and teachers in both countries had a more favorable perception of school uniforms than did students. Students in both countries did not indicate that wearing uniforms would improve the school environment or student behavior; however, the parents in both countries disagreed with the students. Uniquely, students had a more positive attitude toward uniforms the longer they wore them. The authors posited that an elementary start to wearing a uniform could contribute to student acceptance in their secondary school years. Thus, the focus on uniforms to support students' educational experiences remains essential.

### **Study Purpose**

The literature has affirmed that research on current school uniform efforts is minimal, especially when examining students' opinions and uniform outcomes to school violence and safety issues. For example, the Student School Uniform Survey was specifically designed to assess student perceptions of the benefits of a mandatory school uniform, including increased safety, ease of going to school, bullying, decreased disciplinary issues, gang involvement, confidence, and self-esteem. A better understanding of student experiences to potential benefits can allow school leaders to better understand their connectivity to reduced discipline, improved school culture, and overall school performance. Thus, given continued interest surrounding school uniform policies, the purpose of this study was to further examine public middle school students' opinions on the benefits of wearing a school uniform.

## Method

A quantitative methodology was used for the purpose of this study. Of note, this work builds off the work of Authors (DateA) to investigate relationships among responses based on middle school student membership in specific demographic groupings of a survey factor structure. Upon institutional review board approval, the authors utilized de-identified existing data collected from students at three middle schools in an urban area in the western U.S. These middle schools had mandatory uniform policies and were all located in the same school district. The existing data reflected 1,848 middle school student responses for the instrument, Student School Uniform Survey. The existing survey data included three demographic grouping: gender, grade-level, and race/ethnicity. Therefore, the research questions that guided this study were: What are middle school student opinions regarding the benefits of wearing school uniforms? Do student opinions on school uniforms differ by demographic groupings?

### Instrumentation and Existing Dataset

The instrument from which the data originated is a researcher-created instrument designed to measure student perceptions of the benefits of wearing a school uniform at the conclusion of the first year of a mandatory uniform policy at the middle school level. The school administration of one middle school approached the university with aims to measure the perceived benefits of the school uniform policy. After conducting a review of literature, the lead developer of the survey worked with the school principal to identify areas of inquiry and determine factors to be measured by the Student School Uniform Survey. The instrument was constructed around six perceived factors: decreases in discipline, gang involvement, bullying and increases in safety, ease of going to school, confidence, and self-esteem. After developing an initial set of questions for the instrument, we consulted with the school administration and modified the survey based on the administration's feedback. Importantly, while the school principal provided feedback on the survey for his respective school site; the lead researchers implemented the survey across multiple schools. At that point, the principal was not involved in continued study efforts. As such, the data were existing but only one study at one school had been published. This study reflects a subsequent analysis across all existing data previously collected.

Graduate students with an educator background also provided feedback on the survey; finally, students in a middle school leadership class also reviewed the survey and provided feedback. This content validity led to having the instrument center on 49 questions, with primarily 4- and 5-point Likert-type items and dichotomous yes/no questions. Items 15-46 on the survey ask respondents to select a, b, c, or d with a = Strongly Disagree and d = Strongly Agree. The final three questions focus on demographic groupings that asked students to self-identify gender, grade-level, and race/ethnicity.

All response choices used similar lettering options to align with a scantron sheet that students were familiar with using through testing initiatives. The Student School Uniform Survey was initially administered to students in their English or advisory class by the lead researcher and volunteer graduate students who had completed their Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative program. Middle school students were informed that their responses to the survey would not impact the mandatory school uniform policy. In addition, students were told that

completion of the survey was voluntary. Survey questions were read aloud to students to support pacing needs to limit a disruption to their school day, as well as to attend to possible difference in student reading levels. Completion of the survey took no longer than approximately 10 minutes. These measures and procedures represent the origin of the existing dataset.

## **Data Analyses**

First, descriptive statistics were used to gain a better understanding of the existing dataset, examine the data for missing cases and outliers, and test for assumptions of the additional analyses. Next, to identify possible group differences in student perceptions, the Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was used for each of the demographic variables (i.e., gender, grade-level, and race/ethnicity). Importantly, in Authors (Sanchez et al., 2012), reliability using Cronbach's alpha was .93, which was deemed appropriate to conduct additional analyses. Furthermore, this work is part of a larger study (Yoxsimer, 2015) that also conducted a factor analysis on the Student School Uniform Survey. Yoxsimer (2015) found that Factors 1-3 of the Student School Uniform Survey included *Safety and Behavior of Others*, *Acceptance of my Behavior*, and *Ease of Going to School*. Items within these factors reflected a coefficient alpha of .89 with  $n = 1,109$ . Also, although this existing dataset included three grade levels (i.e., sixth, seventh, and eighth) and five categories for race/ethnicity (i.e., White/Caucasian, Hispanic/Latino, Black/African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American/Alaskan Native), the 6<sup>th</sup>-grade students were not considered in the MANOVA, and only White/Caucasian and Hispanic/Latino were included because of the small  $n$ -size in the other groups. Finally, for statistically significant results, post-hoc analyses were conducted, and the mean scores were examined to identify group distinctions.

## **Limitations**

The data were limited to one school district. The data reflects student perceptions and are a snapshot view. Results do not encompass longitudinal outcomes to the uniform policy. The data also reflect self-reported information and were not linked to specific student or school achievement outcomes. Comparisons across school demographics used for this study or their unique school programming that was in place during the start of the uniform policies was not explored, which may have contributed to experiences while wearing their uniforms.

## **Results**

### **All Students**

These descriptive results represent the survey responses from the first year of school inform implementation at three urban middle schools and total of 1,848 students. Of the 1,848 surveys collected, 85% ( $n = 1,577$ ) had the race/ethnicity question completed, but 15% ( $n = 271$ ) of the surveys did not have this question completed (see Table 1).

**Table 1***Frequencies and Percentages of Groups Established by Ethnicity*

Ethnicity	Frequency	Percent
White/Caucasian	567	31
Hispanic/Latino	807	44
Black/African American	60	3
Asian/Pacific Islander	93	5
Native American/Alaskan Native	40	2
No Response	271	15
Total	1848	100

The data on gender reflected 91% completion ( $n = 1,681$ ) with 46% ( $n = 846$ ) as male and 45% ( $n = 832$ ) as female. The data revealed that 9% ( $n = 167$ ) of the surveys had this question blank. In terms of grade-level, 6<sup>th</sup>-grade students accounted for 7% ( $n = 135$ ), 7<sup>th</sup>-grade students 39% ( $n = 728$ ), and 8<sup>th</sup>-grade students 44% ( $n = 808$ ) of the dataset. The low number of 6<sup>th</sup>-grade students relative to other grades was because only one of the three middle schools included in the study had that grade level. Missing data for grade level accounted for 9% ( $n = 160$ ) of the data.

In addition to the demographics, when students were asked if they liked wearing a uniform to school, 10% indicated “Yes,” while the remaining 90% indicated “No.” Also, 70% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that there were behavior problems at their school. When asked how often students saw bullying, gang activity, violence, teasing, or drugs at their school, over 40% of the students indicated “sometimes” to “almost always” for each of the categories. The only exception was the drugs category, which had 35%. The highest category was teasing, with 65% of the students saying they “sometimes” to “almost always” saw this occur at their school.

While most students did not like wearing uniforms, 30% of the students believed that wearing uniforms might reduce discipline issues. Yet only 10% said they would wear them if given a choice. Also, 44% of the students admitted getting easily distracted in the classroom, while 17% indicated that wearing a uniform helped them (*self*) focus in school, and 24% affirmed uniforms help *other* students focus on school. Considering consequences for not wearing a uniform, only 30% had gotten detention for not having worn it at some point.

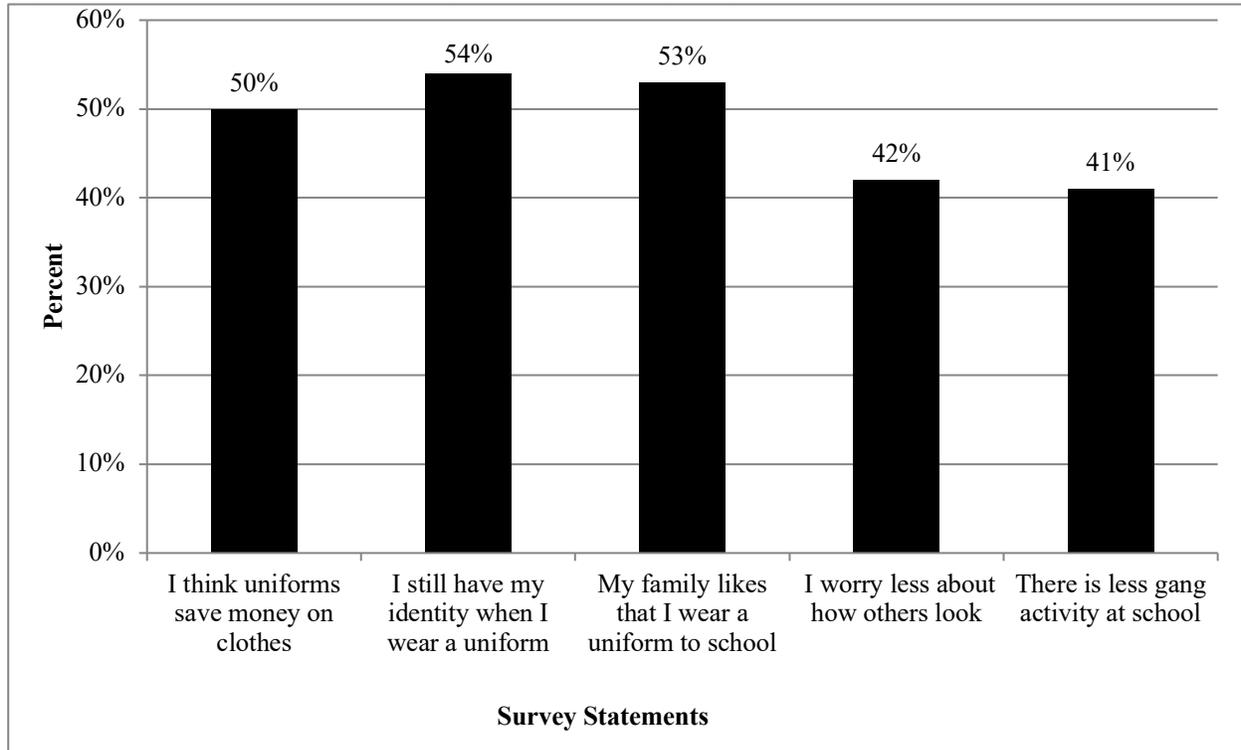
### **Students’ Highest/Lowest Perceived Benefits**

Two groups were created using the results of the 32 specific statements related to behavior problems, self-esteem, confidence, feeling equal to others, feeling accepted by others, ease of going to school, and more. The two groups were: (a) the five highest ratings of agreement and (b) the five lowest ratings of agreement, as shown in Figures 1 and 2 respectively. The five highest ratings with “agree” and “strongly agree” had more than 40% of the students in agreement with

the statements. The five lowest ratings with “agree” and “strongly agree” had only 12% to 19% of students in agreement with the statements.

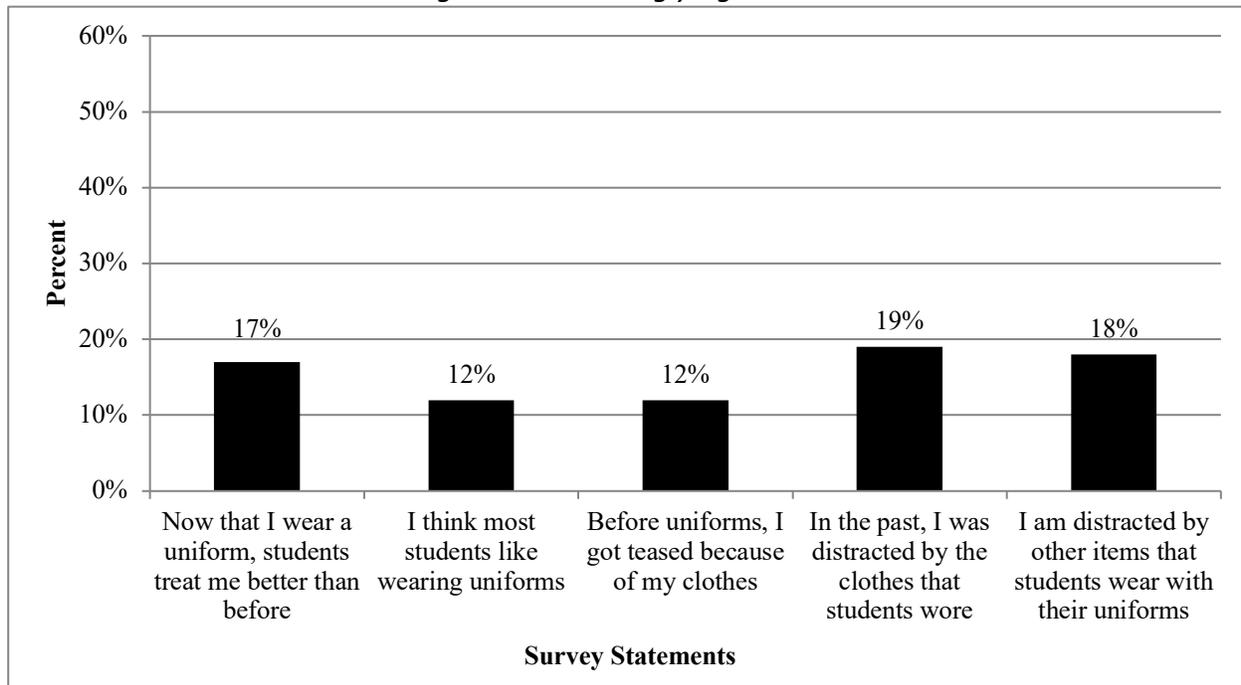
**Figure 1**

*Highest Rated Statements with “Agree” and “Strongly Agree”*



**Figure 2**

*Lowest Rated Statements with “Agree” and “Strongly Agree”*



## Other Notable Student Opinions

There were eight statements for which 30% to 37% of the students indicated as “agree” and “strongly agree.” These statements were as follows:

- I think uniforms help our school succeed (30%)
- With uniforms, there are fewer distractions at school (31%)
- With uniforms, there are fewer problems at school (33%)
- Wearing a uniform makes me feel equal to other students (33%)
- Wearing a uniform makes it easier for me to go to school (33%)
- My school is safer because we wear uniforms (34%)
- I think uniforms help our school look better (36%)
- With uniforms, I worry less about my appearance at school (37%)

These statements attend to multiple aspects of the intentions for the implementation of school uniforms. Although the level of agreement for these was not in the majority for students, they represent at least one-third of the students and a degree of perceived benefits in unique areas.

## Gender Comparisons

A one-way MANOVA was conducted to determine if differences existed in survey response patterns by gender, male ( $n = 442$ ) and female ( $n = 450$ ). Mean factor scores were used, Box's  $M$  was not significant, and the assumption of variance-covariance was met. As a result, Wilk's Lambda was used to interpret the MANOVA. The main effect revealed there were no significant differences in response patterns between males and females [ $F(3, 888) = 1.84, p < .01$ ].

## Grade-Level Comparisons

A one-way MANOVA was conducted to determine if differences existed in response patterns by grade level, seventh ( $n = 423$ ) and eighth grade ( $n = 473$ ). Mean factor scores were used and Box's  $M$  was significant, so Pillai's Trace was used as the appropriate statistic to interpret the MANOVA. Main effects indicated statistical significance [Pillai's Trace = .000,  $F(3, 892) = 9.53, p < .05$ ]. A subsequent ANOVA indicated differences existed between grade levels in Factors 1 and 3, with mean scores indicating that seventh grade students responded higher for both factors. Table 2 summarizes the main effects results of the univariate ANOVAs for Factors 1 and 3.

**Table 2***Univariate Main Effects for Grade Level on Three Factor Scores*

Variable	df	$ms^2$	$F$	Sig	$\eta^2$
Safety and Behavior of Others	1	1.58	25.23	.00*	.03
Error	894	.06			
Ease of Going to School	1	5.88	10.88	.00*	.01
Error	894	.54			

Note. \*Significant at  $p < .05$

**Race/Ethnicity Comparisons**

A one-way MANOVA was conducted to investigate potential differences in the mean survey scores of the two groups, White/Caucasian ( $n = 374$ ) and Hispanic/Latino ( $n = 522$ ) on Factors 1-3. Homogeneity of variance-covariance was assessed by interpreting Box's  $M$ , which was not significant, so Wilk's Lambda was determined to be the appropriate statistic. The one-way MANOVA revealed a multivariate main effect for ethnicity [Wilk's Lambda = .97,  $F(3, 892) = 9.56$ ,  $p < .05$ ]. The ANOVA revealed that group differences were significant for Factors 2 and 3, with mean scores indicating that Hispanic/Latino students responded higher both factors. Table 3 summarizes the univariate main effects results.

**Table 3***Univariate Main Effects for Race/Ethnicity on Three Factor Scores*

Variable	df	$ms^2$	$F$	Sig	$\eta^2$
Safety and Behavior of Others	1	.24	3.69	.06	.00
Error	894	.06			
Acceptance and My Behavior	1	1.00	17.88	.00*	.02
Error	894	.06			
Ease of Going to School	1	10.23	19.12	.00*	.02
Error	894	.54			

Note. \*Significant at  $p < .05$

## Discussion

A large majority (90%) of students in their first year of having a school uniform policy at three urban middle schools indicated that they do not like to wear school uniforms. Yet, when examining more unique areas on the benefits of school uniforms, perceived benefits were found. For example, the survey item on student identity reflected 54% of students indicating they still had their identity. For items, such as the statement indicating they get treated better now that they wear uniforms, responses were low at 17%, but many might argue that the percentage still reflects strong practical significance when nearly one-fifth of the of the school's population has been positively impacted. While the percentages may seem low, this also aligned with Gurung et al. (2018) who found that "clothing is enough of a cue for people to make significant character judgments" (p. 556), as it is expected that educators remain unbiased and equitable in their practices to support all students.

Also, even though there are studies on differences in student and faculty perceptions regarding uniforms (Draa, 2005; Firmin et al., 2006), very few have examined the differences of perceptions within schools by demographic student groups. Results of this study revealed that there were no statistically significant differences by gender; whereas, in Sanchez et al. (2012), females tended to identify differences as compared to males with distinct differences by grade-level and race/ethnicity. The demographic group of grade-level revealed that 7<sup>th</sup>-grade students responded statistically significantly higher on Factor 1 (Safety and Behavior of Others) and Factor 3 (Ease of Going to School). Additionally, race/ethnicity differences existed on Factors 2 (Acceptance and My Behavior) and 3 (Ease of Going to School) with Hispanic/Latino responding higher than White/Caucasian on both factors. These results were like the recent findings by Jones (2020) in which Hispanic students viewed uniforms more positively and may have found them more helpful than their counterparts. Certainly, further work may help determine how mandatory uniform policies impact such perspectives. Altogether, this work continues to support and inform education stakeholders when implementing a mandatory school uniform policy, but it also provides important considerations on examining benefits based on the intersectionality of identities, such as 7<sup>th</sup>-grade Hispanic/Latino students.

These insights can help school leaders identify practices that promote positive responses to the factors measured by the Student School Uniform Survey. Positive increases in students' perceptions of the constructs identified in the Student School Uniform Survey could support efforts toward increased learning experiences for all students. This is especially important with the understanding that, when students' social-emotional needs are met, including feelings of safety, acceptance, and ease of going to school, they learn better (Zins et al., 2004).

## Conclusion

A deeper understanding of students' perceived benefits of wearing a school uniform can facilitate and strengthen alignment of the intended purpose of school uniform policies with outcomes. For example, broader administration of this instrument could provide interesting data about the effect of school uniforms on diverse demographic groups, especially when considering one argument against school uniforms is that they are most implemented in schools that predominantly serve students of color and from low-income family backgrounds (DaCosta, 2006).

Uniquely, in Jones (2020) work on student perceptions of the effects of uniforms indicated minimal differences by socio-economic status (SES), which supported the possibility that students may see themselves as having increased academic potential. If such students perceive greater benefits from a mandatory school uniform policy than their predominant counterparts, the implications could be far-reaching and might influence policy makers in schools across the country. Ultimately, uniforms continue to be used “to symbolize a school’s cohesiveness, levels of discipline, respect for authority, and high achievement; a hierarchy of priorities that schools promote” (Happel, 2013, p. 94). Thus, these finding have immediate relevance because many school leaders in districts throughout the U.S. continue to consider the implementation of school uniform policies and are charged with making equity-centered decisions to support all students, especially our most vulnerable youth.

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