

DELINEATING ARGUMENTS: CASE STUDY

School Conflict

ISSUE

Recently, a student came to school wearing a T-shirt with a provocative graphic on it and what some people viewed as misogynistic lyrics from a song by a popular rap artist. A teacher who was offended by the shirt referred the student to the office, where the assistant principal told him to go home, change the shirt, and never wear it to school again. When the student refused to do so, he was suspended for insubordination. In protest, a large group of sympathetic students produced and wore T-shirts that read, "Life's a b----- when you lose your right to free speech."

When asked to stop wearing the shirts, these students also refused to do so. Faced with the dilemma of what to do, the school administration is proposing changes to school policy and a dress code that prohibits clothing with any words, logos, graphics, or designer labels. Those opposed to the code claim that it essentially requires students to wear a school "uniform."

At a school board meeting, students and staff present arguments about the proposed policy change.

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

The junior class president, a male, has been one of the leaders of the T-shirt protest group. He sees the issue as a symbolic one, and is opposed to policies and actions that deny students' rights. His parents, among the more affluent families in the school district, are active members of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and supported the production of the protesters' T-shirts.

He presents the following argument:

Any restriction on student dress violates students' basic rights. Once a student clothing choice is prohibited because it is considered "offensive," a precedent is set for limiting free speech in all areas of school life.

Americans, including American high school students, are guaranteed the right to free speech by the US Constitution. The First Amendment in the Bill of Rights states, "Congress shall make no law... abridging the freedom of speech..."

Public schools are agencies of government, and therefore are expected to follow the law as established in the Constitution and Bill of Rights. The US Supreme Court has upheld the free speech rights of students. In a case similar to this one, Justice Abe Fortas wrote, "First Amendment rights, applied in light of the special characteristics of the school environment, are available to teachers and students..."

The school's argument to support banning the shirt was flawed. School officials said that the lyrics on the shirt were "offensive" and therefore "disruptive" to the school environment. As our protest T-shirts showed, however, there are many meanings for the word in question, most of which are not offensive to anyone. It is defined in the dictionary as meaning: "a female dog," "a difficult situation," or "a querulous, nagging complaint."

The protesters' T-shirts, which they were asked to remove, used the word to represent the "difficult situation" that will result if students' rights to free speech are not respected. The school administration has shown in a number of specific instances that it is more concerned with controlling student behavior than guaranteeing student rights. An example would be last spring in the student government elections, when posters making fun of some school rules were taken down.

In conclusion, restrictions on student dress violate students' basic rights. The school overstepped its bounds when it used an interpretation of the words on the shirt to argue that the shirt was offensive. The school's proposal of a more restrictive dress code will create a "difficult situation" in which students' rights may continue to be lost. Therefore, the wearing of such shirts should be allowed and the dress code should remain non-restrictive so that we don't set a precedent that limits free speech in all areas of school life.

HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

The high school principal, a woman, is concerned about disruptions in school resulting from the wearing of clothing that may be offensive to some students and staff members. While she was personally offended by the words on the T-shirt, she has also tried to listen to and reason with the protesting students, to little avail. Regarding student dress in general, she is concerned that many of her students lack the money to afford the designer label clothing worn by some of her more affluent students, and the class distinctions that result based mostly on student dress.

She presents the following argument:

The offensive T-shirt, and the student's refusal to remove it, put school administrators in a difficult, "no win" situation. When the assistant principal asked the student to go home and change his shirt, he was making a "reasonable request," as defined in the school's Code of Conduct. When the student refused, the administrator had no choice but to suspend him for "insubordination."

The school has over 1500 students and 100 staff members. Many staff members and a number of female students found the shirt's message and graphic to be offensive. In situations such as this one, the school administration must ensure that the school environment is not disrupted. Administrators often have to prioritize the "good of many" over the preferences of a few.

When the referring teacher and a group of students who accompanied her came to the office, they testified that they were "deeply offended" by how the shirt depicted women. They demanded that the student be sent home to change, and said they could not remain in class with him if he wore the shirt. In cases such as this, conflict often results. Our job is to prevent this sort of disruptive conflict.

Disruptive situations such as this incident can be prevented by a more uniform dress code. Shirts without any logos, graphics, or designer labels can not offend anyone, and will not be seen as expressions of style, economic status (or free speech, for that matter). A more uniform dress code will help remove distinctions of class and lead to a more unified school community.

In conclusion, and because having to decide what is acceptable or offensive and what is not is a "slippery slope," the school administration therefore proposes a stricter dress code, clearly describing what is acceptable, uniform dress – with no words, logos, or graphics visible. In so doing, we can reduce the wearing of offensive clothing, disruptive interpersonal conflict, and class distinctions in our high school.

PERSPECTIVES