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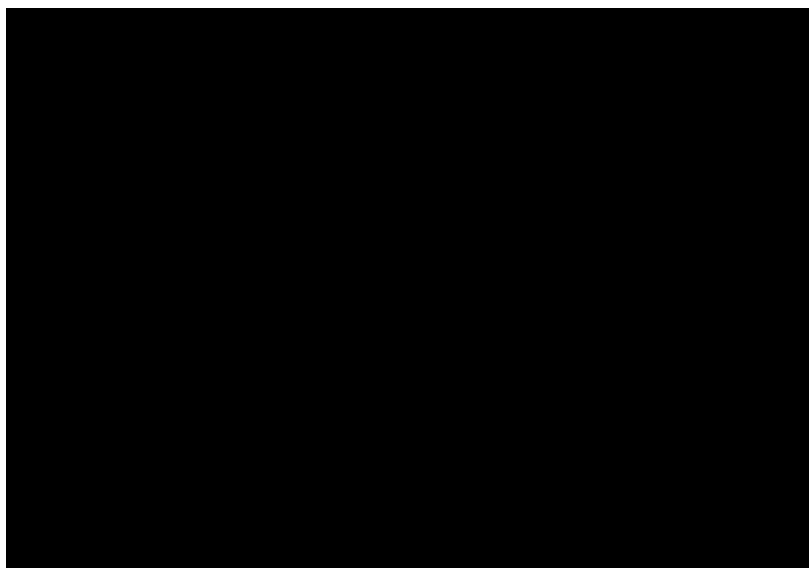
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HYDE PARK, JAMAICA PLAIN, ROXBURY

English High to join Boston schools requiring uniforms

Posted by Matt Rocheleau May 20, 2011 01:18 PM

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(Courtesy: ETV)

English High School's student television program, ETV, hosted by Juan Colon and Yohana Amanuel, previews next year's school uniforms designed by Society Original Products.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Collared shirts, cardigans, V-neck sweaters and vests – even optional ties and scarves. [English High School](#) students will have a new look next fall when the “Blue & Blue” becomes just the fourth public school in Boston to require uniforms.

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And school officials hope that by inviting students to help design the uniforms, the teenagers will be more willing to wear them.

“It was such a big buzz when we started this process over what the look would be,” said Headmaster Sito Narcisse. “The question I kept asking students was, ‘What will we be able to do to get you guys to wear it?’ ”

The 800-student school in Jamaica Plain hired popular urban clothing label [Society Original Products](#) to create the uniforms. The company

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was founded by two Bostonians – one from Mattapan and the other a Dorchester native.

A group of students, mainly freshman through juniors, worked alongside representatives from the brand, worn by hip-hop stars, including the rapper Wiz Khalifa.

Designing began in October, and a main desire among students was that the uniform allow for options so that they could mix and match an array of top and bottom types and colors.

“Every kid had their own preference of fashion,” said Narcisse, who remembered when students surprised him by asking that ties and scarves be added to the school’s new clothing line. “They wanted to add their own style.”

The uniforms have a preppy, collegiate feel and are emblazoned with a large, capital E above smaller text with the school’s name and founding year – a reminder of the school’s historic standing as the country’s oldest public high school.

The collection includes a mix of sweaters, vests, cardigans, long- and short-sleeve polo shirts and T-shirts available in four colors – navy blue, light blue, gray and white. Optional ties, scarves, and other accessories are expected to be available later next year as well.

Pants, shorts, and skirts can be worn in gray, black, navy blue and khaki. Jeans aren’t allowed. Pants must be kept at waist level; skirts or shorts must extend to or past the knee. Black or brown belts are required. Shoes and their laces must be solid-colored black, white or brown.

Policies at other Boston schools

Boston schools are allowed to implement dress codes and uniform policies independently, but according to state and district regulations.

City public school policy forbids “internal detention, suspension or expulsion from school and/or be[ing] penalized academically,” for uniform policy violators. Instead, schools use incentive-based and positive reinforcement measures to encourage compliance.

The Community Academy of Science and Health in Hyde Park began a uniform policy three years ago at the request of both parents and students.

“I think it works out great, and I think the students like it. It saves families a lot of money on clothing and it gives us more camaraderie,” said Jim Kelley, an Army JROTC instructor at the school.

Teacher and disciplinarian Bruce Collotta said the number of students out of compliance with the uniform policy has steadily decreased since the rules first began.

“There’s always that small percentage of kids that don’t want to wear the uniform,” he said.

Madison Park Technical Vocational High School in Roxbury began requiring freshmen to wear uniforms around two to three years ago. Students in the

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upper grades often wear uniforms related to their vocational studies.

This school year, New Mission High School in Roxbury became the third of the city's 134 public schools to implement a mandatory uniform policy. And, the school plans to keep the trial policy next year.

Principal Naia Wilson said the idea began with a group of students who approached her last year. From there, a school-wide fashion show was held last spring to show off potential uniform ideas, and around 75 percent the student body voted to adopt the school's current four-day-a-week policy. Fridays are dress down days.

"It's always not easy," to enforce, said Wilson.

After around 95 percent compliance at the start of the year, she said the winter months proved most challenging as students often came to school dressed in attire meant to insulate from cold and snow. "But it certainly to us makes a difference with the culture and climate of the school."

The school tries to work with families whose students struggle to adhere to the policy, she said. All families who needed financial help to buy the uniforms received it, and only one student is exempt for religious reasons.

"Most families are really on board," Wilson said. "I've never had students come to me and say, 'this is taking away my individuality.' For a lot of students, it really does take away that [peer fashion] competition. It makes it easier for them to get up in the morning and get to school."

A growing number of city elementary and middle schools have begun offering uniforms in recent years. School outfits at those grade levels are "not mandatory, rather encouraged," according to school officials. Younger students and their guardians tend to follow the recommendation.

An out-of-compliance student at English High will partake in same-day afterschool community service, the [school's policy says](#), in addition to having parents contacted and the incident documented in their student file.

Students can request exemption from the policy for certain personal reasons, including if wearing the uniform creates financial hardship or violates religious belief. Excuses about unwashed uniforms or hungry pets that reportedly chew on clothing – in addition to eating other all school-related items like homework – won't fly with administrators.

But, because of students' involvement with creating the uniforms, the headmaster expects few, if any, challenges or rebellion.

"When kids see a majority of students doing things, they tend not to fight that," Narcisse said.

"Our goal is to work with students and parents," he added. "Most of the time when you get push back on things, it's not because they don't want to do it. It's the process. The more we engage them the more they work with you."

Uniforms latest of many changes at English

The uniforms will be the latest in a slew of policy changes at the high school that has been designated a "turnaround school" by state officials along with 11 other significantly-underperforming Boston schools and 23 more schools elsewhere in Massachusetts.

This past year, English High extended its school day, increased its tutoring and after-school offerings and made major academic grading changes

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including increasing the grade-point average needed to participate on sports teams and making the letter grade 'D' – scores 69 and below – a failing mark.

“The kids have not only been made it successfully through these changes, they’ve exceeded expectations,” Narcisse said, noting how the school’s four-year graduation rate has risen to 59.8 percent from 54.2 percent a year ago and student behavior has improved.

“There is a new energy here and students are embracing the change,” said Mayor Thomas M. Menino, who attended a ceremony at the school Monday when construction management company Parsons Brinckerhoff presented a \$20,000 donation to help pay for the new uniforms. An executive at the company graduated from English High in 1961.

Uniforms and dress codes in public schools have been met with challenges that the rules limit students’ right to freely express themselves. Court cases about the legality of such policies in public schools have produced **no clear ruling** from judges. And, **some research** in recent years has disputed that uniforms have a real impact.

However, many, including English High officials, see the attire policy as a way to keep the students focused and to train them for the working world that often requires strict or unwritten uniform rules. The school also hopes to save students the time, money and peer-pressure-induced stress of buying and picking out their wardrobes.

And, said the headmaster the policy will “bring more pride to the school, and it will also be a representation of themselves because this is truly their uniform.”

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