

# DETROIT NATIVE SUN

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UNITING & ENLIGHTENING THE COMMUNITY

## What's Inside...

POSITIVELY DETROIT	2
SPORTS	3
NEWS	4-5
EDUCATION	6
INSPIRATIONS	7
BUSINESS & FINANCE	8
MESSAGES FROM THE MOUND	9
BEAUTY & BARBER	10
LEGAL & POLITICAL NEWS	11
COMMUNITY	12
HEALTH	13
EMPLOYMENT	14
EDITORIAL	15
LIFESTYLES	16
BLACKLIST	17
REAL ESTATE	18
ENTERTAINMENT	19



## UNIFORM VIOLATION

### SCHOOL POLICIES OR STUDENT RIGHTS?

#### PART 1 - CHARTER SCHOOLS

By Valerie D. Lockhart  
SUN EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Reluctantly, a 9 year-old boy approached his mother and mumbled, "I have some bad news. Today, I received a uniform violation."

The third grader, who attends the Detroit Edison Public School Academy, explained how he was told that he could not wear black sweat pants with the moniker, "Stay humble. Hustle hard" written on the front.

DEPSA is one of six schools operating under the New Paradigm for Education, a nonprofit Charter Management Organization.

A standard school uniform policy is implemented for each grade level throughout the district. Elementary school boys, in grades 3 - 5, must wear a white button down shirt, black pants, a red tie, and black shoes and socks. Polo shirts are not allowed. Girls in the same grades must wear a white blouse with a round collar, plaid skirts, plaid cross tie, red, white or black tights or knee socks and black shoes.

"Males and females must wear proper undergarments under all apparel...this means WHITE, without designs or other colors," the policy states.

While DEPSA and other schools seek to boost enrollment with advertising that brags about the services offered, they have all failed to state what their uniform policy is and how it may affect low-income families or children with physical disabilities.

"We discontinued our uniform policy, after we returned to in-person schooling following COVID," said a teacher at one of University Prep Academy's elementary schools. "We did not want to inconvenience families or place a financial burden on them. We wanted kids to come back and to get back to the business of learning."

University Prep Academy operates 10 schools in Detroit that includes three high schools.

"We believe all students should be able to dress comfortably for school and engage in the educational environment without fear of, or actual, unnecessary discipline or body shaming," noted in their Student and Family Handbook. "We believe teachers should focus on teaching without the additional and often uncomfortable burden of dress code enforcement."

UPA's board and administrators strive to maintain transparency by posting policies, schedules and contact information for board members online for the community and stakeholders to access.

"Our vision for our U Prep School Communities is to provide a culturally responsive educational experience for our scholars that builds academic competence, habits of work and scholarship, and self-actualization empowering them to successfully accomplish their post-secondary plans, as well as socially and civically engaged as change agents for themselves and their community," Danielle Jackson, chief executive officer, said. "We developed our Student and Family Handbook with this vision in mind. Our handbook is designed to help you understand Our Vision and Purpose; How Restorative Practices live in our community, our programs, and Our Policies and Procedures."

According to the ACLU, public schools that enforce gender specific uniform policies are not only violating student rights but are breaking federal laws.

"Public schools can have dress codes, but under federal law dress codes can't treat students differently based on their gender, force students to conform to sex stereotypes, or censor particular viewpoints. Schools can't create a dress

code based on the stereotype that only girls can wear some types of clothes and only boys can wear other types of clothes," officials said.

Paris, who has a 10-year-old daughter that attends DEPSA, agrees with the ACLU.

"All girls don't like to wear girly dresses. Some girls come on their menstrual cycle and don't want to wear skirts. They may feel uncomfortable and would rather wear pants," she said. "It's unfair that high school girls get to wear pants, but not the elementary school girls."

Earlier this year, a charter school agreed to pay \$1.465 million to parents and students who challenged the school's "skirts only" rule for girls.

"This settlement should send a strong message to all public schools: Dress codes that impose different requirements based on sex perpetuate the notion that girls are not equal to boys, harming students of all genders," Ria Tabacco Mar, director of the ACLU Women's Rights Project, said. "Schools should adopt gender-inclusive dress codes – or risk facing steep costs."

While the 9-year-old DEPSA student was initially fearful of being suspended from school for receiving a uniform violation, he mustered up courage to stand up for his rights and to fight back. He wore the same pants back to school a couple weeks later and was prepared to receive a violation.

"My pants say, 'Stay humble. Hustle hard'. I'm doing just that," the ambitious honor roll student said. "I'm not only a kid entrepreneur, but I'm a kid activist too. Somebody has to stand up for kids, so why not me. My mom said that my great-grand parents would be proud of me. One was a labor rights activist and my great uncle was president of the NAACP. They stood up for what was right, and now it's my turn."

Administrators at DEPSA did not respond to our email regarding their uniform policy nor did anyone at New Paradigm for Education's administrative office answer our calls.

