



**ethnic  
communities'  
council of  
victoria**

23 April 2007

## **ECCV Submission to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools**

1. Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) welcomes the opportunity to present a submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools.
2. ECCV was established in 1974 as a voluntary community based organisation. ECCV is now a broadly based, statewide, peak advocacy body representing ethnic and multicultural communities across Victoria. ECCV has a volunteer executive of 19 people representing our member organisations. ECCV has a chairperson, office bearers and full time professional staff running various programs and services. ECCV works for culturally and linguistically appropriate services and access for Victorians from non-English speaking backgrounds and develops policies and strategies in this area. This submission has been developed following consultation with the ECCV Executive Committee.
3. ECCV believes that any introduction of mandatory school uniforms should not undermine the rights of people of multicultural and religiously diverse backgrounds to wear reasonable clothing or attire of significant cultural or religious importance.
4. Victoria is a multicultural society populated by people of hundreds of faiths and languages. Any mandatory school uniform policy needs to recognise and respect the significant level of cultural and religious diversity in our community.
5. For instance, mandatory school uniforms should not be used to prevent students from wearing significant and reasonable cultural or religious attire such as Christian crosses, hijabs (Muslim scarfs), yarmulka (Jewish caps), or turbans (Sikh headwear).
6. The wearing of significant and reasonable religious or cultural attire can be of the utmost importance to the self-identity of students from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. Any attempts to prevent the wearing of such items, when those items are reasonable, would be contrary to basic human rights and in breach of the discrimination in education provisions of the Victorian *Equal Opportunity Act* and the rights to cultural self-expression contained in the Victorian *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities*.
7. The banning of religious attire in French public schools in recent years has attracted international attention. While some argue this policy relates to France's secular traditions this decision has been interpreted by many as discrimination against Muslim girls choosing to wear hijabs. Muslim girls in France have been expelled from school for wearing hijabs which are reasonable religious attire. This could be deemed contrary to international human rights principles regarding freedom of religion and freedom of expression. In our view, there is no

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justification for implementing such a policy in Victoria and this would be detrimental to community harmony and the rights of minority communities.

8. Any mandatory school uniform needs to recognise that notions of modesty vary across and within different cultures. For example, the inclusion of skirts in school uniforms may present problems for some culturally and linguistically diverse communities as well as some Anglo-Australian communities in regards to the length of the skirt. ECCV recommends that school uniform provisions allow for a degree of flexibility such as permitting students to wear pants rather than skirts and allowing students to wear long sleeved tops if they so desire.
9. Mandatory school uniforms (while allowing for cultural and religious clothing preferences) may assist students from new and emerging communities in regards to their sense of belonging in a new school environment.
10. Mandatory school uniforms can have the benefit for people from low income families of not having to compete with children from high-income families wearing fashionable and expensive clothes which may enhance their social status to the detriment of children without access to these clothes.
11. Many new and emerging communities, particularly refugee groups, have very low incomes when they establish themselves in Australia. It is important that any school uniform policy considers the cost of such uniforms and ensures they are not unduly expensive. Payment arrangements also need to be flexible, and include provisions for payment over time, so as to assist low-income families.
12. If mandatory school uniforms are introduced ECCV recommends that all Victorian schools are strongly encouraged to implement a system which allows second hand uniforms in good condition to be bought and sold. Such a system would reduce the financial pressures that any mandatory school uniform may place on low income families.
13. Another option expressed by one ECCV Executive Member would be to consider having uniform school colours but allow students to have flexibility in what type of clothes they wore providing the clothes matched those colours. If the school uniform was navy blue and white, clothing attire that matched those blue and white colour arrangements would be acceptable, regardless of whether it was short or long sleeved, or skirts or pants. This would allow for uniformity with flexibility.
14. In conclusion, any Victorian school uniform policy needs to recognise and respect the right of Victorian students to wear reasonable and significant religious or cultural attire in combination and complimentary to any mandatory school uniform, ensure uniforms are affordable, and be of a standard or have a degree of flexibility that is acceptable to most groups in our community.