



Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

School Uniforms (Guidelines and
Allowances) Bill:
Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children
and Young People Youth Panel

3 June 2025

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Nick Mathison (Chairperson)
Mr Pat Sheehan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Danny Baker
Mr David Brooks
Mr Colin Crawford
Mrs Michelle Guy
Mr Peter Martin
Mrs Cathy Mason

Witnesses:

Ms Eva Bradley	NICCY Youth Panel
Ms Rhea Donnell	NICCY Youth Panel
Ms Astrid Knox	NICCY Youth Panel
Ms Bethany McKinley	NICCY Youth Panel
Ms Laura McFall	Office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Following the Youth Assembly's evidence session, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) Youth Panel is here to bring the young person's perspective on the implications of the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill. You are all welcome, and we look forward to hearing from you. From the Youth Panel, we have Eva Bradley, Bethany McKinley, Astrid Knox and Rhea Donnell. Is Laura McFall joining us? Hopefully, she will join us when she is available. She is the participation officer from NICCY.

At this stage, I will hand over to you and say that we are really glad to have you here and to hear your evidence. This is legislation that, probably more than any other that has been through the Assembly recently, impacts on children and young people directly every day that they are in school, so it is vital that we hear your views on the Bill.

We will begin with any opening remarks or presentation that you want to make. We ask that that be up to 10 minutes, but it does not have to be that long or hit that target. We will then move to questions from members and answers. If, at any stage, there are questions that you are not comfortable answering, you are completely at liberty to say so. If you do not think that it is an area that you have expertise in, that is absolutely fine, and we will be happy to move on, should that situation arise.

The Committee Clerk: Laura has hurt herself, so she will come in as soon as she can.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I know. OK. Do we need to hold off on starting the session?

The Committee Clerk: Here she is.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Laura, are you OK to take part?

Ms Laura McFall (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People): Yes. Apologies for the drama.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): We have Laura McFall joining us. I hope that you are OK to get through the session, Laura.

I will hand over to you for opening remarks.

Ms Eva Bradley (NICCY Youth Panel): Good afternoon, Chair and Committee members. Thank you for the opportunity to give evidence today. My name is Eva, and I speak as a member of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People's Youth Panel. I will use the opportunity to highlight how uniform policies can have unintended consequences, particularly for neurodivergent students and women and girls, especially where safety, privacy and choice are concerned.

I will start with my story. In my secondary school, it was mandatory for girls to wear skirts and tights with no option to wear socks or trousers. As a student with special educational needs (SEN), I faced many barriers at school, and those uniform regulations were one. Due to my sensory issues, I found it extremely uncomfortable, even distressing, to wear tights, and that had a detrimental impact on my ability to learn. Therefore, I had to get formal permission from my school special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) to wear socks to school. Many young people across Northern Ireland who, like me, are on the autism spectrum or face sensory difficulties have other experiences, whether with fabrics, materials or uniforms, so even having to wear a tie with the top button of their shirt done up can prove difficult for a lot of people with sensory issues.

Article 23 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) addresses the right of children with disabilities and covers access to education for disabled children. Therefore, there must be provision in the Bill to allow students with disabilities and those with short-term conditions to have flexibility over their school uniform.

The design and enforcement of school uniform regulations often disproportionately impact on women and girls. Society often places greater control over the appearance of women and girls, which is perpetuated by a great deal of uniform policies. In many schools, particularly in mixed-gender schools, uniform policies place greater emphasis on girls, with the enforcement of regulations on skirt length, hair, jewellery and tights being commonplace in schools throughout Northern Ireland, with some even placing rules on the denial of tights that girls can wear and staff members measuring the length of skirts.

Girls should be able to go to school and feel comfortable with what they wear, and they should be given the option of wearing a skirt or trousers. Many girls have reported feeling unsafe whilst travelling to school in their uniform, with many being subject to harassment, such as catcalling, on their way to school.

Upskirting is a serious problem in Northern Ireland schools. Many girls feel that they may be less unsafe if they were given the option of wearing trousers. That should not be viewed as the solution to upskirting and sexual harassment, as more needs to be done to tackle those issues and to end violence against women and girls. However, it should absolutely be an option for girls to wear trousers if they choose.

Thank you for listening and for the opportunity to speak.

Ms Bethany McKinley (NICCY Youth Panel): My name is Bethany, and I am a first-year student. I wanted to be here today because I have been passionate about the subject for quite a few years now, and I thought that sharing my opinions would be beneficial for others who do not feel that they have a voice.

Uniform is an adjective, which means:

"remaining the same in all cases and at all times; unchanging in form or character".

However, in most schools, that is not the case, as there is a distinct separation of boys and girls, which, in some cases, even extends to gendered blazers.

I will raise two points about choice and equality that go against or impact on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which most schools teach. Being restricted by your uniform can make it harder to do some curricular and extracurricular activities, such as drama. Have you ever tried to act out a scene where you are trying to escape through a window while wearing a skirt? It is hard to do. The fabric in the hem of the skirt can be uncomfortable and rub against your legs, and, due to its length, it gets caught all the time. The fabrics used in uniforms can often be irritating and uncomfortable, and there is no choice for an alternative, because you are often restricted to one supplier, unlike trousers, which you can buy from a million different places.

School is meant to be a safe space for children. When you take away the choice in what pupils can wear, you find that it is not comfortable any more and does not make you feel as though you want to be there. Female teachers can wear trousers, and male teachers can wear shorts, so why is it different for children? In the past week, I have spoken to at least 30 people in my year, and all of them agree that they would be more comfortable or feel that it would be beneficial for others if pupils had the choice of wearing either skirts or trousers. Some people whom I spoke to were happy to wear skirts but felt that they would like the option to wear trousers or shorts. Others did not feel comfortable at all about being made to wear skirts and tights. It should not have to be one or the other; there should be a choice of both.

Equality and choice in uniforms will not have an impact on learning. If anything, it will help, because you are able to concentrate on what matters and are not thinking about other worries, including concerns about your uniform or how you feel or look.

Ms Astrid Knox (NICCY Youth Panel): We want to talk to you today about our school uniform and our rights. Our school's vision states:

"We will accept you for who you are, welcoming your individuality. As a member of our school family, we will work in partnership with all who care for you, to support your emotional and academic growth through empowering you to reach your full potential in a safe and loving environment."

That vision is an important part of why we are all here today. We want all children's school experience to be like that.

Ms Rhea Donnell (NICCY Youth Panel): Not too long ago, we went ice skating, but, for safety reasons we were not allowed to wear skirts. That got us thinking, so we started our petition to request a change to our school's uniform policy. We contacted the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People to ask what he thought.

Ms Knox: Chris got us thinking about the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Those rights are all over our school and are promoted by a rights-respecting team. Article 2 of the convention is about non-discrimination. Having to wear skirts means that we cannot participate in activities in the same way as boys. We are less able to move freely for drama, dancing and sport. We have been told that skirts look tidy, but being tidy is not as important as being comfortable. We think that boys look tidy in their trousers, so why would we not? We think that all children in all schools should be treated the same way with the same choices and chances.

Ms Donnell: Article 3 of the convention is about acting in the best interests of the child. Adults should always do what is best for us as children. That means that our ability to play, focus on education and experience equality should be important to all adults, especially those who make decisions that affect children.

Ms Knox: Article 5 is concerned with family guidance as children develop. Our parents support our decision to wear trousers to school, and our teachers and parents guide us in using our voices.

Ms Donnell: Article 12 is all about having respect for children's views. We feel that, at times, our concerns have been dismissed or washed over. We have been given no real reasons why we have to wear skirts, but we have lots of reasons why we should not. Adults should not only listen to us but take

our views seriously and use them in their decision-making. Our petition shows that the vast majority of girls want the option of wearing trousers to school. Academic research also supports our position.

Ms Knox: Article 16 of the convention is about the protection of privacy. Wearing a skirt, even with shorts underneath, can be uncomfortable and embarrassing if your skirt blows up. Having to wear tight leggings in PE class makes us feel uncomfortable. We do not understand why we cannot wear jogging bottoms like the boys, as those make us feel more comfortable. As we grow, changes in our bodies make privacy even more important for girls.

Ms Donnell: Article 23 talks about children with disabilities. When I tore a muscle in my leg, my skirt was very uncomfortable. My little sister will start P1 in September, and she hates the feeling of skirts. I know that lots of little girls will feel the exact same way.

Ms Knox: Article 28 of the convention is on access to education. I know that lots of girls are distracted by the feeling of their uniform, which stops them being able to focus and learn.

Ms Donnell: Article 29 is about the aims of education, which is about more than tests. Our comfort would allow us to explore our talents. We are not alone in that: the camogie players are clear that shorts would make their sport easier.

Ms Knox: Article 31 is about rest, play, culture and arts. We want to be able to play and dance freely at break time without our skirts going up. We should also be able to travel freely to school by bike or walking and not be worried about the cold or getting our skirts caught up in the bike. We even have a lead academic whose research tells us that skirts restrict movement and affect girls' health. We have provided a letter from her outlining her support. We have also been asked to write about the issue for her blog and her campaign group.

Ms Donnell: Our petition shows that our peers support our campaign. Experts also support our campaign. Chris Quinn, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, supports our campaign and has written a letter of support. Skirts impact on our rights. Dr Mairead Ryan, a leading researcher on the impact of uniforms on children's health, supports our campaign. The public support our campaign.

We went viral with a 'Belfast Live' article following the NICCY press release. Our school has now agreed to change its policy to allow girls to wear trousers, but we want to make sure that no girls have to spend time fighting for that, when it is an easy thing to change. We ask that we have the same options as boys: trousers on uniform days and joggers for PE. Will you please support our campaign, accept Claire Sugden's amendment to the legislation and uphold our rights?

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you very much. That was a comprehensive overview of the issues. I probably do not need to spend too much time asking about your views on girls being permitted to wear trousers in school. Those have been set out extremely clearly and in a clear, rights-based framework. That was a helpful articulation of that issue and how it impacts on you, so thank you for that, and credit to both of you in your campaign. You have rightly gathered a lot of media attention, because we should not be having this conversation in 2025. It should not be something for which special permissions need to be granted. I am clear in saying that your campaign is asking for the right things, so credit to you both. Thank you, all, for your evidence. It is so important for us to hear how uniform policies impact on your day-to-day lives, so your evidence has been really helpful.

I will broaden out the question about the wearing of trousers. That was articulated as clearly as it could have been, so I do not have to focus on that. I put this question to the Youth Assembly, and I will put it to you. The Committee has been looking at whether there is a need for a broader inclusion clause, something that would look at whether school uniform policy should be required to provide, yes, the more gender-neutral options and choice in that space but also flexibility to reflect additional needs or disabilities: for example, flexibility around religious or cultural practices that might impact on the wearing of a uniform. Would you support a clause that covered a range of equality issues as well as the specific one on trousers, on which your views are clear?

Ms Bradley: We would absolutely support that. It is my personal view and probably the view of the rest of the Youth Panel that all young people should feel safe and comfortable in their school uniforms regardless of their gender identity or religious or cultural background.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): When the Committee heard from the Human Rights Commission, it mentioned something specifically, and I think that it was used in your evidence. It was the "best interests of the child" principle. Would you like to see that embedded in the Bill in the sense that uniform policies need to be written and published with that as the lens that we look through and that the best interests of the child should run through them?

Ms Donnell: That is important. If schools just asked pupils whether they would feel more comfortable wearing, say, skirts or trousers, they would have options. It is important for children to have a say in what they wear to school: it is their uniform, and they have to wear it.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): We may come on to the issue of consultation in a moment and where that sits in the Bill. That is grand.

Mr Sheehan: Different groups in society wear uniforms. The police, for example, until relatively recently, had to wear white shirts and ties and all of that. Now, you can see that their uniform has changed a lot. A lot of the cops now wear half-zips and that type of thing. It still seems to be convention that the uniform for boys, for example, is a shirt, tie and blazer, and, for girls, a skirt or whatever it is and blazer. I talked to someone earlier who said that, at a school in her area, the young people have the option to wear half-zips and leggings or track bottoms as their school uniform. What are your views on that?

Ms McKinley: That might be a good opportunity for people to be more comfortable in what they wear to school. It might be good as an option to think about.

Ms McFall: Some of the young people whom we have spoken to but who are not here really stressed the function of the uniform. As we said in the paper that we submitted to the Committee, we would like making sure that uniforms are functional included in the policy. For example, a blazer — a woollen coat — will rarely be a useful item of clothing in our climate. On the days when we have good weather, it is too warm; on the days when we do not have good weather, generally, it rains, and it becomes cumbersome to wear a woollen blazer. Young people have talked a lot about that and about the inclusion of additional items such as gloves. We heard from one young woman who has Raynaud's disease and needs to keep her hands warm, but, because gloves are not mentioned in the school's policy, she was told to remove them. That is often the experience of children and young people: the first thing that they encounter when they enter the school at the start of the day is some kind of negative interaction about uniform.

Mr Sheehan: We have heard that, even in very warm weather, young people are not allowed to take their blazers off in the classroom. That does not seem to be in the best interests of the child and their comfort in the learning environment. Do you agree with that?

Ms McFall: Yes. I think that the girls were saying that uniform needs to be suitable for whatever activity they are doing. Do you want to give the wee example about your class in the fields, Rhea?

Ms Donnell: Every year, our school buys sheep. Girls wear skirts to school, and, in the fields behind the school, there are nettles. Most of the girls have been stung by a nettle or got their skirt caught on a thorn, and that limits them. As in physical education, they should be able to move around as much as the boys. I do not think that any boy in our year has been stung by a nettle in those fields.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): That is a really clear example.

Mr Sheehan: Thank you very much. That is useful.

Mrs Guy: Thank you so much for your evidence. I echo the Chair's comments about your campaign. You have done an excellent job, and you have explained brilliantly today not just why this is important to you but the rights aspects of it. Great work; it is impressive.

Ms Donnell: Thank you.

Mrs Guy: We do not want consulting children and young people to be just a tick-box exercise. How can we ensure that the voices of children and young people are taken seriously when we put together school uniform policies?

Ms Donnell: Just speak to a few students; that is really all. Speaking to a few students would be the best thing.

Ms McFall: It is clear from what you have heard this evening that children and young people can form their own views. They have not been coerced or directed on what to say. If we had tried that, they would clearly have said no. Children and young people have views, and, when we look at article 12, we see that those need to be consistently listened to. Article 12 has two parts, the first of which is about supporting young people to form and articulate their views. The second part is about making sure that we take those views seriously. We have a duty, and you, as the Assembly, have a duty to take them seriously. It is part of the UNCRC, which the UK Government have signed up to, and we therefore have a duty to uphold those views.

There are a lot of good examples. We have one of the world's leading experts in article 12, Laura Lundy, who is based in Queen's University. We have excellent examples across the island of Ireland of where her model has been put in place to ensure that participation is at the centre of government. There is information and guidance on how to listen to the views of children and young people and include those in decision-making. It is about making sure that that is put in place.

Ms McKinley: Also, for getting feedback from young people, our school uses Google forums, I believe — maybe Google Form quizzes. No, they are not quizzes. They are used to get feedback from people.

Mrs Guy: Surveys?

Ms McKinley: Surveys, yes. Maybe that would be an idea. You could then take the data from a survey and see what people's opinions are.

Mrs Guy: So far, in the Committee, when it comes to the Bill, we have talked a lot about PE kits. What are your views on PE kits? Is it important that there is a nice, particular brand on your PE kit? Do you need PE kits at all? What do you think about PE kits in schools?

Ms Bradley: Branded PE kits lead to inequalities for families, in that some are not able to afford the school PE kits, depending on the brand. A good measure would be to see brand-less PE kits.

Ms Donnell: PE kits are important. I agree with Eva completely: branded kits can definitely be a lot more expensive. PE kits are good. I would not even try to do PE in a skirt, for instance. It would not be easy at all. However, branded kits should not be compulsory.

Ms McFall: We have heard from some young people who are from sporty families. We hear that one branded PE kit can cost almost £100. If you are doing several sports and after-school activities or PE during school time, you may need multiples of those, because they cannot be washed in an evening and turned around. That just adds to the cost for families. It does not change your performance when you play hockey in P7, fourth form or first form. You will not be better at hockey because of the PE kit that you wear. It really comes into play only when the children do games and activities on behalf of the school — when they are in competition. Some have suggested that, in that case, the school should hold the PE kits and uniforms in the same way as some sports clubs do: purchase the uniforms, have them washed and then return them to the children when they are doing sports on behalf of the school.

Mr Baker: I might ask you to represent me the next time that I get in trouble with the Speaker about my attire. *[Laughter.]* I might actually win.

Thank you. That was really important. You referenced the amendment that has been submitted by Claire. After listening to the two presentations, it is becoming clear that, although you support it, it probably does not go far enough. We need to incorporate a lot more, and equality and rights need to be at the heart of it. Had you been consulted at the beginning of the drafting of the Bill, it would look completely different. I assure you that our team is working away on that to make sure that it is rights-based for our young people.

You have covered everything. I do not even have a question. Thank you. It was comprehensive. I hope that everybody is listening to this, because it is so important, and it is you who live and breathe this every day.

Mrs Mason: Much like Danny, I do not have any questions for you. That was absolutely fantastic. You covered so much. I thought that you would repeat things that we have already heard and back up things that other people have said. However, you raised another issue: the safety aspect of wearing a skirt. That story about the nettles is something that I had not even thought of. We always think of the issue of allowing girls to wear trousers as one of equality or comfort, but it is about much more than that; it is a health and safety thing as well. Thank you. It has been fantastic and really insightful.

Mr Crawford: Thank you so much for turning up. Girls, I was reading about you upstairs in the office before I came down. Keep fighting, keep speaking out and keep speaking up for what you believe in and what you hold dear, and never let anybody limit you because of your age, gender or anything about you. Keep strong, and keep fighting for what you believe in.

My question is this: if or when you have worries or concerns in school, maybe about your uniform, do you feel that your teachers or principals take time to listen and take those on board?

Ms Donnell: I think that they do. Our principal listened and has changed the uniform policy in my and Astrid's school. All you have to do is ask, and they will support you.

Ms McFall: There is an inequality in experiences. Bethany, I know that you were told off recently for wearing gloves in school.

Ms McKinley: Yes.

Ms McFall: Did you feel that you could challenge that or question why?

Ms McKinley: No. It was not that you could challenge it; it was more, "Do this or else you will face consequences". You do not feel that you have the option to challenge it.

Ms McFall: Quite a lot of children have told us that they get demerits or some kind of sanction or punishment when they do not have the correct uniform on. However, they just do not feel like they can challenge it, or their views are dismissed. Not being taken seriously was mentioned. They are told that people are concerned about their education and their well-being. However, they sometimes have genuine concerns about things. It is not about saying, "I want to turn up in my Nike tracksuit". They are saying, "I want a functional uniform that does not cost my family a lot of money", and they are not taken seriously or are given reasons such as, "You look better. You look smarter. You look tidier". It is difficult for a young person to keep challenging that when they do not understand the reasoning behind it. I know that somebody mentioned that to you, Rhea, and you were quite discouraged at one stage in your campaign. What were you told?

Ms Donnell: We were told that skirts look tidier, and someone told us that we should not be doing this, because we were in P7 and leaving next year. Astrid and I feel that it is not just for us; it is for the girls from the past and the girls in the future so that everyone feels comfortable in what they wear. I just think that everyone should have the option.

Mr Crawford: Thank you very much.

Mr Brooks: Guys, you have all spoken very well today. Well done, and thank you for your presentation.

Can I ask about demerits? That was not done in my school, at least not under that name. That was mentioned in the previous session. Is that a case of multiple strikes and then there is a sanction? What does that look like?

Ms McFall: Some schools have a uniform card. One young person told us that you get a black mark if you have any uniform infraction, and, if you get five black marks, you get a detention. Other schools have a demerit system: you start with, for example, 20 credits, and, for every infraction, such as wearing incorrect uniform, not doing a homework or pushing somebody in the corridor, you get so many points deducted.

Mr Brooks: We talked about this in the last session. That is an attempt to ensure that there are not disproportionate punishments for one small infraction, but, rather, that there are multiple chances. I am

not necessarily defending that or trying to get into a debate about it; I was just interested in the concept and how it works. I appreciate the answer. Thank you.

This may be a question for Laura. Guys, if you want to feed in or give examples, I am happy to hear them. We have heard from Bethany about the gloves. Sometimes, when uniform issues are raised, we hear about the exceptions. I have felt, maybe naively — that is why I ask the question — that they are exceptions. In the workplace, we usually have reasonable adjustments, and I hope that schools, for the most part, are willing to look at reasonable requests and exceptions, particularly when there are conditions, illnesses and disabilities involved. In your experience, are there many cases in which that is not the case and, even when there are specific conditions and good reason for a reasonable adjustment to be made, schools do not take that into consideration?

Ms McFall: Yes. It depends. Most schools will have a common-sense approach and will act, particularly when a child has a disability, which is more common. However, there is a long waiting list for ASD referrals at the moment. A child may have sensory issues that have not been identified. Eva spoke about the impact that that had on her. It took you quite a while, did it not, to get that adjustment put in place.

Ms Bradley: Yes, it did.

Ms McFall: It was quite a battle. For a child of 11 years of age who already has undiagnosed autism and sensory issues that impact on their well-being, it is hard to keep on challenging that. Some simply stop talking about it. There is that hidden discomfort. In particular, we hear quite a lot from young women who, around their period, do not feel comfortable going into school in their school uniform, so they just do not go. I know that you have spoken to a period dignity project about that.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): That has been rescheduled from last week to tomorrow.

Ms McFall: There are instances in which those common-sense adjustments, which are reasonable adjustments for disability, are met. However, things that will just make young people feel better and happier are often not met, and no good reason is given.

Mr Brooks: I will come back to that point.

We heard concerns from Rhea and from the previous panel that young people's views would not be listened to and taken seriously. We are listening; others are listening. That does not always mean, in the end, that everything that you would like to happen will happen. I am sure that you know that; I am not trying to over-explain it. It does not mean that those who come to different conclusions at times are not listening. I imagine that you will experience that in the different forums that you take part in. I want to make that clear.

As someone who is probably on the more traditional end of the spectrum in my views on school uniform and so on, I have to say that schools not making reasonable adjustments concerns me. Reasonable adjustments and adjustments to school uniform in general should not require a Bill, frankly, for them to be considered and for people to be listened to. You might argue that that would be better — we are having that discussion — but, whatever our views on different aspects of the Bill, when it comes to duty of care, if someone comes forward to a school with a health condition or another good reason for those adjustments to be made, those views should be listened to, even from my point of view, and the adjustments should be made.

Thank you. Well done for putting together a campaign and making your voice heard on these issues, and thank you for your presentation.

Mr Martin: I have been really impressed by your evidence. I see that Rhea and Astrid are leading on the BBC News website. People around this table would pay money to get there, so you are doing a great job.

The main point of the Bill is to make school uniform affordable. How important is it that all school uniform is more or less the same in order to make it affordable? One thing that the Bill is trying to do is to make sure that there are only so many branded items and that, if you need a shirt, blazer or sports gear, it may just be black and have no logo, which makes it cheaper.

Do you accept that uniform is still important in schools? In some of our discussions, for example, we have considered what would happen if there were no uniform code or if somebody came in wearing the wrong uniform. Say, for example, that the uniform policy stated that you could not wear branded trainers and somebody came in with branded trainers, should they get a demerit? The uniform code states "no branded trainers", but somebody comes to school wearing branded trainers: what do you think about that?

Ms Donnell: What if branded trainers were the only pair of shoes that they had to wear at the time? There should be no punishment for what shoes you wear, unless, say, you are trying to play hockey and you come in wearing high heels. That is just not normal, and you should not do that. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Martin: You definitely should not do that, Rhea. That would be a bad idea.

Ms Donnell: Branded shoes are OK as long as you feel comfortable in them. You should wear whatever shoes you feel most comfortable in.

Ms McFall: There is a lot around the spirit of the law versus the letter of the law when it comes to uniform policy, and children often experience that letter-of-the-law approach. It is not taken into consideration why there is some kind of infraction. Sometimes, we have to assume the best. If someone is coming into school wilfully violating the school uniform policy to make a statement or whatever it might be, fair enough, it might warrant a discussion. However, as Rhea said, those might be the only shoes that they have. They might be wearing a coat because it is cold that day. We need to remember that, as humans, we make choices about what is appropriate for us to wear. There needs to be some flexibility with children to allow them to do that.

In some cases, with those small infringements of uniform policy, is it not better to rebel by wearing hoop earrings instead of stud earrings than by bringing a knife into school? We need to remember that, during teenage years and adolescence, people will test boundaries, and it is OK, sometimes, for those boundaries to be small things that will not impact on their education or the well-being of those around them.

Mr Martin: Do you accept that it could be quite hard for teachers, if there were not some rules around uniform? Teachers have to deal with lots of children, and that can be hard if children are coming in wearing different things. It goes back to my first point about the trainers.

One of the ideas behind the Bill is to make sure that the uniform that people get is cheaper and that everyone can afford it. That is really important to me. I think that the deputy Chair raised in a Committee meeting the point that no child should make a choice about their school on the basis of cost: for me, that is mission-critical.

Can you see what would happen if, say, there were 30 kids in a class and the rule was "no branded trainers"? Are Nike Air expensive? I do not really know. I do not have a pair, but we will assume that they are expensive. For Hansard purposes, other brands are available. Do you think that, if one kid comes in wearing Nike Air and everyone else is wearing non-branded trainers, somebody else might want to show off that they have more expensive trainers and come in wearing Nike Air trainers the next day? That might make some people feel bad, if their parents cannot afford Nike trainers.

Ms Donnell: You should just wear what you have. If that person only has Nike Air trainers, they should wear them. Also, people should not feel pressure to wear what other people wear.

The uniform policy is important, but, sometimes, there are reasons why you should be able to go against it. If you do not have unbranded trainers and the only trainers that you have are the Nike Air ones, it is important to know that you can just wear those if they are the only shoes that you have, but nobody else should feel pressure to wear what that one person is wearing.

Mr Martin: That is brilliant. Thank you so much for those great answers.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I do not think that any of us would say that the job of a teacher is easy to navigate with all the issues that arise in any given day in a school. Having been married to a teacher for many years, I know that that is the case.

I get a little nervous when we get into the language of crime and punishment and infractions. It would be much better if we could foster a culture of respect and inclusion. That would be a good starting point. I appreciate that there are always issues to navigate. That is by way of a comment more than anything else.

There are no indications from other members, so that brings our evidence session to an end. Thank you again for your time. Thank you for the really comprehensive evidence that you have given and for sharing a lot of personal accounts, which is not easy in a public forum like this. The Committee really appreciates your engagement with us today. Thank you.