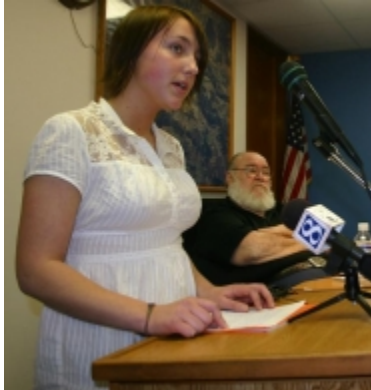


High school dress debate heats up

Students bring concerns to school board, television cameras

BY GARTH GUIBORD 

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Sandy High School junior Annalisa Peterson addresses the school board at its Feb. 11 meeting. Board member Jim Duff listens.

MARCUS HATHCOCK / SANDY POST

Sandy High School students, unhappy with the recent adjustments to the dress code, took their complaints to the Oregon Trail School Board meeting Monday, Feb. 12. As reported in The Post last week, the focus of those adjustments dealt with student safety and gang issues at the school.

Some students, however, felt that the updates to the dress code are not going to be helpful or effective policies.

“I believe that these new rules are simply an example of the administration implementing a superficial solution to deeper problems that they don’t want to go into,” Annalisa Peterson, a junior at the high school, told the board. “If there were gang issues at Sandy High School, it would not be put to rest because they aren’t able to dress the same. Gangs will still be gangs whether they are in uniform or not.”

Sandy High School Principal Jim Saxton complimented the students for having the courage to speak their minds before the board, but he also defended the newly defined rules. Saxton pointed to three separate occasions since the new code was put in place Monday, Jan. 29. All three centered on identifying a non-student teen who entered the campus; in the third incident, beer was found in the teen’s backpack.

“I’m not interested in having that kind of influence around the school,” Saxton said. “If it takes something like this (dress code) to try to curb it, that’s what we’ll do. If we see in the future that it’s not working, then we’ll try something else.”

Saxton and Vice Principal Tim Werner stressed that the dress code is a part of a proactive strategy that will help keep gangs out of the school and make it safer in general.

“The main things with gangs are identification and intimidation,” Werner said. “The dress code is a tiny piece of (the solution). We’re just trying to stay a step ahead before it’s a problem.”

A group of students including Peterson felt differently and organized a T-shirt protest on the first day of the newly defined dress code. The group of approximately 50 students wore T-shirts with “G.A.N.G.” on them, standing for Girls/Guys Against Nonsense Government.

The student protest generated quite a conversation on local discussion boards and caught the attention of Portland-based television media outlets.

As of Monday night, Feb. 12, www.sandypost.com online readers made 11 comment postings on last week’s story, “Sandy High dress code targets gangs” — the biggest response to any article posted online since the new comment feature was introduced on The Post’s Web site late last year. (See excerpts of some of those comments on the Opinion page, Page 4A.)

At news-and-views blog portland.indymedia.org, locals and interested Portland-area readers contributed 23 bulletin board posts regarding the dress code issue.

On both sites, most of the comments were made anonymously or with pseudonyms, and a majority opposed the dress code changes.

Peterson, freshman Katie Pelchar and junior Sierra Willett contacted the major television stations in Portland, drawing ABC affiliate KATU and NBC affiliate KGW to the Feb. 12 school board meeting. The dress code controversy made the evening and/or late-night newscasts on those stations as well as on Fox affiliate KPTV.

The debate will continue for now, as Peterson plans to take the issue to the School Board again and may take the G.A.N.G. T-shirts to other parts of the community.

Students organized another protest in response to an idea from board member Randy Carmony that students could wear name badges with their school ID numbers. According to Sarah Young, the student government’s community liaison, the suggestion particularly angered the students.

“We were all just furious sitting there in the meeting,” Young said. “We see it almost like a dictatorship.”

Young and like-minded students scrambled to send text messages to as many Sandy High School students’ cell phones as possible in hopes of organizing a late-notice protest.

On Tuesday, Feb. 13, dozens of students wore T-shirts that read, “Hi, my name is,” followed by their six-digit student numbers, with a barcode on the back.

“They might as well scan us instead of taking attendance,” Young said. “We’re not students anymore, we’re a number, and they don’t know us by name.”

Young noted that students couldn’t get in trouble for having the numbers on their shirts, despite the fact that numbers are now forbidden by the dress code, because students use their identification numbers every day at school.

The ban on numbers, however, may be short-lived, as Saxton remarked that school administrators will reevaluate some of the new dress code, including numbers.

“We’ll take a look at that; we’ve already had some discussions,” Saxton said. “We want to be proactive, but we don’t to be so restrictive that the kids can’t wear their favorite shirt.”