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Fact checks needed for recent dress-code comments by board members

Tensions ran high at the Gallup McKinley County Schools Board of Education meeting on Aug. 15 over a number of issues previously reported by the Sun. One topic loudly interrupted the school district superintendent when it solicited cheers and boos from audience members, and even a member of the school board.

The topic was about dress-code policies that are instituted and upheld at multiple Gallup McKinley County Schools at an autonomous level. Superintendent Frank Chiapetti clarified near the beginning of the discussion that most questions would be better posed to a panel of principals who all have different school codes made for different reasons and, in some cases, during different school years.

The conversation was tame enough to begin with when Board Secretary Lynn Huenemann brought up a singular issue concerning students not being allowed to wear blue jeans. He didn't disagree with any dress-code policy concerning modesty, offensive graphics, or wearing gang colors.

Huenemann said it's important for students to be able to wear neutral clothing that's common to the area they live in — for instance, professionals in Gallup and the surrounding rural area often wear jeans.

“Even pastors in our rural area wear jeans at Sunday-morning church services,” he said. “So why can’t our kids wear jeans to school?”

Chiapetti said each school is independent in regards to dress-code policy, but there are school district requirements it must meet.

Some schools allow jeans, while others do not. Either way, Chiapetti asked the board to direct questions, like those regarding jeans, to the principals of the schools in question.

Discord ensues

Chiapetti then explained the benefits of dress-code policies that require a uniform like polo shirts and khaki pants. When the matter of cost was addressed, he mentioned that, in town, polo shirts are affordable.

It was this talking point that caused Board President Priscilla Manuelito to loudly interrupt the superintendent with interjections of, “That’s where you are wrong,” and, “I disagree with you there,” multiple times.

Manuelito said students couldn’t afford polo shirts that cost $50.

“I wish you could see the poverty of these students that are not living as comfortably as you,” Manuelito said to Chiapetti.

The Sun followed up with Chiapetti in order to better understand this issue and Manuelito’s response.

“I cannot figure out what she is arguing on dress code,” Chiapetti wrote in an email concerning

Manuelito. “Polos can be purchased as low as $3.99 in some stores in Gallup, and pants under $10.”

$50 vs. $3.99

The Sun did some fact checking to see whose prices were more accurate concerning polo shirts for students: Manuelito at $50 or Chiapetti at $3.99.

The truth favors the superintendent, as two stores offer polo shirts in multiple student sizes for $4 or less. In fact, as of press time, Fallas at the Rio West Mall, 1300 W. Maloney Ave., had polo shirts for $3.33.

The Sun couldn’t find a store in town that sold plain polo shirts for over $30.

During the meeting, Manuelito also said that some parents couldn’t afford to go to a Laundromat once a month to clean school clothes.

According to GMCS dress-code policy, whether a “student’s appearance is detrimental to the educational process” is up to the school’s personnel and may relate to the cleanliness of the attire — whether it be polo shirts, graphic t-shirts, or blue jeans.

Board members offer their two cents

During the meeting, Vice President Kevin Mitchell shared a recent experience he had while attending a birthday party for an elementary-age child.

“This family’s relatives and friends bought [the student] nice new clothes that he wasn’t able to wear for the first day of school,” because of this particular school’s dress-code policy, he said.

Newest board member Sandra Jeff contributed to the conversation by offering a story she heard second-hand elsewhere in the country.

Jeff spoke of a student who wore clothes that fit the school's dress-code policy, but that weren't the right size. The mother of the student bought the clothes from a thrift store, and chose the size that most closely fit her child.

After the student had been bullied for having shoes that didn't fit, the young teen committed suicide.

Jeff had no comment for the Gallup Sun when asked for clarifications, and no news articles could be found to verify her comments.

Poll results

The Sun reached out to teachers, parents, and students in the Gallup area on Facebook for input regarding dress codes that require all students to wear polo shirts and khaki pants.

Of those who participated, 80 percent were in favor of having such a dress-code policy.

"They equalize kids, reduce bullying, and make the morning routine easier," parent and GMCS alum Mandy Remenar said.

Taylor Walker, a teacher at Chief Manuelito Middle School, said some schools like her own help with the cost of clothing if families can't afford the uniform-style dress code.

“Dress codes help to equalize students/minimize bullying due to different types of dress,” Walker commented on Facebook. “I also feel they help prepare students for life outside of school by teaching them that places of work (and school is their job currently) have certain expectations they will need to follow — how to dress being one of these expectations.”

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