

# KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

School Dress Codes,  
Gender, and  
Self-Expression



## CAN I SPEAK OUT WITH MY CLOTHING?

**YOU CAN WEAR WRISTBANDS AND ACCESSORIES THAT EXPRESS YOUR POINT OF VIEW.**

**SCHOOLS SHOULD NOT BAN:**

1. Rainbows
2. LGBTQ, feminist, political, and identity messages
3. Pride symbols/slogans

**FIRST AMENDMENT RIGHTS**

## EVERYDAY DRESS CODES

Public schools can have dress codes, but federal law says that dress codes cannot treat boys and girls differently, force students to conform to sex stereotypes, or censor particular viewpoints.

### **Schools Cannot:**

1. Create dress codes based on gender stereotypes. For example, your school can require that skirts must be a certain length, but not that only female students can wear skirts.
2. Create dress codes that are only gender neutral on paper; dress codes must be enforced equally. For example, “revealing” clothing rules, such as bans on tank tops or mini skirts, should not be enforced only if the student identifies as female, nor should they be enforced more harshly against certain groups of people such as transgender girls or girls of color.

## PROM, HOMECOMING, GRADUATION, AND OTHER SCHOOL EVENTS

Schools cannot require students to dress in attire consistent with traditional gender norms for special events, such as graduation ceremonies, prom, and homecoming. All students are allowed to wear clothing aligning with their gender identity and expression.



## GROOMING

Courts have not been consistent in their views about jewelry, ear piercings, and hair length. These situations must be considered on a case-by-case basis. If you have questions about your school's policies on grooming, please contact the ACLU-PA.

Please email questions to  
**info@aclupa.org**

## WHAT DO YOU DO IF YOUR SCHOOL CLAIMS THAT YOUR ATTIRE IS DISRUPTIVE?

School officials sometimes try to justify censoring student expression by claiming that their dress is disruptive. Often, school officials are influenced by the views of parents and other students when deciding what is and is not disruptive. Courts have consistently ruled that student and parent reactions to LGBTQ or political messages should not justify censorship by the school.

### If you are punished for your attire:

- Remain calm and polite. You can comply with the orders of your school official in the moment and then seek help if you believe you are being wrongfully censored.
- Keep copies of all paper work given to you by the school, including demerits, detention slips, or notes home to parents.
- Contact the ACLU-PA as soon as possible.

*\*Contacting the ACLU-PA is completely confidential – any communication between you and the ACLU-PA will be kept private.*

**ACLU of Pennsylvania**  
www.aclupa.org

**Requests for legal assistance:**  
877-745-ACLU (2258) or www.aclupa.org/complaint

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