

School uniforms are hailed by many in education as promoting social equality among students and fostering a greater sense of identity, contributing to improved behaviour and even academic performance.

Practically all of the top-performing independent schools in Scotland require their pupils to wear a uniform. However, advice published by Scottish ministers last year urged head teachers to ditch ties, brightly trimmed blazers, tartan skirts and other traditional formal school garments, with the aim of cutting costs for struggling families and promoting greater comfort, freedom and happiness for children.

The guidance released in September was drawn up after consultation with schools, parents and councils. It recommends that blazers should not be compulsory, that schools should be encouraged to include generic items and colours available from a range of suppliers, and that pre-worn clothing should be put forward as a "preferred option" to promote sustainability.

Jenny Gilruth, the education secretary, said: "Schools are expected to do all they can to limit school clothing costs for families as part of our wider aim to reduce the cost of the school day."

The advice was not legally binding and has not yet been taken up by any independent schools in Scotland, where staff and indeed many students say they are proud of their uniforms and in no rush to get rid of them. But it has fed into ongoing conversations in some schools about improving the different ways uniforms are designed and sold, with objectives of greater flexibility and wearability, reducing waste and slashing costs.

Dollar Academy, a co-educational day and boarding school in Clackmannanshire, undertook a whole-school consultation on uniform, inviting all the pupils to share their views. With school uniform playing a key role in daily life, the school wanted to understand what pupils value, what works well, and where there might be room for change.

"Alongside gathering pupil perspectives, we also consulted with our colleagues, who provided valuable insights into practicality, consistency and how uniform contributes to a sense of identity and belonging," says Kate MacNish, Dollar Academy's head of prep and junior school.

The consultation found that while pupils were proud of their distinctive uniform they recognised room for improvement. "One of the strongest themes to emerge, particularly among our senior school pupils," MacNish says, "was an appreciation for the colour palette, which was seen as smart, recognisable and integral to our identity. Many pupils



Ties that bind: all in favour of a uniform approach

Blazers and badges breed respect, the heads of independent schools tell *Malcolm Jack*

valued the tradition of wearing kilts and blazers but suggested some small tweaks to improve comfort and practicality.

"As we consider our next steps, we remain committed to balancing tradition with the needs of our school community, ensuring that Dollar Academy's uniform continues to instil pride and belonging in every pupil."

School uniforms are viewed by many as old-fashioned relics, but back in 1888 the founders of St George's, a day and boarding school in Edinburgh, were dead against them. Their Froebel principles stressed the individual, believing that self-expression was key to personal development. In those days school uniform was even seen as lower-class by some, and it wasn't until the 1920s and 1930s, when many girls' high schools adopted the gymslip, a sleeveless tunic with a pleated

skirt, that they began to become commonplace.

At St George's today, all students are encouraged to demonstrate their commitment to the school community by following the uniform and dress code, and it is very much here to stay. "We take pride in upholding the tradition and heritage of our uniform, ensuring that every student presents themselves in a way that reflects our values," Carol Chandler-Thompson, the head, says.

But through its second-hand uniform exchange shop, St George's aims to promote practical, sustainable and cost-effective solutions for parents – with added benefits for the school. "The uniform exchange provides high-quality uniform at a reduced price, making it an affordable option for families," Chandler-Thompson says. "Many of our uniform items are built to last and, in some cases, have been worn by a fourth or even fifth pupil. This longevity not only ensures the continued use of well-made clothing but also significantly reduces waste, aligning with our commitment to sustainability."

"Beyond the financial and environmental advantages, the uniform exchange also serves as a valuable fundraising initiative. Proceeds generated from the sale of second-hand uniforms go towards special projects chosen by our school community, directly benefiting our students and enhancing their learning environment."

A pre-owned uniform shop is also operated at Morrison's Academy, an all-through co-educational independent day school in Perthshire, where the navy blue blazer with bright white trim and red-and-yellow chevron badge have remained largely unchanged since the school was founded in 1860.

"We are mindful of the financial impact uniforms can have on families, which is why our nearly-new shop offers sustainable and affordable options for those who need them," Colin Nicoll, assistant rector pastoral, says. "This initiative helps to make the uniform accessible while supporting our commitment to sustainability."

In spite of what the Scottish government guidance suggests, Morrison's Academy intends to preserve and continue its 165-year-long heritage of uniforms and in particular its blazers. The school believes it fosters a sense of belonging and egalitarianism within its community, and serves as a symbol of its history and shared identity, connecting pupils to the generations of Morrisonians who came before them.

"Wearing a uniform helps to create an environment of equality, reducing the pressure on pupils to keep up with the latest and often more expensive labels or brands," Nicoll says. "This ensures that all Morrisonians feel included and valued, regardless of their background, and allows them to focus on their education without distractions."

He adds: "For many pupils and their families, putting on the school blazer for the first time is a special milestone."

"It signifies becoming part of the Morrisonian family and instils a sense of pride in their appearance and identity."

The navy blue blazer and red-and-yellow badge of Morrison's Academy has been almost unchanged since 1860. Below, Erksine Stewart Melville uses a red tartan



Malcolm Jack

In an ongoing hangover from the lockdowns of the Covid-19 pandemic, more than 20,000 pupils enrolled in Scottish schools missed at least half of their lessons in 2022-23. A report published last year by the think tank Centre for Social Justice found that 2.7 per cent of pupils in primary, secondary and special schools were "severely absent", with figures up over 70 per cent on pre-pandemic levels.

Statistics released by councils across Scotland further revealed that tens of thousands of pupils were absent for at least 20 per cent of school in 2023-24. Data shared in response to a series of freedom of information requests by the Scottish Conservatives last year revealed that a minimum of 184,845 children in primary and secondary school were absent for at least one day every fortnight, and 71,852 were missing a day of school each week.

While Scottish government figures pointed to a small decrease in persistent absence in 2023-24, down to 31.4 per cent from 32.5 per cent in 2022-23, the education system remains in the grip of an absenteeism epidemic. Some schools where the problem is at its worst are said to have resorted to desperate measures to tempt back chronically absent children, such as entering any child who attends five days a week into a draw to win prizes including games consoles and mountain bikes.

Scotland's independent schools are not immune to the problem, having been closed for months on end during the pandemic like all schools in Britain. The isolating effects were particularly severe for children with additional support needs, such as a disability or difficult family circumstances.

It has focused minds among school leaders when it comes to ensuring they create the most welcoming, nurturing and motivating environments possible, with targeted support systems in place for persistently absent children.

"We understand the challenges of rising absenteeism in Scottish schools, particularly in the post-pandemic context," says Victoria Gamble, head of Fairview International School, a co-educational International Baccalaureate world school in Bridge of Allan.

"We create a supportive environment that motivates pupils to attend, enjoy and feel fulfilled by their school experience. This sees us focusing on engaging, inquiry-based learning that makes education relevant and inspiring for our students."

Gamble believes Fairview's small class sizes play a crucial role, allowing staff to provide a more personalised experience and greater individual attention. When it comes to addressing the needs of frequent and long-term absentees, she highlights the importance of pastoral care.

"By identifying the underlying causes of absenteeism, we offer tailored resources, including individualised academic plans and emotional support," she says. "We believe collaboration with families is vital for reinforcing this support. Ultimately, our goal is to cultivate a culture of belonging and encouragement, ensuring that every student at Fairview feels valued and motivated to succeed."

Every child is individual and has their own skillset, and not all excel in traditional mainstream subjects such as maths and English. In that context, it's not hard to understand why some pupils



Making learning enjoyable is key to tackling absenteeism

The number of children missing days has soared since lockdown, but teachers believe an enriching and varied curriculum within a positive environment can reverse the trend

can feel left behind. At Dollar Academy, a co-educational day and boarding school in Clackmannanshire, the staff strongly believe that good attendance is linked to a broad and diverse curriculum that genuinely interests pupils, wherever their academic curiosity and aptitude may lie.

"We are fortunate to be able to offer among the widest range of SQA subjects of any independent school in Scotland," Karen Miller, assistant rector, says. "It's a deliberate point of planning because we believe that academic success is strongly linked with enjoyment of the curriculum. With over 34 Highers to choose from, pupils are able to study subjects that they are passionate about, be that engineering, science or photography."

"Our dedicated staff body are deeply passionate about their subject areas and the learning experiences they provide. This coming year, with a particular focus on S5 and S6, we have significantly expanded our academic offering by introducing a range of new qualifications, including NPAs and National 5s in emerging subject areas including cybersecurity, travel and tourism, and costume design. This initiative is part of

our commitment to ensuring a more diverse and enriching experience for our students."

When it comes to encouraging children to attend school, it's not just about the academic environment, according to Colin Nicoll, assistant rector pastoral at Morrison's Academy, an all-through co-educational independent day school in Perthshire.

"It's about helping young people

discover their passions and develop as individuals," he says. "Our wide range of co-curricular activities allows pupils to explore what excites them, whether it's through sport, music, drama, Stem [science, technology, engineering and maths] or other interests. Many of our pupils thrive on the social benefits of these activities."

The enthusiasm that extracurricular pursuits instil in many Morrison's pupils

Getting to school on time is taken seriously at independent schools such as St George's in Edinburgh



We understand that when children are happy, they excel in every aspect

is plain to see, with some eager to come in at 7.30am on a Saturday to play hockey or rugby, and others remaining on campus until 7pm on weeknights for pipe band.

"It's not just about the activity; it's about the friendships, teamwork and sense of community that they build through these experiences," Nicoll says.

"By combining a strong support system, enriching opportunities and a focus on individual wellbeing, we aim to ensure every pupil feels fulfilled and motivated to be part of our school community."

When attendance becomes a concern at Erskine Stewart Melville, a co-educational all-through school in Edinburgh, early intervention is deemed crucial. "We work closely with parents and students, recognising that each student has their own unique circumstances and challenges," Anthony Simpson, the school's principal, says.

"This year we have launched a partnership with Place2Be, the leading children's mental health charity. Together, we're offering vital emotional and mental health support to our students, while also providing parents with access to workshops and courses."

"As the first independent school in Scotland to form this partnership, it's a strong testament to our commitment to providing a safe, nurturing environment where students can truly thrive."

Among all the assorted stresses, strains and challenges that children and families face daily, it's easy to overlook the importance of one simple thing when it comes to ensuring that young people attend school and thrive there: their happiness.

"We understand that when children are happy, they excel in every aspect," Simpson says, "socially, emotionally, physically and academically. That's why wellbeing is at the heart of everything we do."

"It's not enough to just enforce attendance rules, we need to create a school environment where students feel valued, supported and eager to engage with their learning."