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Middle-schooler's Tigger socks spark court case

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

SAN FRANCISCO — Some schools ban gang colors. Others prohibit miniskirts. But 14-year-old Toni Kay Scott and her parents say they weren't prepared for a school that outlawed Tigger on a pair of socks.

For coming to class at a Napa, Calif., middle school wearing hosiery that portrayed the Winnie the Pooh character — in violation of the school's solid-colors-only, no-pictures, no-logos dress code — the seventh-grader landed in the principal's office, and then in a detention program called Students With Attitude Problems.

Now Redwood Middle School and the Napa Valley Unified School District, which approved the code, have landed in court.

The school's "unconstitutionally vague, overbroad and restrictive uniform dress code policy" flouts state law, violates freedom of expression and wastes teachers' and students' time and attention that would be better spent on education, the American Civil Liberties Union said in a suit filed Monday on behalf of six students and their parents.

Toni Kay, now an eighth-grade honors student, said she has been cited more than a dozen times in 18 months, and sent home from school twice, for such infractions as wearing a polo shirt with the manufacturer's butterfly logo, a pair of pink tennis shoes and a shirt with the insignia of the anti-drug program D.A.R.E.

"All my friends that go to other schools, they can wear jeans. They can wear stripes and patterns. I'm like, I wish I could wear that but I can't," she said.

When she picks out her clothes every morning, she said, "I'm asking myself, 'Is this OK for school, or am I going to get dress-coded?'"

The school policy, in effect for more than a decade, requires students' clothes and backpacks to be entirely solid colors. The only acceptable fabrics are cotton twill, chino and corduroy.

No jeans or "denim-looking" clothes allowed. No pictures, words, symbols or patterns, except the school logo. And definitely no Tigger.

The school's policy statement says the rules were developed "to ensure the safety and protect the instructional time of all students."

In a 2005 interview, school principal Michael Pearson said the policy allows the school to level the playing field.

"We do not have to deal with issues of kids who are dressing a certain way because their parents are able to shop at the fashionable stores," Pearson said. "You cannot tell on my campus the kids that come from a low-income family."

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