

Dressed To Learn

Here's one thing President Clinton has right. Schools with discipline problems can help turn things around by forcing students to wear uniforms

The idea may even catch on in New York City. With more than one million students, the Big Apple has the largest school district in the nation — and one of the most liberal.

The city's schools chancellor, Rudy Crew, backed the idea in a recent speech. He wants kids to base their self-image on academics, not fashion. "These young people have literally gotten the notion of human worth confused with the notion of material worth," he said. "It's time for us to clear this notion up that you are not what the label says in the back of your shirt."

School uniforms remove a whole class of distractions, and so help students, teachers and principals focus on education.

Does it work? Look at Long Beach, Calif. In '94, the Long Beach Unified

School District became the first large one in the nation to require uniforms city-wide.

It has mandated the simple white-and-blue outfits only in grades K-8, but after just two years the results are strong. School violence, vandalism and even drug possession are down.

Chemical substance possession fell 66%. Weapons possession is down 80%. Sex offenses dropped 91%. And incidents with dangerous devices have fallen 98%. Overall, crime in these schools fell from 3,222 incidents to just 920 — a 71% drop, even as enrollment rose 4%.

School uniforms don't just stem violence. They have a positive influence, too.

LBUSD's elementary attendance rates reached 94.5% in the '95-96 school year. That's the highest in 15

years of record keeping. Ditto for middle schools, where 94.3% of kids are in class.

Meanwhile, crime is up 28% over two years in LBUSD high schools, which have no rules on uniforms. "These are the same families, the same communities, and the same kids," noted district official Dick Van Der Laan. "And yet crime is increasing."

Early on, LBUSD had to hurdle legal obstacles set by the American Civil Liberties Union and other liberal legal aid groups. Their complaint? Uniforms cost too much for low-income parents.

In fact, these clothes cost far less than the Tommy Hilfiger and Calvin Klein fashions they typically replace.

And the real issue is decency. Uniforms symbolize — indeed, help set — the expectations and standards now lacking in the homes of many underprivileged children.

That doesn't guarantee better students. But it's a big step in the right direction.