In response to student requests, and to views from two parents and one important visitor to the school, at my suggestion the Governing Body recently consulted with parents and with students on a proposal to change the colour of the school polo shirt from the current beige to a dark green, matching the blazer. More than 75% of the students and parents that responded were against this proposal. Please see the Graphs below. Student responses are first; parents second.

In the light of the above I recommend that we do not adopt this proposal.
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As happens when parents are consulted about an aspect of uniform, a small number of parents have raised counter proposals to change other aspects of the uniform in ways that they believe would improve things. On this occasion, two suggestions have been raised by a small number of parents:

- Remove the school coat from the uniform, instead specifying a generic alternative
- Exchange the polo shirt for a shirt and tie.

I very strongly recommend that we do not follow these suggestions.

Our school coat and our polo shirt are two of the key pillars of the leadership strategy which over a decade have allowed us to become a school which is calm and safe, is characterised by exceptionally positive relationships, and is a place where students from all backgrounds can and do work together as equals and the overwhelming majority feel that they belong. This in turn has allowed us to attract and retain an exceptionally strong staff, and so achieve exceptional outcomes for our students. Belong More enables Achieve More and Be More – at Thurstable, they cannot exist without it.

Our intake has a large number of students who come from educationally deprived families, and a significant number who come from economically deprived families as well. In the past (pre 2007) we failed to integrate these children with those from advantaged homes, and operated an increasingly divided school, with setting being used to create an effective system of segregation between the have and the have nots in lessons (with resultanty poor outcomes for the disadvantaged) and a social and emotional environment that was extremely damaging. Shouting at students was expected, student fights at break and at lunch were common, and exclusion was used as a coping mechanism when the “sin bin” (seldom occupied by advantaged students) failed – and it failed all the time.

The uniform (shirt/tie and generic coat) exacerbated and fed this toxic environment, as students wore over garments that covered their uniform, and their parents argued how black grey had to be to be black, what “large” meant when applied to a logo, and what was and was not a hoodie or a coat. At the same time, the school swung between ignoring absurdly worn ties and untucked shirts, and “blitzing” them to try to assert that staff were in charge, after all. All this staff time and effort led to further division and alienation, and to less and less engagement and focus on learning. By 2006 this had reached a stage where only 38% gained the GCSE benchmark, and exclusions were amongst the highest in Essex.

To remove the school coat and/or to move back to a shirt and tie would “nudge” us back to a time when staff and student relationships were corroded by a constant nagging over shirt and tie etiquette, or where poor shirt and tie etiquette led to perceptions that we were a school not worth belonging to. Removing the school coat would quickly lead to the significant number of students facing disadvantage walking into and out of school covered by non-uniform tops and hoodies that they felt protected their “street cred”, but offered little in the way of warmth and protection from the rain, and made them look to local residents like “hooligans” that they need be afraid of.

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We are a school that is unique in my experience because we have been able bring together advantaged and disadvantaged students together in one positive and mutually supportive student body, with huge benefits for learning and for personal development. We have become a school where almost all children can thrive. Our uniform, with its combination of polo shirt, blazer and school coat, is a key part of the strategy that has allowed this.

What follows are a number of documents that together explain in more detail exactly how these elements of our uniform work in helping shape the school that we now have.

Appendix 1 – Rationale for the School Coat – from 2010

Appendix 2 – Sample Email to Parent on the School Coat

Appendix 3 – Letter to Prospective Parent on the Polo Shirt.

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Appendix 1 – Rationale for the School Coat – from 2010

It is now three years since we announced our new school uniform (including the two part coat) following a thorough consultation process involving students, parents, staff and a number of local residents. Changes to school uniforms cannot be undertaken lightly or quickly, as they can involve a great deal of inconvenience and expense for parents, and so having selected the uniform that was preferred both by students and parents, we announced the changes in February 2007, and they were phased in over 6 months, becoming compulsory in September 2007. Following a parental survey via our website we introduced a knitwear v neck jumper as an optional additional item in September 2009.

The aims of our school uniform (including the school coat) are as follows (and not necessarily in order of priority):

1. To ensure that students are as warm, dry and comfortable in all weathers and in all seasons as possible
2. To ensure that students are suitably dressed for learning
3. To ensure that students look smart and to present a positive image for the school
4. To provide a visual manifestation of belonging – an indication that all students are part of the same community, whilst allowing some scope for students to be individuals
5. To minimise pressure on students in school to seek empty self esteem and illusory peer respect through dress
6. To minimise cost to parents
7. To minimise "child pressure" on parents to buy unsuitable items
8. To create an opportunity for educating children about choice, ownership of choices made, and the consequences that follow choices whilst minimising any consequent risk to them or to their education
9. To ensure that students are instantly recognisable as students whilst on site, and so allow any non-school members to be identified and challenged more readily

The school coat plays a key part in all of these aims, as follows:

1. Having the school coat does already ensure that more students are warm, dry and comfortable than they were prior to its introduction. More students now wear a coat, and far fewer wear totally unsuitable fashion items that provide little or no protection. The flexibility of the fleece/shell combination means that more students have the right coat for all weathers, because they can do so in a single garment. Even more students would benefit if more of them chose to wear the school coat, but this is a matter for them, and for their parents.
2. The flexible and practical features of the school coat mean that more students arrive to lessons warm and dry than was previously the case.
3. The fact that the school coat has completely banished the hoodie from the school site, and drastically reduced it on the journey into school has transformed how local residents and visitors to the school perceive the students and the school.
4. The fact that school uniform is now visible at all times on site rather than being covered by a non-uniform coat has greatly increased the perception of belonging experienced by students as well as the positive impact of the uniform on the school ethos.
5. The school coat has reduced peer pressure on students over dress.
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6. The school coat offers parents the opportunity to purchase an all weather, all seasons coat for £24, which should last at least a year in normal use, and is good value.

7. As a result of the fact that we specify the school coat as the only one we accept on site parents are free to “lay the blame” on us, or even better, simply refuse to consider undermining school policy. The school coat makes all arguments about what is or isn’t a uniform coat redundant.

8. Schools should have as few absolute rules (as opposed to absolute values) as possible, to allow maximum room for responding positively to student views, and maximum flexibility for dealing with students as individuals. However, every school needs a few absolute rules to make sure that students know that in the end, for safety and educational reasons, children must do what they are reasonably asked to do by their teachers. Without this, any school with a socially balanced intake will rapidly become the kind of institution chosen by few or no parents for their children, and with very good reason. If children at such schools prosper, it is in spite of the school, and not because of it. Ideally, these absolute rules should be enforceable with minimum damage to staff/student relationships, with absolutely certainty and through completely consistent sanctions, which should ideally be “low tariff”. The school coat provides us with an ideal “absolute rule” which meets all these criteria.

9. The importance of the school coat is obvious here. Without it, the uniform is mostly covered.

Over the last two years a number of “myths” have grown up around the school coat.

Myth 1 - the uniform is not warm enough for cold weather

Our uniform is absolutely warm enough even for the current temperatures. It takes a layering approach, and with:

- a vest of students’ or parents’ choice (provided it is not visible - we do sell ones that are not)
- the school polo shirt (now also in long sleeve version)
- the school knitted jumper
- the school blazer
- the school thermal fleece
- the school wind and shower proof shell

children are insulated enough for anything the British weather can throw at them. Students and their parents can choose their own trousers, provided that they are black and are school wear as opposed to fashion wear, and there is nothing to stop students wearing thermal leggings which can be bought readily from outdoor shops. We have no rules over hats, scarves and gloves, except that students must take them off in lessons if their teacher asks them to.

Myth 2 - The school has a school coat to make money

The only financial factor in the determination of our school uniform is to keep costs to parents down as far as our other uniform aims will allow. Quite rightly, schools are not allowed to profit from the sale of their uniform. We have never and would never do this.

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Where possible within our uniform aims, we allow parents to select their own supplier. Where this is not possible, we ensure items are "badged", and we bargain hard with suppliers to keep the cost of the uniform down. We charge all uniform items we sell to parents at cost, subsidising the costs for parents with more than one child in the school or whose children are in receipt of free school meals.

Conversely, it would be inappropriate and irregular to subsidise sales of our uniform from the taxpayer funds we receive to educate children, and we have never done so.

Myth 3 - The school could specify colours and designs for all uniform items (and in particular the coat) and still achieve its uniform aims

The result if schools with socially balanced intakes such as ours take this route, and do not have at least key uniform items on a "badged and supplied by us" basis is that the uniform becomes ragged, divisive and impossible to enforce. I have seen this at work over 20 years in 4 different schools.

Parents come under unbearable pressure to purchase items that push the boundaries further and further, as children vainly seek for illusory peer respect and empty self-esteem from the baggiest hoodie or the largest and loudest logo. As this happens, staff/student relations become more and more strained from attempts to enforce the unenforceable, the ethos of the school becomes more fractious and less ordered, and local residents and visitors to the school see what appears to be an ill disciplined, divided school, populated by children who appear to be disengaged and disaffected...and this becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy.

In a very real sense, schools and student bodies are what they appear to be. I am certain that the vast majority of parents wish the school to appear to be and so remain what it currently is: a friendly, open community, with a positive ethos and a clear set of values based around our core principles of belong more, achieve more, and be more.

Myth 4 – The school “disrespects” students by saying that hooded tops and heavily logoed coats lead the community to perceive students as threatening

We owe a duty to students, parents, the wider community and the school to recognise the reality of how young people in hooded tops and logoed coats are regarded by older generations. The fact that this perception is stereotyping and is not accurate is beside the point. It is the reality of the situation. Over time, as a school community, we can work to change this perception, but only if we first recognise how these types of dress affect others, and take the decision not to wear them because mistaken or otherwise, other people matter.

I would rather some children were annoyed at not being able to wear their own coats, and at worst were chilly when choosing to stand in the playground rather than wear the uniform (or get inside the school buildings) than have elderly residents live in fear as our students pass their houses on their way into school. The lessons that we are what we appear to be, that any effort to make the world better must start with ourselves because that is what we control, and that other people matter are absolutely key to the Thurstable values, and I am sure that the vast majority of our parents share them.

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Myth 5 – Children suffer unreasonably from cold because of our school coat policy

Students’ coats are only confiscated on the school site. If they are left very exposed, we will offer to lend them a school coat. They are able to get under shelter or inside at all times when on the school site in very cold weather. We avoid confiscating coats at the end of the day because we don’t want to prevent children wearing whatever coat they have brought to school on the journey home. We return coats to students at the end of the day the first three times their coat is confiscated, and we then write to parents explaining that they will need to pick the coat up from school the next time it has to be confiscated, asking for their support.

All this means that students suffer no more from our school coat policy than annoyance and self imposed short term chilliness. As their Head Teacher I regret their annoyance and chilliness, but as a parent myself, I believe that all the benefits of the school coat outlined above, and the all important developmental lesson that you don’t get your own way by “cutting off your nose to spite your face” make this worthwhile.
Dear Mrs

Thank you for your emails, which are the first I have received this year on the school coat. I thought I would provide some more information to help explain why we have the policy that we have. Having been here for nearly 10 years and seen the impact of our school coat policy, I can tell you that a very significant reason why (with the mixed intake that we have) we are able to be the school that we are, and that you are so pleased with in every other aspect, is our school coat policy.

I stand at the Barbrooke Lane entrance to the school most mornings, and so I know that few students chose to wear the school coat (at least as a coat rather than the fleece alone as an "under blazer" garment). However, those that do are absolutely not bullied for wearing it, and when they do they find that showing you can stand up against peer pressure is actually a sign of strength. This is an important lesson in itself.

The fact that a majority of students prefer not to wear the coat is not in itself reason enough to change the rules. A majority of students would choose to extend lunch by an hour and cancel period 5, I am sure, but that does not mean that it is right for us to do so. Children are very good at knowing what they want - but often need help and support from adults in getting what they need.

The school coat is a key part in a very carefully thought through and well established system that allows us to be a safe, supportive community, where children are listened to, but enjoy the right to be children and to take on responsibility as they are ready, and has helped create a school where children increasingly understand the extent and limits of their own rights, and the duties they owe to others and to their community as they grow older. The coat is one of very few "red lines" which ensure that students understand that though in life they will always have a range of choices, they will not necessarily have every choice, and that the choices they make in relation to the rules of the communities of which they are part will have implications and consequences for them and for others. The school coat policy also ensures that when in school students’ school uniform is visible, which is important, and “nudges” behaviour on the way to school so that this is also the case for most students on their way to and from school. However, I can confirm that provided a non-school coat is taken off and put out of sight in a bag before students come on the school site, there is no rule stipulating what coat they can or cannot wear on their way to and from school.

We keep sanctions low and consistent (confiscation and an offer of a school coat loan, with a return directly to parents after the third confiscation) on this matter so that children can learn against this rule without damaging punishment following, and we have made every effort to make sure it is easy for students to wear the coat (making it compulsory to have it with them progressively through the school, this year reaching up to Year 10). We have also added items to our uniform at student and parent request (jumpers and a long sleeved polo shirt being examples) that mean the impact on children who choose not to wear the coat is lessened in terms of being cold (but importantly not removed entirely). Children are allowed to bring in umbrellas on rainy days.

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As you may know, I am a Thurstable School parent this year. My message to my son on this issue is straightforward. "Understand the rules, and make your choices within them. If you choose not to wear the school coat, there will be times in the day when you are cold. If you break the rules and wear a non-uniform coat, expect consequences to follow, and don’t complain when they do. Why not show you make your own decisions, even if others are too weak willed to do anything other than follow the crowd?" I then let him make his own choices, confident in the knowledge that whatever choices he makes he will learn from them, and will not suffer unduly or unreasonably for them. At the moment, I am slightly irritated to say, he is choosing not to wear the coat, but I hope that will change as he grows in confidence in our school.

I hope this is helpful. You will understand that this is an area that has been rehearsed very extensively indeed in school over the years, and that it is time consuming in terms of management time dealing with parental queries on this matter. However, I know that whilst it is not new to us, it is relatively new to you, and if you would like to meet with me to discuss the situation further, please let me know and I will arrange for an appointment to be made.

Best Wishes
Miles Bacon
Head Teacher
Thurstable School

From:
Sent: Monday, November 23, 2015
To: BaconM
Subject: Re: School Coat Policy

Thank you for your response.
I am yet to see even one person wearing a Thurstable coat on our journey to the school. I am concerned that will get poorly during the winter months so I will encourage her to wear her own personal coat to and from school and I will ensure that she takes it off before entering the premises.
Kind regards
Mrs

To: EvansT
Cc: BaconM;
Subject: School Coat Policy

Good afternoon Mr Evans,
My daughter (, Yr 7) won’t wear her school coat despite the current freezing temperatures. She is adamant that nobody will wear them and so she fears being singled out if she does. Could you please advise whether this is something the school will revise soon?
So far this is the only subject I am concerned about.
I am delighted with; how has settled in to school so far, the letters of congratulations she
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received for her efforts, the opportunity I have to keep an eye on homework that is set and the fact that I am able to communicate with all teachers via email.

Kind regards

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Appendix 3 – Letter to Prospective Parent on the Polo Shirt.

Dear Mrs

Thank you for your letter of the 19th of this month on the subject of school uniform, and specifically on ties. Please feel free to share this reply with any other parents who you think might find it useful. I apologise for writing such a long letter, but I felt that you and your friends deserved a full response.

Our uniform has the following purposes:
- Be affordable
- Be practical
- Create a positive impression and sense of belonging within the school
- Create a good impression of our students outside the school

Ties fail completely on the second measure as they add no practical benefit, and are actively dangerous during lessons in practical subject areas. On this basis they cannot really be said to be good value for parents’ money, either. It can certainly be argued that they have strengths in the final two measures, but we do not believe that this should outweigh their practical weaknesses. Ties also bring other issues, as “proper” ties are seldom worn “properly” by secondary school children, and constant nagging by teachers and parents to do so does not support positive relationships, and wastes valuable time. If “clip ons” are used, can we really say that the impression of formality and conformity within the school that a tie can bring is retained? “Clip ons” are frankly embarrassing to wear (I certainly would prefer not to wear one), and offer endless tempting opportunities for “twanging” with sometimes serious results.

Ties are also a very odd choice for girls’ uniform, who will almost certainly never have to wear a tie in their adult lives. Uniform has to be consistent between the sexes or it is open to challenge on the basis of equality. We take the view that we should be able to explain to a child why we are asking them to do something, and it would be genuinely hard to explain why we want them to wear a tie – especially if they are a girl. The “St Trinians” effect is not a positive one.

There is another more fundamental reason why we moved away from ties 9 years ago, and why I would not recommend to Governors that we move back to them now or in the future. We believe that for a school, a sense of belonging is of fundamental importance. It is vital to the creation of a supportive and nurturing student community, and it is vital to recruiting, developing and retaining the best teachers and support staff. If you have visited our school you will have noticed our exceptionally open, purposeful, positive friendly ethos within which we can all realise our very high expectations of each other. You will have noticed that staff and students treat each other with genuine respect. All this is possible because all of us, staff and students, know that this is our school, that we belong to it and that it belongs to us.

Our students come from a wide range of social backgrounds, and whilst the majority of them (almost certainly including your children and mine) would happily wear a tie properly, those without positive and effective parental support, or those who are going through a “teenage rebellion” phase, would not. Their tie knots would be too small, or too large, or

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too loose or too tight, their tie length would be too long or too short, and the formal shirt (that would have to go with a tie) would be worn tails out. Our choices would then be to tolerate this, or to nag and punish those not wearing the tie properly on a constant and ongoing basis.

If we tolerated incorrect tie and/or shirt wearing, we would send a very negative message not just to people outside the school, but to everyone within the school as well. School uniforms signal the willingness of an individual to be part of the school community, and if they are worn badly the negative message on belonging and on commitment to the school community is very clear. If we choose to nag and punish those who wear the shirt and/or tie incorrectly, we start and then consistently reinforce a negative spiral of alienation. This would result over time in a significant proportion of our students no longer feeling that they belonged here, and being less and less willing to work with us the more we “worked on” them. As a consequence, their learning, wellbeing and their futures would suffer significantly. As this happened, children like yours and mine would no longer find themselves part of an inclusive, positive, supportive learning community, and instead would find themselves suffering from the negative behaviours of other students that would result from the alienation that our uniform policy had created. At the same time we would start losing our best staff, many of whom are here because they want to be part of a high challenge/high support single community, where they can work with students rather than constantly nagging and browbeating them about uniform.

In conclusion, there is fifth bullet point to add to the list above that is perhaps the most important of all:

· Be easy to get right, and be hard to wear wrong!

Our polo shirts are carefully chosen and specifically designed for this purpose, and they have shown over 8 years that they do this very well indeed. Year 11 have black polo shirts to differentiate students on the final stretch of their compulsory school education, and they are very happy with them. The other year groups have a cream polo. This is a less popular colour, which is why we are in the middle of a consultation on whether or not we should change it to the only other colour that would work – the same green as the blazer, with gold piping on the collar. Currently, well over 70% of parents and students who have responded have said they would prefer to keep the colour that we have now, so there is very unlikely to be any change.

It may be that your decision on the next school for your child comes down to whether or not you feel that our exceptionally positive ethos, excellent teaching and consequent outstanding results are worth the polo shirt that plays a significant part in them. For me, this was not a difficult trade, but parental choice is always a very individual matter. I hope in any event that this letter will be of some help to you in making your decision, and answers your questions. If I have left any unanswered, please do let me know.

Best Wishes

Miles Bacon
Head Teacher
Thurstable School

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