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An award-winning English and Social Studies teacher at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, Calif., Larry Ferlazzo is the author of Helping Students Motivate Themselves: Practical Answers To Classroom Challenges, The ESL/ELL Teacher's Survival Guide, and Building Parent Engagement In Schools. He also maintains the popular Websites of the Day blog. In this EdWeek blog, an experiment in knowledge-gathering, he will address readers' questions on classroom management, ELL instruction, lesson planning, and other issues facing teachers. Send your questions to lferlazzo@epe.org. And offer your own thoughts and responses in the comments section.



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Response: Teachers Should Dress As Students' Advocate, Not 'Peer'

By Larry Ferlazzo on September 14, 2014 10:51 AM

(This is the first post in a two-part series on this topic)

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This week's "question-of-the-week" is:

What are useful guidelines for teacher attire?

This question has been debated for decades in faculty lounges and in administrator offices, and, I'm sure, will continue to a topic of discussion for as long as there are teachers and schools.

Personally, I have worn a sport coat and tie to school every day that I have taught for the past eleven years except on field trips, and feel that it slightly elevates my authority in the classroom. I also believe that it's important for students to see me in that attire since I suspect that -- apart from weddings, funerals and in the media -- I am one of the few people that they see wearing a tie (though, admittedly, I can't quite say *why* I think that might be important -- it's more of a "gut" feeling).

There are other key elements in this debate, as well, exemplified by how some New York City

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teachers began this school year by wearing New York City Police Department t-shirts. They wore the shirts as a way to oppose their union's support of a rally protesting the death of Eric Garner by a police officer using an illegal choke hold. I shared my thoughts on their actions at [Teachers, T-Shirts and The Messages They Send](#).

You can also find additional resources on the subject of teacher attire at [The Best \(Or, At Least, The Most Interesting\) Posts On Teacher Attire](#).

Today, in Part One of a two-part series, four educators - Roxanna Elden, Renee Moore, Jane Fung, and Rebecca Mieliwocki - share their thoughts on how teachers should dress.

Roxanna and Renee were guests on my [weekly pre-recorded ten minute BAM! radio show](#), and that will be available in two days when I publish Part Two. It was a very lively conversation that covered how issues of class, gender and race fit into this topic, and I think you'll want to hear it. In the meantime, you might want to listen to previous guests at the same link.

I've received many comments from readers on this question, and will be sharing them in Part Two -- there's still time to contribute your own!

And, now, here are today's guest responses:

Response From Roxanna Elden

Roxanna Elden is a National Board Certified Teacher in Miami. Her book, [See Me After Class: Advice for Teachers](#), is widely used as a tool for training and retention. Roxanna also speaks at events around the country, providing training and support for teachers and sharing a teacher's eye view on a variety of education issues. (Editorial note from Larry -- I love Roxanna's book!):

Here are four things teachers should keep in mind when choosing a teacher wardrobe.

Dress for coverage: *When you're dressing for the day as a teacher, always look at your outfit from a students' eye view. Do you bend over desks to help students? Do you sit in a chair and read to kindergarteners? Make sure your outfits cover everything you'd want them to in each position. Also, raise your arms like you're writing on the board and check whether your shirt still covers your back. Clothing that shows more skin than you intend to can become quite the focal point for your students.*

Dress for physical comfort: *Being uncomfortable affects everything you do - your mental processing time, your memory, and your level of patience with students. With this in mind, you'll want to avoid clothes that are scratchy or constricting. Dress in layers if the temperature in your classroom is unpredictable. Most importantly, wear comfortable shoes. You may be on your feet for seven hours - and it's going to feel a lot longer if your feet are killing you by lunchtime.*

Dress for savings and efficiency: *If you'd like to avoid dry cleaning expenses or the hassle of ironing every morning, check the washing instructions of your teacher clothes before you buy them. If you're hoping to get away with a smaller teacher wardrobe, stick with less trendy styles and low-key colors so students won't constantly point out that you wore the same thing last week.*

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Dress for a psychological edge: *In many ways, teaching is a performance. You need to dress so you can be "on" all day without feeling self-conscious. If you're worried you've gained weight over the holidays, avoid squeezing into an outfit you'll be tempted to tug at. You also need to balance your desire for efficiency with the teacher image you hope to project. If you want to be the teacher who wears a suit, you may end up dry cleaning after all. If it's important to you to be a trendsetter, you won't be comfortable rotating the same seven cardigans and four pairs of dark colored pants. And yes, ladies: if you absolutely must show up to work in heels for a psychological edge do it. But keep a spare pair of flats in your desk drawer.*

"When you're dressing
for the day as a teacher,
always look at your
outfit from a students'
eye view."

- Roxanna Elden in Education
Week Teacher

Response From Renee Moore

Renee Moore, NBCT, teaches English at Mississippi Delta Community College. She is 2001 Mississippi Teacher of the Year; member of the Board of Directors of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (**NBPTS**) and of the Center for Teaching Quality **Collaboratory**; co-authored *Teaching 2030* (2011) and blogs at **TeachMoore**:

This may seem a strange topic in 2014, but teacher attire is both a professional and cultural issue, and its impact matters more in some communities than others. For example, most Black parents and students here in the Delta still take great offense at teachers who dress too casually in the classroom for it sends the nonverbal message that "What I'm doing here really isn't that important," or worse, "the people for whom I'm doing it are really that important."

When I started teaching, the veteran Black teachers in my building pulled me aside and schooled me specifically on how I should dress while teaching. There was historical precedent for their concern. White teachers who had been assigned to teach in predominantly Black schools as part of court ordered desegregation often exhibited their displeasure by dressing sloppily for work. In the local community, that was a sign of disrespect.

My advice to new teachers is to locate the most respected teachers in your building, and look at how they dress and conduct themselves. Not the self-described best teachers, but those to

whom others on the faculty listen and show respect.

*Certainly, attire should be practical for the activities you will be doing during the school day, but even then it should be clean and **clearly** distinguish you as a teacher from students. This is especially true for younger teachers at the secondary level. I am my students' friend and advocate, but not their peer.*

"Most Black parents and students here in the Delta still take great offense at teachers who dress too casually in the classroom for it sends the nonverbal message that "What I'm doing here really isn't that important," or worse, "the people for whom I'm doing it are really that important."

- Renee Moore in Education Week Teacher

Response From Jane Fung

Jane Fung has been teaching and learning in Los Angeles public schools for the past 27 years. She is National Board Certified, a Milken Educator and a member of the Center for Teaching Quality:

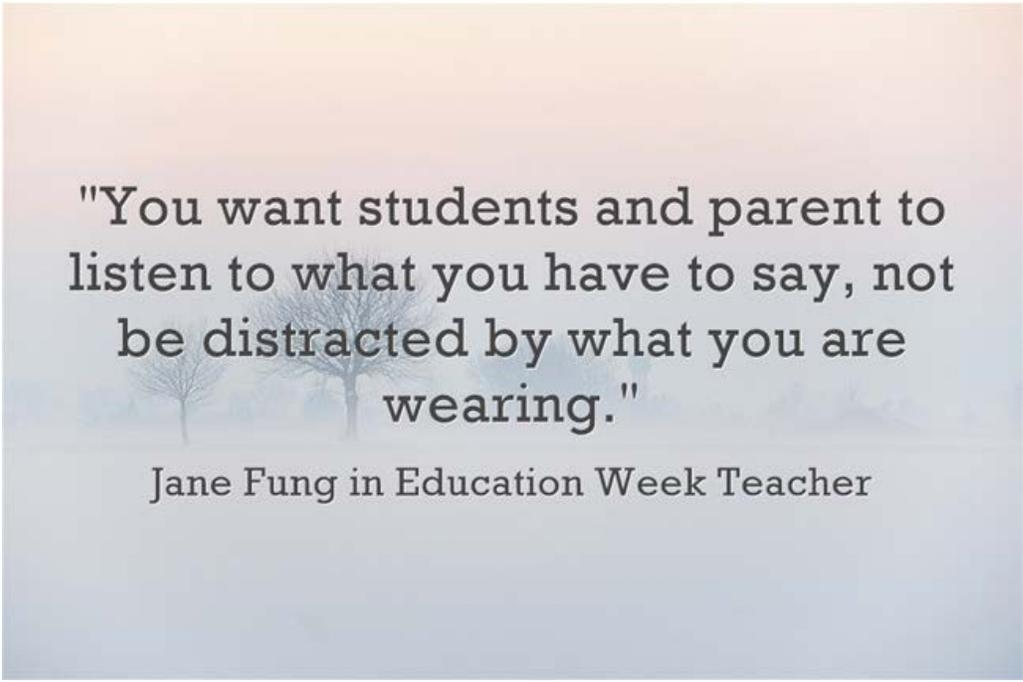
Teacher attire often varies from school to school. Teachers new to a school site can ask administration and staff what the dress code is for that school. If there aren't guidelines available, here are a few things I do or consider:

Observe what staff and teachers are wearing. *You can get a good idea about what is acceptable in terms of attire by noting what teachers on staff are wearing. One school may*

expect teachers to be dressed in more business-like attire, some may encourage teachers to dress in school uniform like the students, and others maybe more casual where jeans and shorts are very acceptable.

Can I effectively teach in what I am wearing? *If you were going to teach PE, it wouldn't be practical to wear heels or sandals, but if you teach high school English, you may be able to. I teach first grade and we meet on the rug daily, so I make sure that what I wear will allow me to sit comfortably and facilitate our discussions on the rug.*

You are the teacher. *Use your judgment when dressing the part of the adult-role model. You will interact with students, families, and the community daily. How do you want to present yourself and profession to others? I have colleagues wear flip-flops to teach, but for me, I don't feel they are appropriate for school so I don't. It's a good rule of thumb to avoid any clothing that may be too revealing in fabric or length. You want students and parent to listen to what you have to say, not be distracted by what you are wearing.*



"You want students and parent to listen to what you have to say, not be distracted by what you are wearing."

Jane Fung in Education Week Teacher

Response From Rebecca Mieliwocki

Rebecca Mieliwocki is a seventh grade English teacher in Burbank, California, and the 2012 National Teacher of the year. She has visited over thirty states and nine countries representing our nation's amazing public school teachers. She believes that there is nothing kids can't learn and accomplish with the help of an enthusiastic, well-prepared, wonderful teacher:

It's important to maintain a professional presence as educators and one of the ways we can do that is through what we wear to work. Although teachers face some unique challenges when it comes to looking sharp at work, there are still many options for how to look great in the classroom.

First, start by making sure what you choose to wear each day is clean, well fitting, and work-

appropriate. That means no pajama pants, flip-flops, ripped jeans, or t-shirts with questionable phrases on them. Clothes that are too tight, too revealing, too flashy, or too casual need to be saved for weekends too. Really, anything that draws attention to what you have on instead of the work you are doing is probably reason enough to leave it at home.

Many male teachers enjoy wearing a suit and tie or a sport coat with slacks. It's not the most common outfit for men, but it sure creates a sense of purpose and seriousness that students, fellow teachers, administrators, parents and community members respond to. Other popular outfits for men include slacks or trousers with a collared shirt or polo shirt.

Female teachers can choose anything from a dress or pant suit to slacks with an attractive blouse to a dress. More casual attire such as colored khakis and collared shirts are appropriate as well. Any outfit that conveys your professionalism, your personal style, is comfortable, and makes you seem approachable works for the classroom.

Because teachers don't have unlimited wardrobe budgets and because we often teach in situations where getting dirty is common, we need to make sure that what we purchase is easy to care for, durable, and fairly inexpensive. Thankfully, most of the midrange merchants such as Kohl's, Target, Old Navy, JC Penney and Nordstrom Rack have workplace separates that meet all of those requirements.

Often times, schools host team days or school spirit days and on those special occasions it's entirely appropriate to don your school's polo or tee shirts with clean, unripped jeans or khakis, tennis shoes or colorful flats, sweatshirts or hoodies. Kids love to see their teachers dressed up usually AND dressed down on special spirit days. We're lucky that we get to do both.

"It's important to maintain a professional presence as educators and one of the ways we can do that is through what we wear to work."

Rebecca Mieliwocki in Education Week
Teacher

Thanks to Roxanna, Renee, Jane and Rebecca for their contributions!

Please feel free to leave a comment your reactions to the topic or directly to anything that has been said in this post. As I mentioned earlier, readers' thoughts will be included in Part Two.

Consider contributing a question to be answered in a future post. You can send one to me at lferlazzo@epe.org. When you send it in, let me know if I can use your real name if it's selected or if you'd prefer remaining anonymous and have a pseudonym in mind.

You can also contact me on Twitter at [@Larryferlazzo](https://twitter.com/Larryferlazzo).

Anyone whose question is selected for weekly column can choose one free book from a number of education publishers.

Just a reminder -- you can subscribe and receive updates from this blog via [email](#) or [RSS Reader](#)... And, if you missed any of the highlights from the first three years of blog, you can see a categorized list below. You won't see posts from school year in those compilations, but you can review those new ones by clicking on the monthly archives link on blog's sidebar:

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Education Week has published a collection of posts from blog -- along with new material -- in an ebook form. It's titled [Classroom Management Q&As: Expert Strategies for Teaching](#).

Watch for Part Two in a few days....

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