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Violent actions, not clothes, define the gang member Jordan High's ban on white T-shirts after fights misses the point

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On Sept. 9, several fistfights broke out among some Jordan High School students and several trespassers as school was dismissed. Following the incident, a verbal confrontation occurred in the Jordan cafeteria involving students wearing white T-shirts, and the troublemakers were identified and immediately removed.

Following that incident, Jordan's Principal David Christenbury decided to ban white T-shirts from campus for the remainder of the school year in order to prevent further conflict. A Durham Public Schools policy allows him to amend school dress codes if it has been determined that specific student attire could incite violent or disruptive behavior.

So Christenbury has ensured that as he said, "The students involved in provoking the incident have been identified and removed from campus and will be disciplined accordance with Durham Public Schools policy, and to the fullest extent of the law."

Although white T-shirts have been associated with gangs, many fail to realize that white T-shirts have become popular because of their presence in the entertainment industry, affordability, comfort and ease of coordination with modern designer jeans.

Banning white T-shirts will neither prevent gang violence nor deter scuffles such as the one at Jordan High. It was not the presence of the T-shirts that caused the gang brawl; it was the actions of a select few students and trespassers. Whether it's a blue shirt or a red shirt, gang members are identified by more than just colors. Until school administrators understand that, such bans only will alter the attire of gang members attending a specific school.

It is not what one wears that identifies a person as a troublemaker. Instead, it is the actions of students that distinguish them as troublemakers.

No single approach or strategy can effectively address the gang dynamic, rather a combination of strategies focused on intervention, prevention and realistic alternatives are needed to deter youth from gang activity.

Attacking white T-shirts as if they prompted the fight will not reduce youth gang involvement or gang activity in schools. When dealing with this complex culture, those wanting to address the problem must ask themselves this: How is this action going to deter and prevent youth gang involvement and gang activity?

The ban of white T-shirts will do neither.

Whether it is a blue blazer or a white T-shirt, a gang member is a gang member despite the clothing and to intervene in this culture, banning clothing is just not enough nor a compelling approach.

To purge Durham and our schools of gangs, we must investigate the crime rather than the culture.

Police and schools administrators should not be expected to assume sole responsibility for youth gang problems and reducing such activity in our schools. Broad-based community collaboration is essential for long-term success.

While "disciplining in accordance with Durham Public Schools policy and to the fullest extent of the law" will provide a short-term better learning environment, such an approach is neither strategic nor comprehensive because it lacks long-term anti-gang solutions. Young gang members being expelled leaves those students without a place to be during the day besides the streets, which surely will produce crime and victimization among those individuals and others.

The cycle of suspension and expulsion to detention to corrections and prisons and back into Durham's communities will not provide these young people with marketable job skills or profitable employment opportunities to avoid the lucrative drug market. A lack of education due to suspension and expulsion is at the foundation of this cycle. Where do white T-shirts reside in this cycle? Nowhere.

While Jordan students continue to complain about the policy implemented as a result of their fellow schoolmates brawling outside the school, students should stop promoting and upholding such activity.

Rather than running to be an observer of such activity, students should actively talk with their friends and fellow students to deter gang involvement and to act as role models to those already involved in gangs.

Positive peer pressure to discourage gang involvement can be just as effective as policies and strategies adopted by school administrators.

Students must contribute to the solution rather than the problem. While students should uphold their First Amendment right to freedom of speech, which includes freedom of expression, students must provide positive alternatives to policies with which they disagree.

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