Rethinking School Uniform in 2026: Practical, Affordable and Inclusive

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Recent reporting by the BBC News highlighted a secondary school in Derby taking a decisive step: from September, pupils will no longer be required to wear the traditional blazer, shirt and tie. Instead, students will wear an all-weather jacket and polo shirt featuring the school logo.

The rationale?

Practicality. Affordability. Inclusion. And, crucially, listening to students and parents.

The school leadership cited sensory considerations, comfort, and real-world usability as part of the shift. The new uniform can be worn both inside and outside school — reducing the need for multiple garments and lowering overall cost pressure on families.

This is not an isolated move. It reflects a broader conversation happening across the UK.

A Growing Shift: From Tradition to Practicality

For decades, the traditional blazer-and-tie model has symbolised school identity and discipline. But in 2026, schools are increasingly asking:

- Does this format still serve our pupils?
- Is it financially sustainable for families?
- Are there more inclusive alternatives?

We are seeing three clear trends emerge:

1. **Reduction of compulsory branded items**
2. **Greater use of practical, multi-purpose garments**
3. **Policies shaped by inclusion and affordability**

The Derby school's decision mirrors similar developments in other areas — including schools trialling PE-style daily wear or more flexible uniform models.

This is not about lowering standards. It is about modernising them.

Councils Stepping Forward: Funding and Support

Alongside policy changes within schools, local authorities are also responding.

As recently reported, Wakefield Council has proposed a £3.5m support fund, including £2m specifically to help families with the cost of school uniforms, alongside wider winter support measures.

Other councils across England are operating or reviewing:

- School clothing grant schemes
- Household Support Fund allocations for uniform costs
- Pre-loved uniform exchanges and swap programmes
- Direct support routed through schools for low-income families

This reflects a clear acknowledgement: uniform affordability is now a mainstream public policy issue, not just a school-level concern.

Where councils champion families, schools are empowered to act.

What This Means for Schools

For school leaders and Trust executives, this moment presents a positive opportunity.

A uniform review in 2026 can:

- Reduce cost barriers for families
- Improve attendance and engagement
- Support pupils with sensory or additional needs
- Align with evolving government guidance
- Demonstrate responsiveness to community feedback

Forward-thinking schools are asking practical questions:

- How many compulsory branded items do we truly need?
- Could a jacket replace both blazer and coat?
- Could a polo replace shirt and tie?
- Could daily PE-style wear support movement and wellbeing?
- Can we introduce a pre-loved scheme as standard?

Small structural changes can make a meaningful difference.

The Role of Uniform Suppliers: Partners in Change

This is also a moment for uniform suppliers to step forward — not defensively, but collaboratively.

The suppliers who will thrive in this environment are those who:

- Offer cost-transparent pricing models
- Support schools in reducing unnecessary branded items
- Provide modular branding options
- Introduce practical, multi-season garments
- Help schools implement pre-loved or trade-in schemes

- Accept voucher and grant redemption systems
- Provide reporting to support council-funded schemes

In short, suppliers who see themselves not just as retailers, but as strategic partners in delivering accessible education.

There is a real opportunity here for suppliers to say:

"We are here to help schools modernise, reduce costs, and remain compliant — while protecting identity and quality."

A Balanced Future for School Uniform

Uniform still matters.

It supports identity, belonging and cohesion. But in 2026, identity does not have to mean rigidity.

The conversation is shifting from:

"What have we always done?"

to

"What works best for pupils and families today?"

With councils allocating funding, schools listening to their communities, and suppliers innovating responsibly, there is a pathway forward that balances:

- Tradition
- Inclusion
- Practicality
- Financial realism

For schools considering a uniform review this year, the question is no longer whether change is happening.

It is how proactively you choose to shape it.