

Remember When...

Teachers' Dress through the years

Research Committee Program

Have you ever been sitting around visiting with your fellow teachers when you started playing a "Remember When" game? Well, let's play that game at our meeting tonight. We have a wonderful (style or slide) show for you current fashions; but first let's take a look back to see how teacher dress has changed through the years. You will be pleased you live in the 21st century.

In the early decades of the 20th century, there were very few women teachers; so when women were allowed to teach in schools, they had to conform to strict dress codes. In the early 1900's teachers wore long skirts (no more than 2 inches above the ankles) with at least 2 petticoats and blouses with puffy sleeves, perhaps with matching jackets. All teachers wore stockings and ankle-high lace-up shoes. This dress was much the same as what women would wear to church or on an outing in town. One list of teacher requirements states that teachers may not wear bright colors; and, under no circumstances could they dye their hair!

In the 1930's, women teachers, following fashion, wore short-sleeved shirts, long dresses that fell to about mid-calf. They could also wear skirts of similar length and blouses. Hose were still required, and shoes were either slip-on, one-inch "high heels," or lace-up with buckles. The shoes no longer were required to cover the ankle. Whew!!

In the 1940's the war years brought rationing and shortage, so many goods and teachers were impacted as well. Nylon hose were almost impossible to find, so teachers did without or wore hose with "runs." Horrors! Since most dresses were made at home not bought in stores, teachers had little choice as to fabric or patterns.

The 1950's brought the rise of the middle class. Fabric was plentiful and most women teachers still made their own clothes or those made by a seamstress. Life was good again. Hemlines continued to rise and fabric choices were increased. Women began to wear more pants (not just for horseback riding), but never to school. Shoes continued to be mostly heels. How many of you remember seeing your teachers come to school in high heels and then trade their shoes for those gold "mule" slippers that we all wanted?

The 1960's saw the rise of much more freedom in clothes permitted to wear to school. The style of dress for female teachers had followed the styles of fashion for many years but, when the mini-skirt hit in the 1960's, teachers were faced with a dilemma. Bending over to help a student or sitting on a stool in front of a class could prove embarrassing for everyone. However, the general public (and, of course, school boards) favored teachers in dresses or skirts and blouses.

By the mid-1970's, female teachers began to lobby school districts to be allowed to wear pants to school. Enter the mini-skirt. However, most districts included strict guidelines for the teachers. Some of us remember the posters in the schools with paper cutouts from catalogs that showed what pantsuit looked like. It had to be a matching set consisting of a jacket or vest and pants with a coordinating blouse.

As time progressed, the concept of the "suit" part went by the wayside; teachers were allowed to wear pants and tops, but not jeans. No flip-flops, please. When the idea of "casual Friday" came into the workplace, things really changed. Now districts began to allow employees to wear sweat or T-shirts and even jeans, but sometimes only on "Casual Friday."

Teacher dress codes always attempt to monitor to some extent what teachers wear, with greater or lesser success. Most teacher dress codes adhere to local communities' ideas of what is acceptable. This can mean many different things depending on where you live and teach.

After log: This program is intended to generate discussion among members comparing what each generation of members encountered as they began to teach. Sometimes, we find that the more we change the more we remain the same. Bridging different generations of teachers is fun. We all agree that dress may change, but what doesn't change is the love for teaching children with patience and diligence. Though things around us like dress codes may change, our love of teaching and children remains strong and is the bedrock of our profession.