

Uniforms to sail through school

Some principals engage designers while others poll students to have a uniform that stands out from other schools



Huang Huifen



PHOTOS: WESTWOOD PRIMARY SCHOOL, CREST SECONDARY, SENGKANG GREEN, SOUTH VIEW PRIMARY, ST MARGARET'S SECONDARY, PALM VIEW PRIMARY, EDWARD TEO, LIM YAOHUI AND DIOS VINCOY JR FOR THE STRAITS TIMES, ST FILE Pupils of Westwood Primary School in their uniform – dri-fit top with tartan collar and trimmings. This is paired with cotton polyester culottes for girls and teal shorts for boys.

Westwood Primary pupil Akif bin Muhammad Irfan is only seven years old and already donning “designer wear” to school every day.

His school uniform is designed by Ms Audrey See, owner of local qipao boutique The Girl's Kaksh.

The knows Westwood Primary's vice-principal, Mrs Sarah Seow, and agreed to help design the school uniform for free last year.

Ten parents were invited to a coffee session to give feedback on the design. The school in Jurong West took in its first batch of Primary 1 pupils this year.

The result is a dri-fit top with tartan collar and trimmings. This is paired with cotton polyester culottes for girls and teal shorts for boys. Pupils wear the uniform for classroom and physical education.

Another new school, Crest Secondary, surveyed 200 Primary 6 pupils on the

choice of uniform colour during its road shows at four primary schools last year. Most pupils picked a yellow top over a white one – hence, the school's eventual yellow-and-navy blue ensemble.

From engaging fashion designers to polling students, some schools go to great lengths to create uniforms that stand out.

School uniform designs came under scrutiny recently after Stamford Primary's design change led to a supply shortage and angry parents in its wake. Some parents questioned the necessity of redesigns.

So what do principals consider when designing a school uniform?

Mrs Daphne Yeoh, principal of the new Sengkang Green Primary School, says she chose the white-and-khaki colour combination for its uniform after a survey of other schools in the Punggol and Seng Kang area. No other school in the vicinity has the same colours for its uniform.

“We wanted to make sure our students are not mistaken for those from other

schools. We also wanted a uniform that is timeless,” she says.

Uniforms must be practical too. Teachers at Crest Secondary, which specialises in normal (technical) education, designed a dri-fit top with bermudas for the boys and “skorts” (shorts within a skirt) for the girls. These enable students to move around easily for hands-on training in hospitality services and mechanical servicing.

Mrs Jenny Yeo, principal of South View Primary, replaced the girls' pinafore and blouse uniform in 2007 with a lightweight blouse worn over a slightly pleated skirt because she said the old uniform was “too warm for Singapore's weather”.

Panels of batik prints were incorporated into the boys' and girls' uniforms to create a distinctive look. The former uniform has been around since the school started in 1990 from a merger of Nam San and Ama Keng School.

However, not all schools see the need to change or update their uniforms.

For more than 81 years, Nanyang Girls' High students have been wearing the same all-white uniform with sleeveless blouse over pleated skirt. The school's Chinese name is embroidered in red on the blouse.

“The white uniform with the red characters ‘Nanyang’, which the girls affectionately call the ‘hongzi’, is a reflection of the Nanyang identity and very much a part of our school heritage,” says Ms Agnes Ng, Nanyang Girls' senior head of relations and communications. Hongzi is the Chinese word for red.

At the 171-year-old St Margaret's Secondary School, its polka-dotted green dress was a result of a school-wide design contest in 1974. The winning entry was submitted by then-art teacher Lim Kah Pheok, who is now in her 70s and retired.

The striking polka dots drew its share of criticisms over the years, with some saying they looked childish and old-fashioned. In the mid-2000s, the school conducted a poll to see if students wanted a different uniform design. The majority said no.

The dots have even become a branding tool. The school uses the catchphrase “Daughters Of Tomorrow”, an acronym for the word dot, for school programmes, says Mrs Marion Tan, principal of St Margaret's Secondary.

Former St Margaret's Secondary student Dawn Seet, 18, still keeps her uniform after graduating two years ago.

“Despite being teased by my friends from other schools about my uniform, I am very proud of it because of its unique design. If the school changes the uniform, I will feel a sense of loss as it has become part of St Margaret's identity,” she says.

✉ hhuang@sph.com.sg

Additional reporting by Rachael Boon

Which schools have the best-looking uniforms? Write to suntimes@sph.com.sg

DESIGNERS CRITIQUE 10 SCHOOL UNIFORMS

SundayLife! asks four local designers to give their take on 10 school uniforms. They are:

Ms Jo Soh, 36, owner and designer of home-grown fashion label Hansel, who has designed staff uniforms for DBS Bank, 313@somers, Ion Orchard and the official uniform for Team Singapore at the 2008 Asean Para Games.

Ms J.R. Chan, 26, managing director of menswear store Threesixfive at Parco Millenia Walk. She co-designed uniforms for the Da Paolo Group, beauty store Essentials at Paragon and OCB Sunday Banking.

Mr Nicholas Wong, 40, creative director of womenswear brands Nicholas and Saturday, who has designed uniforms for presenters at the Youth Olympic Games and retail assistants in Brazilian shoe brand Melissa's Asian stores.

Ms Esther Tay, 59, managing director of corporate design and production house Esta, responsible for budget carrier Scoot's cabin crew uniforms. She has also done uniforms for some students of St Joseph's Institution International and Anglo-Chinese School (International).

Crest Secondary School

What: A dri-fit polo shirt with bermudas for boys and “skort” for girls.

Designers say: Suitable for the school's practice-oriented curriculum, but a navy blue blazer or jacket would smarten the look for formal events.



Palm View Primary School (left)

What: Another dual-purpose uniform for classroom and PE. Girls wear culottes while boys wear bermudas held up by an elastic waistband.

Designers say: A sporty get-up that may be too casual for a school uniform. Wong says it reminds him of company shirts worn by those in the construction business. But Soh and Chan love the practical yet feminine touch of the culottes.



Woodgrove Secondary School

What: Lower secondary school girls wear a Sailormoon-like blouse over navy-blue pleated skirt. Upper secondary girls wear a white blouse. Boys wear white shirts and blue bottoms.

Designers say: With the lower secondary girls' uniform different from the rest of the students, the look is inconsistent. Wong says it is hard to build a strong brand

identity when students represent the school at national events and people cannot identify the school they belong to. Also, the Sailormoon-like design might suit primary schoolchildren better.

Westwood Primary School (main photograph, top)

What: A dual-purpose, dri-fit top with tartan collar and trimmings. This is paired with cotton-polyester culottes for the girls, and teal shorts for the boys. Students wear black shoes. The uniform is worn for classroom and physical education activities.

Designers say: An overall smart look that is cute on the children. But the dual-purpose concept may not be practical. The collar may restrict movements during PE. Hygiene is also a concern when students do not change out of their sweaty gear. Pastel tartan clashes with the strong teal colour and black shoes.



Catholic High School

What: White shirt with metal buttons on the flaps of chest pockets and khaki green bottoms.

Designers say: The military-inspired look gives the boys a smart and commanding presence and helps them stand out. But Tay finds the metal buttons and chest pockets too big.



Cedar Girls' Secondary School

What: Blue blouse with grey skirt, worn with a grey and yellow striped tie.

Designers say: A neat, simple but understated design with a mature colour theme. Soh says the bulky turn-up cuffs

ending just above the elbow look a tad dated. The bulges that often appear when a woven top is tucked into a bottom also makes the uniform less flattering.



South View Primary School (left)

What: Beige top and navy-blue bottoms with batik panels running along the shoulder, down the upper body and in the pleats of the skirt.

Designers say: While the batik print is unique, applying it on so many sections of the uniform makes it look messy and busy. Chan says the batik print is too mature-looking for primary schoolchildren. It should be applied on a badge or as iconic embroidery instead.



Zhenghua Secondary School (above)

What: Red top over black bottoms and shoes.

Designers say: The uniforms look similar to those worn by service crew, especially with the mandarin collar on the girl's blouse.



St Margaret's Secondary School

What: A green, polka-dotted, semi-fitted dress worn with a plain tie and school badge.

Designers say: Chan, Soh and Wong gave this uniform the thumbs up. The feminine and distinctive design gives the impression that the students are fun and outgoing. Chan likes the neat and fuss-free look of a one-piece dress. But Tay finds the design too childish for secondary school girls and thinks it is time for an update.

Sengkang Green Primary School (right)

What: A white top worn over khaki bottoms.

Designers say: Wong says this is his favourite among the 10 designs. “The simple and neat look channels Jil Sander's sleek and minimalistic style. The colour is very pleasing to the eye,” he says. Soh says the hanging top eliminates unsightly bulges caused when shirts are tucked in. She also likes that the girls' blouse has a softer, rounded collar than the boys'. Tay suggests using a brighter mustard colour for the bottoms for a better colour combination.

