

HATS ON, HATS OFF

by Sarah Henry
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Cancer-Conscious Mother Fights School Headwear Ban

When Wendy Lennon moved from Australia to California two years ago, she brought along skin cancer prevention habits that are common back home. But now those sun-shielding practices have embroiled her in controversy.

Last January, Lennon, a 39-year-old mother of three, challenged the San Jose Unified School District's "no hats" policy. Hats are banned in San Jose schools because officials say they cause discipline problems and some schoolchildren wear caps to signal gang affiliation. But Lennon argued that hats should be allowed because they can help prevent skin cancer.

This cross-cultural conundrum surfaced soon after the Lennons arrived in the United States in September 1993. "We packed the kids' lunches for them -- with their hats -- and sent them off to school," said Lennon, describing a routine familiar to parents in Australia, which has made skin cancer prevention a major public health campaign. "The kids were told to take their hats off and never to bring them again, basically. That's how we found out that there was this 'no hats' policy."

Lennon thought it was just an oversight. Like most Australians, she is well versed in the precautionary measures necessary to protect her children from the sun; wearing a hat to and from school and in the playground was simply a matter of form. "It's very mainstream at home," she says. "There's the little ditties like: 'No hats, no play, protect yourself from the UV ray.' Little kids understand the concept of UV rays. It's education -- very inexpensive education, too -- little ditties and a hat and some sunscreen."

This preventive approach was new, she discovered, to the San Jose Unified School District. After talking with her children's principal at Graystone Elementary School, she learned why the district bans hats.

To Lennon, the prohibition is absurd. "How much impact is taking a hat away going to have on these gangs?" she asked. "Aren't they going to have a bracelet or a bandanna or another signal? I have to say I have become more sympathetic to the reasons behind them banning the hats. . . . But truly, is that gang element so all-pervasive that you have to risk your child being educated in preventative health? There doesn't seem to be a great deal of logic or common sense here."

Lennon says there's an easy way to keep gang members from co-opting a school cap. "I've suggested that they get a school hat. I never, ever, and I still can't see how a gang member would run around with a school hat with Graystone Elementary written on it," she said.

Skin cancer is not a problem unique to sun-drenched Australia. One in five Americans will develop skin cancer during his or her lifetime; there are 834,000 new skin cancer cases each year and more than one death an hour from skin cancer. Malignant melanoma -- the most serious of skin cancers -- is the fastest growing cancer in the United States. Lennon thought that by presenting these facts to school officials, they would come around to her way of thinking. She was wrong.

Wendy LennonDespite letters of support from the American Cancer Society, the Skin Cancer Foundation and prominent dermatologists, a school district committee voted unanimously against Lennon's hat proposal last May.

School board president Carol Myers says that the "no hats" policy, in effect since the 1980s, is unlikely to be lifted. "Teachers and administrators don't need the extra hassle," said Myers. "They've got a lot to deal with. I'm going to support the staff on this and do what makes their life easier."

When Lennon learned that children could wear hats at school for medical reasons, she got a doctor's "prescription" for her two youngest children. They support their mother 100 percent. Tobias, 11, who likes to wear a baseball cap to school, explained: "I just think it's a good idea because kids are protected from the sun. I get teased a lot by some kids. I just kind of ignore it and try to walk away." Jacqueline, 6, said her favorite school hat sports Dopey of the seven dwarfs. Her biggest hat hassle, she recounted with a shrug, "is a kid at school called George. He always bugs me and knocks my hat off my head."

Myers said she is not unsympathetic to Lennon's message. "What Wendy is doing is admirable," she said. A school teacher for more than 20 years, Myers works in a neighboring school district where hats are allowed; she hasn't noticed any major behavior problems. And she's personally familiar with the harm that the sun's rays can wage: Her husband has had two recent operations to remove melanomas.

Myers is talking compromise. She says she plans to approach science and physical education teachers about adding instruction on the dangers of sun exposure to schools' curriculum. But would she push to allow kids to wear hats? Myers balked at the question. It's not, she repeated, what the staff wants: "It's not realistic."

It's this kind of resistance that's kept Lennon committed to her one-woman crusade. She conceded there have been many days when she's felt like giving up. She perseveres, she said, because she's certain of one thing: "They know I'm right and I know I'm right."

Sarah Henry is a San Francisco-based writer.