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What's brown done for him?

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LOWELL -- Darren Sawyer was given a choice at the beginning of school yesterday: Change out of his brown clothes or go home.

Brown clothing was recently banned at the Molloy Alternative High School, where Sawyer is a sophomore. The ban came about from the emergence of the Brown Mafia, a new teenage gang in Lowell whose members wear the color brown, school officials said.

When Sawyer refused to change into a school-issued T-shirt or call home to have other clothes brought to the school, he was sent home, said Molloy Principal Kathy Akashian.

"It's ridiculous," said Sawyer's mother, Lisa Motard. "I've heard of banning red and black. Now brown? What other colors are they going to come up with?"

Akashian deemed Sawyer's chocolate Aeropostale hooded sweatshirt and American Eagle T-shirt to be in violation of the school handbook, which prohibits students from wearing gang-related clothing. Akashian said students were verbally warned "several months ago" not to wear brown to school.

"We try to make the school as accepting and welcoming as possible for these kids," said Akashian.

The Brown Mafia emerged several months ago in the city, according to School Resource Officer Tim Crowley. It was formed by black and Hispanic teenagers, but also accepts members from other ethnic backgrounds, Crowley said.

"When we identify a color a gang is associated with, and we find a person who may be associated with that gang, we don't let them wear it to school," said Crowley.

Sawyer, 17, who is Caucasian, claims to have never heard of the Brown Mafia and insists he is not a gang member.

"It made me feel like crap because almost half of my clothes have brown on them," said Sawyer.

Both shirts were Christmas gifts, Sawyer said, adding that several other articles of clothing he got for Christmas are also brown.

"I can't wear my new clothes now," said Sawyer. "What's going to be next? Red, white and blue? Soon kids are going to be going to school wearing nothing because everything is gang."

Lowell High School Headmaster Bill Samaras said students are allowed to wear brown clothing unless it appears they are making a gang statement by donning the color. The policy is especially strict at the Alternative School, said Samaras, where many students have a history of disciplinary problems.

"We have a very strong position on gang apparel," said Samaras. "We're not talking about someone who innocently wears a color. When a color is worn in such a way to represent a gang, they're told to change their clothes or they're out of the school. It's of absolute zero tolerance in that school. They know what they're responsible for."

Motard said her son attends the Alternative School because he has ADHD and does better with smaller class sizes. She said he will continue to wear his brown sweatshirt to school. If he is sent home again, she plans to hire a lawyer.

"There goes my son's education for the day all because of a brown T-shirt and a brown sweatshirt," said Motard. "They stare at everybody's clothing instead of worrying about their education."

According to Akashian, another student was also sent home yesterday for wearing a brown and refusing to change into other clothing.

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