GUIDE

Can a school club pay for its advisor's shirt?

Club money in a public school is public money. The advisor can wear the club shirt, but only when the students plan for it before they raise the money, and never as a thank-you gift.

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Most club shirt orders carry one size that is not on the roster: the advisor's. Paying for it from the club account feels like the obvious way to say thanks. Under California's student body rules, that thank-you is exactly the purchase that fails. A club can put its advisor in the club shirt, but only when the students plan it as part of the club's look before the fundraiser, and only with the paperwork to show it.

Club money in a public school is public money

In California, a middle or high school club handles its money through the associated student body, or ASB. California's Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team (FCMAT) states the rule plainly in its Associated Student Body Manual, last revised May 21, 2026: "ASB funds are legally considered public funds." The manual says ASB spending must benefit a group of students rather than individuals, with few exceptions, and that no expenditure may be a gift of public funds. It also says gifts are not allowable "even if the amount is small." Every purchase needs approval before it happens, signed by a student representative, the advisor and the principal under Education Code 48933(b).

A club shirt for every member passes that test easily, because it serves the group. The advisor's shirt is a different question, because the advisor is one adult.

FCMAT names the advisor's t-shirt directly

The manual's section on employee clothing leaves little room for guessing. FCMAT writes that there is no statute or case authorizing ASB funds for "jackets, sweatshirts, or t-shirts for employees," because those items benefit an individual and could be considered a gift of public funds. A separate passage says adults cannot receive any form of financial or in-kind recognition from ASB trust funds. A shirt given to thank the advisor for a great year is in-kind recognition, whatever it costs.

District manuals carry the same rule. Visalia Unified's 2025–26 ASB manual says ASB funds cannot be used to purchase apparel for adults, and it lists gifts and employee clothing among its disallowed expenses.

The one path: students make the advisor part of the uniform

FCMAT allows one exception. If the students decide, as part of their fundraising, that they want the advisor or coach to wear the same uniform as the club, the cost may be allowed. The manual asks the students to do four things:

- Document that no board policy, administrative regulation, ASB bylaw or business office rule prohibits fundraising for advisor clothing.
- Record the intent in the club minutes, with limits on the quantity and type of clothing, such as the same shirt the members wear.
- Spell out the type and quantity of the advisor's clothing on the fundraiser approval form and the revenue potential form.
- List the advisor's clothing as its own line on the purchase order.

The difference is intent and timing. The shirt is part of how the club looks at its events, chosen by students and counted before the money exists. It is not a reward handed out after the fact.

Where the club-pays approach fails

Most problems come from orders that add adults at the last minute. These are the cases that do not pass:

- **The thank-you shirt.** A shirt ordered as appreciation is recognition for an adult, which the manual rules out entirely.

- **Chaperones, parents and the principal.** The uniform exception names the advisor or coach. FCMAT's section on awards adds that awards to community members, parents or volunteers are not authorized under the Education Code.
- **Order now, approve later.** FCMAT calls a purchase made without preapproval a violation of law. Student council can ratify it afterward, but the club is then explaining a mistake instead of following a plan.
- **A district that says no.** If board policy or the club's bylaws prohibit advisor clothing, the first step fails and the exception never opens.

Two clean ways to put adults in the club shirt

The simplest is that each adult buys their own shirt on the same order. The advisor's size goes on the order form like anyone else's, and the advisor pays for it personally.

The second is a parent group. FCMAT notes that school-connected organizations such as a PTA or foundation are not subject to the rules on gifts of public funds. A booster club can buy shirts for the advisor and the parent volunteers with its own money, under its own bylaws, and the club account stays clean. Either way, ask the printer for an invoice that lists the adult shirts separately from the student shirts, so the club's records show exactly what its money paid for.

Outside California, the district business office decides

FCMAT writes for California. Other states set their own rules. Washington, for example, holds student body money in an associated student body program fund, and RCW 28A.325.030 requires the student body's governing body to approve disbursements in advance. The question to bring to any district business office is the same: may club funds buy clothing for an adult, and what must the students document first?

> A shirt the students planned is part of the uniform. A shirt added as a thank-you is a gift.

FCMAT offers a simple test for any ASB purchase: if it were published on the front page of the local newspaper, would the same action still be recommended? An advisor in the same shirt as the club, written into the minutes before the fundraiser, passes that test. Impact SpiritWear's position on school club t-shirts is that the order should pass it too, with every adult shirt accounted for before it goes to print.

Further reading

1. Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team, Associated Student Body Manual (revised May 21, 2026), Chapter 14, Allowable and Questionable Expenses, including the Employee Clothing, Gifts and Awards sections fcmat.org/publicationsreports/fcmat-K-12-asb-manual.pdf
2. Visalia Unified School District, Associated Student Body (ASB) Manual 2025–2026, Apparel Purchases and Disallowed Expenses resources.finalsite.net, VUSD ASB Manual FY2025–26
3. Washington State Legislature, RCW 28A.325.030, Associated student body program fund app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=28A.325.030

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