An elementary school in New Jersey, the United States, suspended an eight-year-old student for one day because she wore a polo shirt of a “different shade of green” to school.

The girl’s shirt was a “kelly green” which is brighter than the school’s required “dark green.” The school had sent children home before for wearing the wrong color shirts. While school dress codes should be respected, punishing a student for wearing a different shade of the required color may be called “矯枉過正” (jiao3 wang3 guo4 zheng4).

“矯” (jiao3) to straighten; to correct; to rectify, “枉” (wang3) means “not straight,” “bent,” “crooked;” “過” (guo4) is “pass,” “over,” “excessively,” and “正” (zheng4) is “correct,” “right.” Literally, “矯枉過正” (jiao3 wang3 guo4 zheng4) is “straighten bent pass right.”

If you try to straighten a bent stick but bend it too far, it does not help as you are just leaving the stick bent in the opposite direction. That is the scenario described by the idiom.

So “矯枉過正” (jiao3 wang3 guo4 zheng4) means “to over-rectify,” “to over-correct,” “to overstep the mark,” “to exceed the proper limits in righting a wrong,” “overdo in rectifying behavior.”

“矯正” (jiao3 zheng4) is “to correct,” “to rectify,” “to improve upon.” If something is not right, it is good that we “矯正” (jiao3 zheng4) it. But if you continue to “矯正” (jiao3 zheng4) after the problem has been corrected, it is “矯枉過正” (jiao3 wang3 guo4 zheng4).

“矯枉過正” (jiao3 wang3 guo4 zheng4) usually creates a new problem!

Terms containing the character “過” (guo4) include:

- 過去 (guo4 qu4) – the past
- 過多 (guo4 duo1) – too much, excessive
- 通過 (tong1 guo4) – to pass, to approve (proposal, bill etc.)
- 跳過 (tiao4 guo4) – jump over