



MENSTRUAL EQUITY:

IT'S ABOUT BLOODY TIME

"Menstrual hygiene products are not a luxury...like toilet paper, soap and water, hygiene products are not optional. They are necessary and essential to women's and girls' health, and participating in work, school and society."

- Saadya Hamdan
Director of Gender Equality at
Plan International Canada

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POSITION PAPER

BACKGROUND

Menstruation is a necessary biological process. Each day, more than 300 million people experience menstruation across the globe

However, in most cultures it is a taboo subject. Even in Canada, menstruation is often associated with shame and stigma, surrounded by a code of silence. The financial burden of menstrual products, emotional and mental turmoil of period stigmatization, and reduced attendance and participation in daily activities are some of the main difficulties and barriers resulting from the taboo surrounding menstruation.

These challenges can be even worse for school-age adolescents dealing with menstruation as a new bodily experience while also navigating life as a teenager. The ongoing stigma surrounding menstruation contributes to the immediate need for menstrual products, management, and preparedness. Nearly one in seven Canadian students have missed school due to the unaffordability and inaccessibility of menstrual products (Procter & Gamble, 2018). The view that menstruation is embarrassing needs to be replaced with one that normalizes and accepts the process. It is our goal that Edmonton schools, elementary to high-school, begin to reduce these barriers by providing free menstrual products in all public schools.

WHY FREE MENSTRUAL PRODUCTS IN SCHOOLS?

A question of equity

Fifty-one percent of women and girls across Canada reported they occasionally had to miss-out on activities because of concerns about access to appropriate menstrual products and facilities, while twelve percent reported this problem as a regular occurrence in their life (Plan International Canada, 2018). Full participation in school and school activities is important for the development of healthy and successful individuals and communities.

Additionally, the financial burden of needing to purchase menstrual products is an issue many do not consider. This is problematic given that twenty-seven percent of menstruating Canadians report that they have had to sacrifice other items in their budget in order to afford menstrual products, and eight percent face this challenge on a regular basis (Plan International Canada, 2018). In Edmonton alone, one in six children under the age of eighteen are living in poverty (Edmonton Social Planning Council, 2019), meaning that a considerable proportion of teens and adolescents attending Edmonton schools are likely to face real financial barriers in accessing appropriate menstrual products.

Beyond encouraging full participation in school by increasing access to menstrual products, having them readily available within school washrooms will not only help to normalize and destigmatize menstruation but also to address period poverty. The urgency of such normalization is reflected in the fact that forty percent of Canadian women and girls have regularly experienced being made fun of for being on their period by a male peer, friend, colleague or family

member (Plan International Canada, 2018) and thirty-eight percent have felt the need to lie about being on their period and/or conceal their menstrual products (Plan International Canada, 2018). These statistics are saddening and infuriating given the healthy, normal, and necessary nature of menstruation. Through increasing the discussion around menstruation with this initiative, as well as increasing the visibility of menstrual products within schools, periods can become more normalized.

SUCCESS STORIES

National & Provincial Progress

It is significant to note that some provinces in Canada such as British Columbia and Nova Scotia have made menstrual products free and accessible for students, while on a school district level, the Toronto District School Board has done the same for their students. In British Columbia, a ministerial order issued on April 5, 2019 mandates all public school boards to provide menstrual products in school washrooms to students of all gender identities by the end of 2019 (Government of British Columbia, 2019). On September 17, 2019, the Nova Scotia government announced that menstrual products will be made accessible for students in 367 schools and is projected to impact the lives of over 40,000 students in their school system between grades four and twelve (Nova Scotia Education and Early Child Development, 2019). The Toronto District School Board, which serves over 246,000 students, voted unanimously to provide free menstrual products at all of their elementary and secondary schools for the 2019-2020 school year (Teotonio, 2019).

Locally in Edmonton, The University of Alberta Students' Union began offering free menstrual products around campus in Septem-

ber 2019, which has been met with an incredibly positive response (Turner, 2019). These existing menstrual product programs highlight not only the strong public support for such initiatives, which has been reported at 94.4% within the prairie provinces (Plan International Canada, 2018), but that they are needed within communities. Schools in Edmonton should not wait to join this important movement and instead should step-up among this group of leaders.

CONCLUSION

Edmonton students deserve healthy, inclusive and equitable learning environments.

Part of creating such environments is ensuring the availability of free menstrual products at schools. We want our students to feel safe, inclusive, comfortable and empowered in schools while they are on their periods. No student should feel stigmatized, discriminated or miss school days due to the inaccessibility and unaffordability of the menstrual products. Provision of these products is as important as the provision of toilet paper in school washroom facilities. It is one of the basic and fundamental needs of our students.

Period poverty has to end! Therefore, we urge the Government of Alberta and all the school boards to take immediate notice of this issue. As mentioned earlier, ministries and school boards of some provinces in Canada have already taken measures to provide free menstrual products in schools. We also want our government and school boards to come forward and take this initiative. Let us normalize the conversation around menstruation and end period poverty by providing free menstrual products in all Edmonton schools. We can make the present and future of Alberta healthy, safe and inclusive!

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