

No-Cost Period Products in Schools



Executive Summary

Lack of access to menstrual hygiene products (referred to as “period poverty”) can have serious health, educational, and social consequences for students. Common barriers to menstrual hygiene product access for students include prohibitive costs, lack of information, and stigma. Currently, 12 states have laws requiring that menstrual hygiene products be provided to students at no-cost in school bathrooms. Missouri does not currently require that public and charter schools provide no-cost menstrual (period) products to students.

Highlights

- In a nation-wide survey, 13% of students reported missing school, 15% reported coming to school late, and 24% reported leaving early due to lack of access to menstrual hygiene products at their school.
- A study conducted in an urban St. Louis school district found that 48% of female students reported needing menstrual hygiene products at school but were unable to afford them.
 - Additionally, 17% of students reported missing one or more days of school due to an inadequate supply of menstrual hygiene products.
- In 2021, eight states ([AR](#), [CA](#), [DE](#), [MD](#), [NV](#), [RI](#), [VT](#), [WA](#)) passed laws requiring that all public schools (including charter schools) provide menstrual hygiene products at no-cost to students.
- Using a \$4 yearly average cost per female student grades 6-12 in Missouri, an estimated cost for providing menstrual hygiene products to students would be ~\$960,000 per year.

Limitations

- Estimated fiscal impacts or specific allocations to support no-cost school menstrual hygiene products are frequently not included in recently passed legislation.
- Stigma and lack of knowledge about menstruation can be a barrier keeping students from fully participating in education even if products are provided for free.

Research Background

Access to Menstrual Hygiene (Period) Products

Disposable and [reusable menstrual hygiene products](#) (e.g., pads, tampons, menstrual cups) are essential sanitary health products. The lack of access to sanitary menstrual hygiene products for proper menstrual health management is referred to as “period poverty.” The cost of menstrual hygiene products has been shown to be a major barrier to access for low-income women in

Missouri. A study of low-income women in St. Louis found that 64% reported being unable to afford menstrual hygiene products within the last year.¹ According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 13.7% of Missourians live in poverty and an even greater percentage of children (18.7%) live in poverty.² Access to menstrual hygiene products also varies by race/ethnicity, with 19% of Black college students and 24.5% of Hispanic college students reporting lack of access to such products compared to 11.7% of White college students.³

There are several reasons that a person might not have access to menstrual hygiene products besides costs, such as lack of knowledge about menstruation, and stigma/shame.⁴ The stigma and shame associated with menstruation can be further exacerbated by the lack of access to proper menstrual hygiene products. This can create another barrier to participation in society, including schools, and can lead to absences from class. This is especially true for younger students. A review of menstrual health literacy worldwide found that even in high-income countries such as the U.S., it is common for children and their parents to be uncomfortable talking about menstruation.⁵ Due to this stigma and lack of menstrual literacy, providing no-cost menstrual hygiene products to students might not completely solve period poverty for students.

The Impact of Period Poverty on Students

In a nation-wide survey, 13% of students reported missing school, 15% reported coming to school late, and 24% reported leaving early due to lack of access to menstrual hygiene products at their school.⁶ A study conducted in an urban St. Louis school district found that 48.3% of female students reported needing menstrual hygiene products at school but were unable to afford them.⁷ Additionally, 17% reported missing one or more days of school due to an inadequate supply of menstrual hygiene products. Female students in 9th graders were more likely to miss school due to a lack of menstrual hygiene products (33.1%) compared to a lower percentage of 10th through 12th graders (6.1%).⁶

Unlike other hygiene products, such as toilet paper and hand soap, menstrual hygiene products have not been typically provided at no-cost to students in public and charter schools. Using unsanitary alternatives (e.g., such as rags or paper towels) can result in urogenital infections.⁸ Additionally, students without access to menstrual hygiene products are more likely to report having had moderate to severe depression.³

State Legislation Providing Menstrual Hygiene Products in Schools

In 2021, eight states ([AR](#), [CA](#), [DE](#), [MD](#), [NV](#), [RI](#), [VT](#), [WA](#)) passed laws requiring that all public schools (including charter schools) provide menstrual hygiene products at no-cost to students. Four other states—IL ([2017](#)), NY ([2018](#)), NH ([2019](#)), and VA ([2020](#))—passed similar legislation prior to 2021. Colorado enacted a bill ([2021](#)) that created a grant program to provide funding for no-cost period products in school bathrooms for schools with 50% or more of students eligible for free or reduced-cost lunch.

Recent state-level legislation typically requires students in grades 6 through 12 to be provided no-cost menstrual hygiene products in school bathrooms. However, while the average age to begin menstruation is 12 years old (~6th grade), 10% of U.S. female students are already menstruating by 11.1 years of age (~5th grade).⁹ Therefore, these laws might fail to provide menstrual hygiene products to younger students, especially Black and Mexican-American students, who begin menstruation 3 to 6 months earlier on average than White students.^{9,10}

Estimated fiscal impacts or specific allocations to support no-cost school menstrual hygiene products are frequently not included in recently passed legislation. However, Maryland has a detailed [cost estimate](#) that estimated an average yearly cost of \$4 per female student in middle and high schools. Using this \$4 average multiplied by the approximate number of Missouri female students in grades 6 through 12 (~240,000), the average yearly cost to provide menstrual hygiene products to Missouri students would be ~\$960,000. This does not include the potential one-time costs of installing product dispensers. The average spending per pupil in Missouri for 2017 was \$11,293.¹¹

Missouri Legislation Relating to Menstrual Hygiene Products

In 2021, [SB 53](#) was signed into law, requiring persons being held in correctional centers or jails to be provided with menstrual hygiene products at no-cost (see Science Note: [Feminine Hygiene Products and Prisons](#)). The Department of Corrections has been allocated \$228,348 per year for menstrual hygiene products for FY 2020, 2021, and 2022.

In Missouri, menstrual hygiene products are classified as luxury items and subject to a 4.2% sales tax. However, previously filed [legislation](#) sought to reduce the tax rate to 1.2%. Additionally, [SB 531](#) sought to create a voucher program to help low-income menstruating individuals who participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance programs (SNAP) and SNAP for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) to purchase menstrual hygiene products as these are ineligible for coverage (see Science Note: [Vouchers for Feminine Hygiene Products and Diapers](#)).

References

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