



No-Cost Period Products in Schools: Implementation

Executive Summary

Period poverty is the lack of access or inability to afford essential sanitary menstrual hygiene products (e.g., pads, tampons, reusable menstrual cups). It can have serious health, employment/educational, and social consequences. While lack of access to menstrual hygiene products can affect menstruating individuals at any age, this is a particular problem for menstruating students who may have to miss school due to menstruation. Introduced in the 2022 Missouri legislative session, [HB 1842](#), [HB 1843](#), and [HB 2591](#) would require all public and charter schools with students grades six through twelve to provide menstrual hygiene products in school bathrooms. The K-12 education appropriations bill for the 2022-23 school year perfected by the House, [HB 3002](#), includes a \$1 million appropriation to provide no-cost menstrual hygiene products to public schools.

Highlights

- While the average age to begin menstruation is 12 years old (~6th grade), 10% of U.S. female students are already menstruating by 11 years of age (~5th grade).
- Supplying no-cost menstrual hygiene products in schools could help those in need get through that school day. However, they may not have access to the necessary products outside the school environment.
 - School-day menstrual management may also include the provision of clean clothes and assistance with menstrual pain.
- The most common place to store menstrual hygiene products at schools is within the nurse's office.
- Individual school districts and charter schools set their own policy and procedures for purchasing general school supplies, including menstrual hygiene products.
- Thirteen states and D.C. (including Arkansas and Illinois) have laws mandating that menstrual hygiene products be provided to students in grades 6 through 12.

Limitations

- There is no research consensus as to what is the best practice for product placement.
- There are many different unknown factors that make cost estimates for providing no-cost menstrual hygiene products difficult.
 - Factors include potential program utilization, the number of products needed per menstruating student, and the costs of products.

Research Background

Period Poverty

Period poverty, which is the lack of access or inability to afford essential sanitary menstrual hygiene products (e.g., pads, tampons, reusable menstrual cups), can have serious health, employment/educational, and social consequences.¹

While lack of access to menstrual hygiene products can affect menstruating individuals at any age, this is a particular problem for menstruating students who may have to miss school due to menstruation. In a nationwide survey, 13% of students reported missing school, 15% reported coming to school late, and 24% reported leaving early due to a lack of access to menstrual hygiene products at their school.² For more information about menstrual hygiene access, please see our published Science Notes: [Menstrual Hygiene Products](#) and [No-Cost Period Products in Schools](#).

Special Cost and Placement Considerations for Supplying Menstrual Products in Schools

Introduced in the 2022 Missouri legislative session, [HB 1842](#), [HB 1843](#), and [HB 2591](#) would require all public and charter schools with students grades six through twelve to provide menstrual hygiene products in school bathrooms. The K-12 education appropriations bill for the 2022-23 school year perfected by the House ([HB 3002](#)) further includes a \$1 million appropriation to provide no-cost menstrual hygiene products to public schools. However, in addition to providing menstrual hygiene products, there are special cost and placement considerations to account for to ensure best practices for menstrual hygiene management.

Age of Menarche

Menarche is the first onset of menstruation. Recently passed state-level legislation (the earliest being Illinois in [2017](#)) 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 years of age (~5th grade).⁹ Therefore, these laws might fail to provide menstrual hygiene products to younger students, especially Black and Hispanic students, who begin menstruation 3 to 6 months earlier on average than White students.^{3,4}

Socioeconomic Status

Period poverty often afflicts menstruating individuals of low socioeconomic status. In an analysis of 183 female survey responses from 10 non-profit organizations that serve low-income women in St. Louis, Missouri, 64% of women were unable to afford menstrual hygiene products at one point within the year and 21% of women experienced this monthly.⁵ An additional study conducted with 58 students within 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.⁶

While supplying no-cost menstrual hygiene products in schools may help those in need get through that school day, they may not have access to the necessary products outside the school environment. In a survey of 976 Missouri-based school nurses, it was commonly suggested that additional menstrual products also be sent home with the student for the remainder of their cycle to assist with menstrual hygiene management (Dr. Anne Sebert Kuhlmann. Personal Communication. April 19, 2022).

Product Placement

In a survey of 976 Missouri-based school nurses, the nurse's office was noted as the most common location (99%) for period products in schools. In addition to the nurse's office, teachers (28.9%) and freely distributed products in bathrooms (28.6%) were the next common location for period products. Approximately 21.3% of nurses reported bathroom vending machines which contained period products. (Dr. Anne Sebert Kuhlmann. Personal Communication. April 19, 2022).

There is no research consensus as to what is the best practice for product placement. Keeping products in the nurse's office provides a resource for help if needed. However, trips to the nurse's office may force the student to miss more class time or academic work. Having free menstrual products in the bathroom can provide timely access. However, if a student experiences menarche during school, the student may not know what to do with the available products, and may experience discomfort or anxiety.⁷ An additional consideration to product placement in schools is to ensure school-based education regarding puberty includes practical guidance and information about menstruation and maintenance. Therefore, if reliance on menstrual products in schools is warranted, menstruating students will feel more prepared to handle the situation.⁷

School Day Menstrual Management

A qualitative study interviewed adolescent girls (15-19 years old) in three different cities (Los Angeles, New York City, and Chicago) about menstruation experiences within school and in family contexts. One of the most cited challenges in the study was menstrual management during the school day, specifically, the need to reduce the chances of menstrual leaks and any related visible stains.⁷ In these instances, girls may have had to leave school for the day or call family to obtain resources (e.g., clean clothing) brought to school. Additionally, participants indicated that school personnel had additional resources on hand such as spare pants or wrapped sweatshirts around their waists.⁷ However, not every child's parent or guardian may be able to leave work to either bring their child home or bring their child clean clothes. Moreover, schools that primarily serve communities of lower socioeconomic status may not have additional resources, such as spare clothing to assist with such accidents. In general, schools rely on donations for such resources (Dr. Anne Sebert Kuhlmann. Personal Communication. April 19, 2022).

The same study also identified menstrual pain as another commonly cited difficulty for students to focus in class or can cause menstruating students to socially withdraw due to feeling

uncomfortable. However, most schools are not permitted to distribute pain medications nor are students permitted to bring their own pain medications from home.^{7,8} The commonly used practice is to send menstruating students experiencing menstrual pain to the nurses' office, where students can lie down and rest, and while this practice was noted to help students with pain management, it may lead to missing class time and academic work.

School Procurement Policies

In Missouri, the purchasing of most general supplies (including menstrual hygiene products) for schools is decentralized, meaning it is up to individual school districts and charter schools to set their own policies and procedures for purchasing supplies using local and state funding. In some school districts, such as St. Louis Public Schools, purchasing is further decentralized and is left up to individual schools or offices following policies set by the district's school board. The Missouri School Boards' Association ([MSBA](#)) has created [sample policies](#) and procedures that individual school boards can adapt and adopt. Many school districts in Missouri have used these sample policies as the basis of their own purchasing policies. The MSBA sample policy for purchasing does not require competitive bids for purchases under \$3,500. Schools can use local or online retailers, such as Walmart or Amazon, for such purchases. The State of Missouri has an online procurement system called [MissouriBUYS](#) which allows state agencies to submit bid opportunities and browse catalogs of approved vendors for more costly purchases.

Costs & State Implementation

Though at least 13 states and D.C. (including Arkansas and Illinois) have laws mandating that menstrual hygiene products be provided to students, typically these states do not include specific appropriations for such products (examples of these appropriations in Appendix A). The cost of providing such products would likely then come from general state funding, such as funding formulas, which provide a certain amount of funding per student attending each school, and from local funding provided by local tax levies. Schools might also reduce expenses by soliciting donations of products from the local community and nonprofit organizations. Estimating the cost of providing no-cost menstrual hygiene products to Missouri's K-12 students is difficult because it is not possible to make direct comparisons to other states' varied education budget appropriations for such products.

Additionally, there are many unknown factors when making cost estimates. One is that it is unknown what the potential utilization of free menstrual hygiene products in schools would be. Some students might prefer products that they bring from home or might not know that products are available to them. Another factor is that the cost of tampons and pads varies substantially. More absorbent products tend to be more expensive and features like plastic applicators for tampons or wings to secure pads to underwear are also associated with more expensive products. Low-quality products, or products that students are not familiar with, would likely be used at lower rates, which while lowering the cost of such a program could be counterproductive and underutilized. Finally, there are potential one-time upfront costs if

schools install tampon and pad dispensers in bathrooms. Such dispensers are typically [estimated](#) to cost between \$200 to \$300 per dispenser, not including installation costs.

There are other factors that make cost estimates difficult. One is the number of tampons or pads that will be needed per menstruating person. The CDC's safety guidance for tampons recommends that tampons be changed every 4–8 hours. The typical menstrual cycle bleeding period is three to five days and the average number of cycles per year is 13. However, the number of products needed per cycle can vary due to product absorbency, individual preference, and personal needs.⁹ One study of tampon use in Canadian women found that approximately 13 menstrual products were used per cycle per person.¹⁰

There were 233,134 female students (grades 6–12) enrolled in Missouri public and charter schools for the 2021-22 school year. With a \$1 million allocation for menstrual hygiene products, this would equate to \$4.29 per potentially menstruating student per year. Using the current bulk prices for tampons (\$0.16) and pads (\$0.22) from the office supplies retailer [Uline](#), this allocation would likely provide enough for 26 tampons or 20 pads per menstruating student per year on average. As of April 2022, Alabama has a state [bill](#) pending the governor's signature that would create a grant program to provide no-cost menstrual hygiene products to schools eligible for Title 1 federal assistance. The [fiscal note](#) estimates that 91,000 female students would be in eligible schools grades 5 through 12 and that it would cost \$2.1 million per year. Utah also recently mandated menstrual hygiene products in public schools. Utah has a similar number of K-12 students as Missouri and estimated a first-year cost to local schools of \$2,387,400 and thereafter a yearly cost of \$1,757,400. Neither state provides a specific cost breakdown to show how these estimates were made.

References

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Appendix A. Fiscal estimates related to state legislation on no-cost menstrual products in schools.

State	K-12 Enrollment	Fiscal Analysis	Bill Link
Missouri	917,900	N/A	N/A
Arkansas	473,861	Fiscal Impact	Bill
California	6,002,523	Bill Analysis	Bill
Delaware	138,414	N/A	Bill
Illinois	1,887,316	Fiscal Note	Bill
Maryland	88,853	Fiscal and Policy Note	Bill
Nevada	493,000	Fiscal Notes (multiple)	Bill
New Hampshire	166,263	Fiscal Note	Bill
New York	1,100,000	N/A	Bill
Rhode Island	138,566	N/A	Bill
Utah	675,247	Fiscal Note	Bill
Vermont	78,928	Bill Information	Bill
Washington	1,074,464	Bill Summary	Bill
Washington, D.C.	93,843	N/A	Bill
Alabama*	718,000	Fiscal Note	Bill

*Grant program, not a mandate, currently waiting for Governor’s signature