



CONSIDERATIONS FOR MENSTRUAL EQUITY AND STUDENT SUCCESS

BRIEF

Purpose

This brief addresses how menstrual inequity may affect student attendance, learning, and social and emotional well-being. Funds under Title IV, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) may be used to increase menstrual equity under the Safe and Healthy Students content area (Section 4108 of the ESEA).

Menstruation is a normal monthly occurrence for millions of students in America's schools. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, age at menarche (first period) varies between 8 and 15; thus, menstruation potentially affects students in elementary, middle, and high schools (Office on Women's Health, 2021).

Efforts that support students to manage menstruation in a safe, healthy, and dignified way during the school day have several goals. These include helping students remain in school, focus and be comfortable in class,

“ A 2021 study on the experiences of high school girls found that nearly two-thirds of students surveyed reported being unable to afford menstrual products when they needed them during the school year (Kuhlmann et al., 2021). Of those who reported menstrual product insecurity, roughly 45 percent reported experiencing this hardship almost every month. ”



participate in extracurricular activities, and not experience negative effects on their social or emotional well-being. This brief outlines the concept of menstrual equity, explores current barriers to menstrual equity faced by students who are menstruating and the effects on their academic success and well-being, and provides examples of policies and practices for removing these barriers and improving access to menstrual products for students who need them. Schools, school districts, and their State educational agency partners may consider supporting menstrual equity measures, such as by providing free menstrual products, using funds under the Title IV, Part A Safe and Healthy Students content area (Section 4108).

Barriers to Menstrual Equity

Menstrual equity refers to the belief that students deserve access to menstrual products as needed. This includes access to enough clean, safe products so that users can change them as often as necessary during menstruation.

Research on the extent of menstrual inequity and its associated consequences is limited. However, what is already known demonstrates that not all students have access to menstrual products as needed. A 2021 study on the experiences of menstruating high school students found that nearly two-thirds of students surveyed reported being unable to afford menstrual products when they needed them during the school year (Kuhlmann et al., 2021). Of those who reported menstrual product insecurity, roughly 45 percent reported experiencing this hardship almost every month. Similarly, a 2019 study of more than 600 young women found that, when asked about their high school experiences, roughly 92 percent of those surveyed reported needing a menstrual product during the school day (regardless of whether they had access to one), but only about 42 percent reported attending a school that provided them (Cotropia, 2019). Among those whose schools provided menstrual products, many reported having to pay to access them.

Schools have an important role to play in supporting menstruating students, as



menstruation affects students while they are in school. Schools may consider implementing free menstrual product programs. These programs have the potential to reduce existing menstrual inequities and make schools more supportive environments for menstruating students.

Menstrual Equity Affects All Menstruating Students

The needs of all menstruating students should be accounted for when designing and implementing programs that address menstrual equity. For example, the needs of English learners should be accounted for; thus, information about free menstrual products, including where they are available, how students can access them, and how students should use them, should be available in languages other than English, as identified by the needs of local schools and school districts. In addition, the needs of students with disabilities should be accounted for.

Any menstrual product dispensers in schools should be easily accessible for those with access or functional needs, and all information about these products should be written in clear, plain language that students with intellectual or developmental disabilities can easily understand.

Student Attendance Decreases Due to a Lack of Menstrual Products

13%
of young women reported missing school

15%
of young women reported being late to school

24%
of young women reported leaving school early

(Cotropia, 2019)

Finally, schools that provide menstrual products should place them in single-user bathrooms as well as girls' or women's bathrooms.

Potential Outcomes of Menstrual Inequity

Being unable to access menstrual products when needed is not just an inconvenience; research suggests it may affect students' academic outcomes and school experiences (Cotropia, 2019; Kuhlmann et al., 2021).

Attendance

Some research has shown that lack of access to menstrual products is associated with lower attendance. The 2019 study by Cotropia on the high school experiences of young women found that almost 13 percent of respondents reported missing school due to their lack of access to menstrual products, 15 percent reported being late to school for this reason, and 24 percent reported leaving school early because they needed menstrual products but were unable to access them at school. Additional analyses found that those who attended schools that did not provide menstrual products were nearly two and a half times more likely to report missing school and more than one and a half times more likely to report leaving school early than those who attended schools that did provide menstrual products. However, one limitation of this study is that it did not explicitly control for factors such as school income levels.

For some students, missing school due to a lack of access to menstrual products is not just an occasional experience. The Kuhlmann et al. (2021) study found that, among a sample of 119 girls in grades 9-12 at a public high school in St. Louis, Missouri, nearly 17 percent of those surveyed reported missing at least one school day each month owing to a lack of access

Menstrual Inequity and Student Well-Being

Students who lack access to needed menstrual products and encounter school-related barriers to menstrual equity may experience:

- Shame, embarrassment, and stigma (CDC, 2022).
- Challenges participating in physical school activities, partly due to fear of menstrual leaks (Schmitt et al., 2021).
- Discipline for reasons related to menstruation, including failing to change into gym clothes or being late to class due to bathroom breaks. (A 2021 study by Kuhlmann et al. found that, out of a sample of 119 female students, roughly 27% reported receiving discipline for such reasons.)

to menstrual products. The potential effects of menstrual inequity on attendance may in turn negatively affect menstruating students' academic outcomes, as regular attendance is a contributing factor to academic achievement (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009).

Learning

Cotropia (2019) also found significant relationships between a lack of access to menstrual products and negative impacts on learning, with 18% of young women surveyed reporting that in high school they experienced an inability to focus in class owing to concerns about not being able to manage their menstruation. The study also found significant relationships between schools not providing menstrual products and respondents' reported ability to learn (self-reported factors that

were measured included the ability to focus or understand classroom instruction and the ability to perform well on a test or assignment). Young women who attended schools that did not provide menstrual products were more than two and a half times more likely to report that their learning ability was impacted; those who reported not being able to afford menstrual products were nearly four times more likely to report that their ability to learn was impacted.

Inability to focus in class or understand classroom instruction may negatively affect menstruating students' academic outcomes, as classroom engagement is another critical factor contributing to students' academic achievement (Finn & Zimmer, 2012).

Social and Emotional Well-Being

Lack of access to menstrual products also can affect students' social and emotional well-being during the school day. Schmitt et al. (2021) conducted a qualitative study on the menstruation experiences of 73 adolescent girls ages 15-19 in New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago. The study convened small groups where girls were interviewed about their experiences menstruating while at school, and they engaged in activities such as anonymously writing stories about their first period and brainstorming how they would improve school conditions to better support the needs of menstruating students. During these sessions, girls reported that managing menstruation during the school day was a significant challenge for them. A main concern discussed was menstrual leaks, which expose menstruation to peers. These were described as shameful and highly embarrassing, and may be more likely to occur when students lack access to menstrual products as needed. Indeed, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022) states



that girls who lack access to menstrual products may face stigma and embarrassment.

Schmitt et al. (2021) also found that girls reported that participating in physical activities such as physical education class, sports, and dance programs during menstruation was challenging; one reason given for this was fear of menstrual leaks due to increased movement. The Kuhlmann (2021) study, which included surveys of high school girls, also found that nearly 27 percent of students reported having received a form of discipline for reasons relating to their period, including failing to change into gym clothes or being late to class due to necessary bathroom breaks. Schools should be aware that penalizing or harassing students because of menstruation could constitute discrimination based on sex in violation of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (20 U.S.C. § 1681 et seq.).

Access Considerations

Among schools and school districts that provide free menstrual products for students, these products are not always readily accessible to students without requiring them to disclose their menstruation to an adult. The 2021 study by Kuhlmann et al. found that 61 percent of girls surveyed reported that they obtained menstrual products from the school nurse's office, almost 34 percent reported obtaining products from their school's health clinic, and 29 percent reported that they obtained products from a teacher or other school staff member. Program models that require students to disclose their menstruation to an adult to access menstrual

products may be challenging for students because of the stigma around menstruation. A survey by Cotropia (2019) on the high school experiences of young women found that nearly 74 percent of those who reported needing a menstrual product at school were embarrassed to ask a school administrator for the products or even for general support related to menstruation. When asked why these requests were perceived as embarrassing, respondents reported that menstruation was seen as "gross" and "taboo" (p. 293). Additionally, respondents reported feeling "ashamed" that they needed menstrual products, and worried about being judged for not having their own products (p. 293).



Supporting Menstrual Equity for Students

The following case studies present innovative examples of how jurisdictions are establishing policies and practices to help students access needed menstrual products.

New York City



In 2015, New York City (NYC) began work toward the long-term goal of advancing menstrual equity for students by using a phased program model, with the goal of crafting legislation that would address these issues.

Phase 1

The first phase of NYC's work to improve menstrual equity began in June 2015 with community focus groups, which were asked to problem-solve around issues related to menstrual equity and to explore potential solutions (Schmitt et al., 2022). Participant feedback was considered during subsequent phases.

Phase 2

Phase 2 was a small-scale, 6-month pilot study, beginning at the start of the 2015-16 school year, in which menstrual products and dispensers were donated by a private manufacturer and installed in two high schools (Schmitt et al., 2022). The pilot aimed to examine whether the program was feasible and whether students would misuse or vandalize dispensers and products. After the pilot, NYC Council members solicited feedback from NYC Department of Education (DOE) school administrators and students, finding that students reported needing the menstrual products and that they respected the program and the provision of the products, alleviating

some school leaders' concerns about misuse (Schmitt et al., 2022). The pilot was soon expanded, and, in March 2016, 380 product dispensers were installed in 25 middle and high schools in the city (City of New York, 2016).

Phase 3

Once the pilot program concluded with favorable outcomes (including meeting students' needs, having been supported through donations, and increasingly garnering support from legislators, school staff, and students) the New York City Council unanimously passed [legislation](#) requiring the NYC DOE to provide free menstrual products in bathrooms of public schools serving students in grades 6-12.

Phase 4

At the beginning of the 2016-17 school year, the final phase of NYC's menstrual product program was implemented: It consisted of installing product dispensers and communicating with schools about the new program. Logistical aspects of the program were managed by the NYC DOE's Division of School Facilities; specifically, custodial staffs installed product dispensers in school bathrooms and were responsible for maintaining product supply and ensuring that the dispensers were in good working condition throughout the school year. Implementation also involved the NYC DOE sending information to local schools explaining the new program, so all students and staff understood where students could access menstrual products free of charge.

Implementation Tips

NYC's step of soliciting the opinions, feedback, and experiences of students, community-based organizations, and advocates helped increase buy-in among legislators and the public and ensure that programs were tailored to meet student needs. Other education agencies looking to implement a free menstrual product program may want to consider a phased design like NYC's approach, where different types of data are collected (e.g., interviews, student, and staff surveys) before and after a pilot study to gauge impact, help make course corrections as needed, and gather information needed to report statistics on the success of the program to stakeholders.

Oregon



In March of 2022, the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) released the [Menstrual Dignity for Students Toolkit](#) (updated November 2022).

This resource aims to provide guidance and support to schools as they look to adhere to the requirements outlined in [Oregon's 2021 Menstrual Dignity Act](#), which requires all public education providers to offer free menstrual products (specifically, tampons and menstrual pads) for students. The toolkit was developed by a partnership between the ODE Menstrual Dignity Advisory Group, the ODE Sexuality Education Steering Committee, the ODE Office of Indian Education, the Oregon Health Authority's Adolescent and School Health Program, and the office of a member of the Oregon House of Representatives, and it was informed by research as well as students and community members who testified in front

of the Oregon House Committee on Education in support of Oregon's Menstrual Dignity Act. To support efforts to expand access to menstrual products in accordance with the Act, funding is available to schools to purchase menstrual products, trash receptacles, and dispensers, and to cover any related installation costs. Below are several requirements as well as best practices outlined in the ODE's toolkit that provide insight into how Oregon is addressing menstrual equity for its students.

Legal Requirements

- Products need to be available in at least two student bathrooms in all public school buildings, and these two bathrooms need to be chosen with consideration for all-gender access.
- Within bathrooms where products are provided, schools must offer product use instructions that are medically accurate, age appropriate, culturally responsive, not fear or shame based, and accessible for students with disabilities.
- Products must be free and readily accessible (dispensers should not allow for coin insert), clearly marked as free in at least two languages, and compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act.
- Education providers must stock and continually maintain supply of products.
- Sanitary disposal options are required and should be private and accessible.

Best Practices

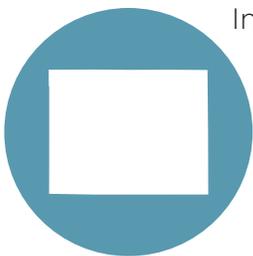
- Menstrual products should be accessible to students during any bathroom closures, as well as during after-school activities, sports, and field trips.

- Menstrual products should be available in a variety of sizes and absorbencies to accommodate all students' menstrual needs. To ensure that products meet students' needs, the ODE recommends engaging students and allowing for their input on product types.
- Students should be allowed to use the bathroom as needed and should not be penalized or punished for bathroom breaks.
- Students should be allowed to take as many products as they need.
- Interested and qualified school staff (e.g., school nurses, counselors, health teachers) are encouraged to be engaged from program design to implementation, and staff members should receive professional learning opportunities to further their understanding of menstrual equity.

Implementation Tips

Schools have many options for delivering menstrual products to students and do not necessarily need to install dispensers. They may instead opt for a countertop basket or storage drawer in bathrooms or even make products available in an envelope or large file folder attached to the wall.

Colorado



In 2021, Colorado passed the [Free Menstrual Hygiene Products to Students Act](#), which created a grant program within the Colorado Department of Education for schools and school districts with at least 50 percent of their population free or reduced-price lunch eligible. According to the Act, a grant recipient must ensure that menstrual products offered under this program are accessible to all students. Additionally,

the Act states that the Colorado Department of Education may seek, accept, and expend donations from private or public sources to help them implement the grant program.

Denver Public Schools' Menstrual Care Program

According to a [presentation](#) by Denver Public Schools' (DPS') Department of Facility Management to the DPS Board of Education in January 2022, the DPS Menstrual Care Program provides free menstrual products to district students in K-8, middle, and high schools. The program represents a partnership between the district's Facility Management Department and its Nursing Services, Finance, and Facilities Operations Departments; the district's Board of Education; and a student advocate. The district's Menstrual Care Program was supported by several outside donations and volunteers, including individuals who helped install product dispensers in 813 bathrooms in the district, as well as donations of 59,000 menstrual pads, tampons, and liners. The district estimates the program costs \$12,000 per month to maintain an adequate supply of menstrual pads and tampons. For reference, DPS served 88,911 students in the 2021-22 school year (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).

Implementation Tips

Colorado's policy is an innovative example, as the state's legislation facilitates public-private partnerships to support schools in implementing free menstrual product programs. For other education agencies looking to adopt such a program, partnering with local groups and community-based organizations may prove helpful, particularly in the beginning phases of implementation.

California



In 2021, California passed the [Menstrual Equity for All Act of 2021](#), which requires all public schools in the state serving students in grades 6–12 to stock school bathrooms with free

menstrual products. This Act was an expansion of 2017 legislation, which required public schools that serve students in grades 6–12 and that meet a 40 percent pupil poverty threshold to stock 50 percent of the school’s bathrooms with menstrual products, and which prohibited any public school from charging for menstrual products provided to students. The 2021 legislation eliminated the pupil poverty threshold requirement, removed the “50 percent of bathrooms” provision, and added requirements for availability.

Implementation Tips

California’s 2021 Act represents an advance toward menstrual equity for students in California public schools, as it expanded access to products for all students, not just those in certain schools, and added gender-affirming provisions. Other states looking to offer information to local education agencies about free menstrual product programs may want to take a similar approach to California’s, both by passing legislative measures to advance menstrual equity and by distributing products throughout all school bathrooms to ensure that all menstruating students have access.

Conclusion

Due to students reporting negative experiences of menstrual inequity, states, school districts, and schools should consider whether and how they might use new or existing authorities to

Tip Summary

- Solicit feedback from students, community-based organizations, and advocates to help increase buy-in and ensure that programs meet students’ needs.
- Consider a phased approach by collecting pre- and post-program implementation data to gauge impact, make course corrections, and gather information needed to report successes.
- Opt for a countertop basket, storage drawer, envelopes or large file folders attached to the wall instead of dispensers.
- Develop public-private partnerships when possible, by partnering with local community-based organizations to support schools in providing free menstrual products.
- Distribute products throughout all school bathrooms to ensure that all menstruating students have access.
- For schools and school districts in states without legislation supporting the provision of free menstrual products, consider working with local stakeholders to pass such legislation.

implement free menstrual product programs. These programs have the potential to reduce existing menstrual inequities and make schools more supportive environments for menstruating students. Schools, school districts, and their State educational agency partners may consider using federal funds to support menstrual equity measures within their Title IV, Part A Safe and Healthy Students content area (Section 4108).

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