

DATE: April 27, 2021

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: Trustee Trisha Estabrooks

SUBJECT: Motion re Free Access to Free Menstrual Products in Edmonton Public Schools

REFERENCE: [Trustees' Handbook – Section 5.2.2 – Notices of Motion](#)

ISSUE

Notice of motion was served at the April 13, 2021, Board meeting.

BACKGROUND

Menstruation is a normal part of life and yet it continues to be stigmatized. Evidence of the stigma and a contributing factor to it is a lack of access to free menstrual products in public facilities, including schools. The lack of access to sanitary products and menstrual hygiene education is known as period poverty.¹

The inability to access period products has implications for students within Edmonton Public Schools. Poor menstrual hygiene can cause physical health risks and has been linked to reproductive and urinary tract infections.² It is estimated that one in seven Canadian girls have either missed school or left school early because of a lack of access to period products. Furthermore, it is estimated that a third of young Canadian women cannot afford menstrual products.³ Given the economic impacts of COVID, it is safe to assume that the barriers to access and the inability to afford menstrual products have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Anecdotally, teachers have shared that period poverty has meant missed opportunities for students and has led to lower self-confidence. Teachers, in many cases, are spending their own resources to provide menstrual products for students who need them in an effort to ensure they remain at school and participate in school-based activities while menstruating.

When Trustees with the Toronto District School Board voted to provide free menstrual products in division schools, they referenced that a “lack of access due to economic factors can be especially damaging during puberty, when school interactions are crucial to a girl’s development.”⁴

Students with the University of Alberta’s School of Public Health raised the issue of period poverty with a small group of EPSB Trustees and Administration during a series of meetings in the spring of 2020. They shared stories and the challenges their peers faced while attending school. On April 13, 2021, two

¹ <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/period-poverty-everything-you-need-to-know/>

² <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/monitor/provincial-progress-campaign-end-period-poverty-canada>

³ Dube, D. (2018, May). One-third of young Canadian women can’t afford menstrual products, report finds. Global News. Retrieved from <https://globalnews.ca/news/4239800/canada-cost-of-menstrual-products/>

⁴ TDSB news release dated August 2019 <https://www.tdsb.on.ca/News/Article-Details/ArtMID/474/ArticleID/1347/TDSB-to-Provide-Free-Menstrual-Products-to-Students>

students from the School of Public Health presented to Trustees at our public Board meeting asking that consideration be given to providing free period products in all Division schools.

I vividly recall my sister and my friends sharing their stories about having periods at school. The fear of shame and the stress of finding a friend who might have an extra tampon to save your day. And even having to miss school due to fear, stigma, and unavailability of menstrual products in schools. This is one of the hundreds and thousands of stories that our own friends, sisters, partners, and mothers have experienced. We strongly believe that our students deserve healthy, inclusive and equitable learning environments. And part of creating such environments is ensuring the availability of free menstrual products at schools. Our students need to feel safe, inclusive, comfortable and empowered in schools while they are on their periods. No student should feel stigmatized, discriminated against or miss school days due to the inaccessibility and unaffordability of the menstrual products.

- Avash Puri, School of Public Health student, University of Alberta

No student in Edmonton should be missing school just because they do not have access to free menstrual products in schools. Menstruation is a normal biological process and therefore access to the menstrual products is one of the basic needs. It is as basic as toilet paper. Where the school governance considers to provide toilet papers to the students and staff in school washrooms as it is a basic necessity, the school boards must consider providing menstrual products too in the school washrooms as it is also a basic necessity. No one menstruates by choice! Where already school boards in other provinces of Canada have taken initiative to provide free menstrual products to the students in schools and now as the City of Edmonton has taken this amazing initiative to provide free menstrual products in all public washrooms, we believe the Edmonton Public School Board should also take the lead and ensure the provision of free menstrual products for the students in school washrooms. We would like the school board to lead by example and be the first school board in Alberta to take this initiative and set a precedent for the rest of the school boards in the Alberta province. No student should be left behind. It's high time to end period poverty!

- Mehnaz Rehmani, School of Public Health student, University of Alberta

University of Alberta Student Advocates for Public Health (SAPH) supports EPSB Board of Trustees in their ask for free menstrual products in EPSB washrooms. Menstruating students should be focusing on their education rather than worrying about their period. By providing menstrual products in your schools, EPSB will help normalize and destigmatize menstruation.

-sent by Pamela Mellon on behalf of Student Advocates for Public Health (SAPH)

The organization No Woman Without. Period. has also added its voice to the call for free menstrual products in Division schools (see Attachment I).

It is critical that all of our schools be safe, welcoming and inclusive. The decision to provide free menstrual products in all division schools is consistent with our Strategic Plan Priority 2 of providing welcoming, high quality learning and working environments and the Goal 1 outcome of learning and working environments that are welcoming, inclusive, safe and healthy.

Leadership on Period Poverty

Other Canadian school jurisdictions have taken the step in providing free menstrual products. In 2019, the government of British Columbia issued a Ministerial order that all 60 public school districts provide free menstrual products available to high school students by the end of 2019.⁵

In issuing the order, then Education Minister Rob Fleming said it was time to “normalize and equalize access to menstrual products in schools, helping to create a better learning environment for students.” He added that it was common sense and long overdue.⁶

The B.C. provincial government provided \$300,000 in startup funding for school districts and promised to work with school authorities, community and education partners to identify gaps and make sure funding was in place to meet the Ministerial order.

Shortly after B.C.’s announcement, Trustees with the Toronto District School Board voted unanimously in favour of directing their Administration to provide access to menstrual products and educational materials at no cost to the Board. The rollout for grades 7 to 12 began in the fall of 2019, followed by all other grades. TDSB worked with Physical and Health Education Canada, a charitable organization, to provide these products in all TDSB schools. The Board chair at the time, Robin Pilkey, talked about the importance of accessibility and equity.

“There are girls and women around the world, even here in Canada, who cannot afford menstrual products. We don’t want a single one of our students having to worry about that and that is why this is such an important step that the Board is taking.” - Robin Pilkey, TDSB Chair, 2019

Earlier this spring after [advocacy from an organization called No Woman Without](#), and a successful pilot project where free menstrual products were provided in some city facilities, Edmonton City Council voted to provide feminine hygiene products in public women's and inclusive washrooms and change rooms where toilet paper, soap, and hand towels/dryers are provided. This includes City Hall, recreation and leisure centres and some transit centres.⁷ The city intends to pay for these products using existing budgets.

In conclusion, period products are essential and should be provided free of charge to students within Edmonton Public Schools. By taking this step, EPSB would become the first Alberta school division to provide free menstrual products; an important step in supporting students’ health and well-being, destigmatizing menstruation and ensuring accessibility to a basic supply needed in our school washrooms.

RELATED FACTS

- This topic has been explored with a small group of Trustees and Administration since spring 2020.
- Providing free menstrual products is about access, but it is also about removing the stigma associated with menstruation.

⁵ <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2019SDPR0033-000587>

⁶ United Way website. <https://www.periodpromise.ca/blogs/news/free-menstrual-products-coming-to-bc-schools-people-in-need>

⁷ <https://edmonton.ctvnews.ca/free-period-products-will-soon-be-available-in-edmonton-public-washrooms-1.5381591>

- The inability to access period products has implications for students within Edmonton Public Schools including health implications and missed classes.
- About a third of all young people under the age of 25 cannot afford menstrual products
- Other school divisions, the City of Edmonton and the province of British Columbia have all taken steps to end period poverty.
- Menstrual products are essential supplies, akin to toilet paper in school washrooms.

CONSIDERATIONS AND ANALYSIS

When EPSB Administration explored the idea of providing free menstrual products in all division schools the initial cost estimate was \$1.8 million annually. In discussions with Trustees and students from the University of Alberta in the spring of 2020, it was believed that partnerships could be found to alleviate or help alleviate the cost to the division to provide free menstrual products.

RECOMMENDATION

Given that menstrual products are a basic need and that access to these products can be a barrier for students, the Board of Trustees moves that Administration explore ways to provide free menstrual products in Division schools, including pursuing partnerships, to provide what should be essential products in Edmonton Public School washrooms.

OPTIONS

1. Approve the recommendation.
2. Provide feedback and request changes to the recommendation for approval.

NEXT STEPS

Pending approval of the recommendation, Administration will begin pursuing partnerships for the supply of menstrual products in all division schools, with the goal of beginning to provide free menstrual products by the fall of 2021. If this recommendation passes, the Board of Trustees would like an update on the status of this request by the end of this school year.

If the recommendation is approved, a letter will be sent to Education Minister Adriana LaGrange encouraging her to take the same step as the B.C government by issuing a Ministerial order that all schools provide free access to period products and encouraging her to provide funding for such an initiative province-wide.

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Attachment I: Letter from No Woman Without



To Whom It May Concern,

This letter is written in support of the Edmonton Public School Boards motion that asks Administration to explore ways to provide free menstrual products in division schools, including pursuing partnerships, to provide what should be essential products in our school washrooms.

There are several areas in which providing menstrual products to students in school is important, which are outlined below.

- Gender inclusivity & safety.
 - Girls, Nonbinary and trans students would be able to attend school freely without the fear of bleeding through their clothes, risking embarrassment, or harassment from other students. It also reduces the risk of a student being outed before they are ready to own the truth of who they are.
- Gender equity
 - Both boys and girls have access to toilet paper, soap, paper towel and now sanitizers in school washrooms.
 - Menstrual products should be no different. Lack of access to product should not prevent a student from attending and participating in schools.
 - Providing access to these products would ensure that menstruators have fair access to education.
 - Every student comes from different circumstance. Two parents, one parent, living in group homes or foster care. Some work full time and live on their own. Some have access to unlimited funds while others rely on social programs such as the foodbank. For those in more precarious situations, this removes a barrier to accessing education

Thank you for your attention to this matter. It is up to us to provide safety and equality to all students. Providing menstrual hygiene products in school washrooms will directly support the mental health and well-being of your student community.

Sincerely,
Scarlet Bjornson
Founder/CEO
No Woman Without. Period.