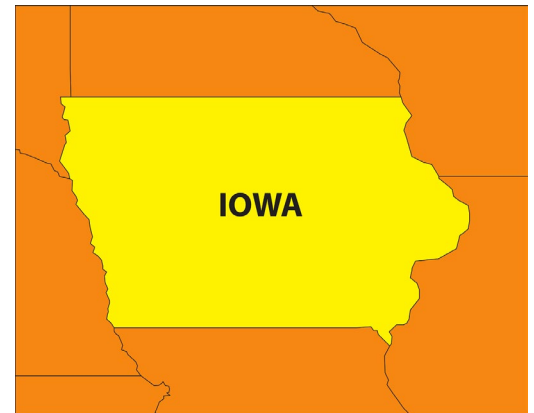




Bill proposes funding for free tampons, pads in school restrooms

By Robin Opsahl



A House Education subcommittee unanimously advanced a bill Monday to require school districts provide free feminine hygiene products, like tampons and menstrual pads, in school restrooms.

The bill, House File 543, would provide state funding beginning July 1, 2025 through June 30, 2028 for the mandate that these sanitary products be available in at least half of restrooms for students in grades 6 through 12.

Maanya Pandey, a student at the University of Iowa, said she founded the nonprofit Love for Red focused on this subject four years ago because of the struggles she saw caused by the lack of easy access for menstrual products for the people around her.

“Almost every menstruating student can relate to this situation: getting your period unexpectedly and realizing you don’t have a menstrual product in your bag,” Pandey said. “Your options are begging people around you for a spare product, the coin-operated dispensers — who carries around change anymore — missing more class time than you already have to visit the nurse, or use what’s available, stuffing toilet paper into your underwear, hoping you don’t bleed through your pants during the day.”

Many students, especially those who do not have the money to purchase period products themselves, leave school in these situations, she said. When this happens multiple days every month, Pandey said “you’re looking at chronic absenteeism, which is linked to higher suspension rates and lower graduation rates.”

Paula Blake, a retired teacher from Johnston, said she strongly supported the bill because it would help students stay in class and would take the burden off of teachers supplying these products using their personal funds.

“You may wonder what’s been done in the past, and it’s as you said — you jam a bunch of toilet paper down your pants and keep your fingers crossed,” Blake said. “You run to your locker, you try to get something, and you’re late for class and you’ve been tardy. Also, teachers have often supplied what’s needed with their own money. Every year for 39 years, I spent between \$500 to \$1,000 of my own money on various educational and personal supplies for my students.”



Advocates were almost unanimously in support of the measure. Margaret Buckton, representing the Rural School Advocates of Iowa and Urban Education Network of Iowa said the organizations she represented were registered as “undecided” on the legislation because of concerns about future funding past the June 2028 cutoff.

“It’s only because about the time when the appropriation runs out, is the time when the income tax cuts are going to hit your hurt your budget, and we will be making tough decisions on what things schools can provide for students,” Buckton said. “So we’ll be back at that time, hoping you continue to fund it.” Rep. Heather Matson, D-Ankeny, said “I don’t know that I’ve been happier to be on a subcommittee this year.” She said she strongly supported the bill’s advancement and noted that House Democrats have also introduced legislation on this subject.

Matson highlighted the efforts of Love for Red and students Brianna Taylor and Erika Rosenberg of Sibley-Ocheyedan High School, who alongside school counselor Thresa Ruggles [advocated at the Statehouse](#) for free feminine hygiene products in women’s restrooms at schools. A pilot program headed by Ruggles found a significant reduction in female student absences – counting 100 fewer female student absences over a time period after the school began providing free products to students. “I would say that high school me would also have been incredibly grateful for this,” Matson said. “Every woman and girl knows what this is like, and I am incredibly grateful that we are having this conversation.”

Rep. Dan Gehlbach, R-Urbandale, said though he is “not directly affected by this, obviously,” he has two teenage daughters and supported the bill moving forward. He thanked Pandey and other young advocates for their efforts to highlight the issue.

The legislation advanced with all three lawmakers supporting the measure, and will go before the House Education Committee for further consideration.

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