



## ***New Zealand to Roll Out Free Period Products to All Students***

The program, designed to reduce “period poverty,” will begin in June.

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By Natasha Frost

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AUCKLAND, New Zealand — Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said Thursday that all schools would make free menstrual products available to students for the next three years, adding New Zealand to the global effort to reduce “period poverty” — a lack of access to pads or tampons that could negatively affect education, health or employment.



The announcement came after a six-month pilot program involving 3,200 students across 15 schools in the country’s Waikato region. The national initiative, which will begin in June at primary, intermediate and secondary schools, is expected to cost 25 million New Zealand dollars (\$17.96 million), Ms. Ardern said.

“Young people should not miss out on their education because of something that is a normal part of life for half the population,” she said outside a school in the city of Hamilton.

In November, Scotland became the first country to announce that it would make period products freely available to all who need them. Other countries have taken smaller steps toward addressing period inequity.

In January, Britain said it would repeal the so-called tampon tax, which classed sanitary products as nonessential, luxury items. At least 30 American states still have similar taxes in place. But the White House announced plans this week for a Gender Policy Council to address issues related to women’s lives, including national security, health care and economics.

Though New Zealand is among the world’s wealthiest nations, a study published last year by the charity KidsCan found that up to 20,000 New Zealand students were at risk of not being able to afford tampons or other products.



With low wages, a high cost of living and a growing housing shortage driving up prices, many people in New Zealand simply cannot afford sanitary items, said Sarah Donovan, a researcher from the University of Otago.

“Kids aren’t going to go to school if they haven’t got menstrual products, because it’s so shameful and embarrassing — there’s still this big stigma around it,” she said. “It’s been this hidden problem of social inequity that no one had thought of.”

The issue affects children from primary school onward. The average age that children begin menstruating in New Zealand is 13, but some start as young as 8 or 9, Dr. Donovan said. While providing free products is a great first step, she said, schools also need to teach students “what a period is, how do you manage them.”

“If it’s going to be primary school and above,” she said, “some of the kids wouldn’t have had the health education around that stuff yet, either at home or at school.”

A study led by Dr. Donovan found that students from New Zealand’s Maori and Pacific Island immigrant communities, who are statistically more likely to be affected by poverty, were also more likely to be unable to afford period products. Fifteen percent of Maori students and 14 percent of Pacific students have missed school because they did not have menstrual items, the study showed.

Sanitary products can cost as much as 15,000 New Zealand dollars, or \$10,800, over a person’s lifetime, said Miranda Hitchings, co-founder of Dignity NZ, a for-profit organization that provides free sanitary items to schools, youth and community organizations.

“That is a significant cost that could be part of a student loan, or a house deposit,” she said. “But because of the gendered cyclical nature of poverty, it’s another thing that puts women, or people with periods, on the back foot.”

Before local news reports in 2016 shined a light on the extent of period poverty in New Zealand, there was relatively little public awareness of the problem, Ms. Hitchings said.

“We went and talked to schools and found that not only was it real, but it was incredibly prevalent,” she said. “We also found that local people individually, like nurses and teachers at schools, were purchasing products for their students out of their own pockets.”

There has also been a sharp increase in period poverty since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, she said.



A campaign for free period products gained steam in late 2019, when Ms. Hitchings, her co-founder, Jacinta Gulasekharam, and other campaigners submitted a petition with 3,000 signatures to the country's Parliament calling for free period products for all students.

It was picked up by the office of Julie Anne Genter of the Green Party, who was then the minister for women. She encouraged the prime minister's office to support the cause.

"It's great progress and a great first step," Ms. Genter said.