



Free period products coming to some Pa. schools thanks to \$3M budget commitment



Pennsylvania lawmakers have signed off on a \$3 million grant program to bring free menstrual products to students, but details such as how schools can apply for the money and which districts will be eligible still need to be worked out.

Democratic Gov. Josh Shapiro approved the program as part of this year's \$47.6 billion state budget. It puts the state Department of Health, in consultation with the Department of Education, in charge of awarding grants to entities including school districts and charter schools.

Casey Smith, a spokesperson for the state Department of Education, said the agencies will "establish guidelines to drive out funding to schools in the coming weeks."

"The Shapiro Administration is committed to the health, wellness, and safety of students across the Commonwealth, and this investment will enable schools to help close a gap in women's health care that too often hurts low-income girls and young women of color," Smith said. Advocates for people with periods argue the allocation is not enough to provide all menstruating students with the supplies they need, but say it's a start.

"We all know that menstrual products are extremely expensive," said Lynette Medley, co-chief executive officer and founder of the SPOT Period, a "menstrual hub" that serves Philadelphia. "It's going to be stretched to the limit." At least 12 other states and the District of Columbia have passed laws to provide free menstrual products in schools, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Advocates have sought to secure state money for free menstrual products for years, Medley said, and this new budget appropriation represents the first victory on the issue.

Pennsylvania does not maintain or publish data on period poverty, but several advocacy groups have attempted to establish the scope of the issue. In a 2020 fact sheet, the Alliance for Period Supplies estimated that 416,000 Pennsylvania girls and women of menstruating age live below the federal poverty line. A 2021 online study of U.S. teenagers found that 23% struggled to afford period products (it was commissioned by the nonprofit PERIOD. and Thinx, which sells period underwear).

Several bills that address period poverty were pending at the time the legislature passed the budget in July, including two from state Rep. Darisha Parker (D., Philadelphia). One bill would establish a free period product grant program for



low-income districts; a school would be eligible if at least 25% of its students are enrolled in reduced-cost lunch programs. It passed the state House in early June.

While the budget established a grant program to supply free period products to schools, Parker still wants the state Senate to pass her bill to guide the agencies creating the requirements. More than 1,500 schools in Pennsylvania told the Department of Education that at least 50% of their students came from low-income households during the most recent year. Other pending bills would address period poverty outside of schools.

State Sen. Maria Collett (D., Montgomery) has introduced a bill that would expand free menstrual products to places beyond schools, including to colleges, correctional institutions, and facilities run by commonwealth agencies, like unemployment offices.

While the leader of the state Senate expressed hesitancy about providing state money for free period products earlier this year, Collett said negotiations were smooth because of the relatively small price tag. Her bill, she added, has a long way to go.

Parker — who pushed for her legislation using phrases including “Menstrual Monday,” “Tampon Tuesday,” and “Flow Friday” — has another bill pending that would create menstrual product fee waivers for people who qualify for SNAP, more commonly known as food stamps. It passed the state House 132-71 and awaits consideration in the upper chamber.

“I know how humiliating it can be. We do not need that to happen to our children,” Parker said. “We have people right now who are using paper towels, using socks, using newspapers.”

<https://why.org/articles/pennsylvania-budget-free-period-products-public-schools/#:~:text=Pennsylvania%20lawmakers%20have%20signed%20off,Democratic%20Gov.>