

Government of Ontario to provide free menstrual products in schools

By Rob Paul

Last week Stephen Lecce, the Province's Minister of Education, announced that Government of Ontario will be distributing six million free menstrual products per year to school boards.

This initiative is in collaboration with Shoppers Drug Mart in an effort to improve access to menstrual products.

Ontario is now one of four provinces taking action on the issue of period poverty within schools.

This comes after a survey conducted by Plan International Canada showed that 63 per cent of women and girls have regularly or occasionally missed an activity because of their period and concerns about not being able to access menstrual hygiene products or proper facilities.

The report also noted that 34 per cent of women and girls have had to regularly or occasionally sacrifice something else within their budget to afford menstrual products.

“Through the strong advocacy of young leaders in our schools, it has become extremely clear that menstrual products are a necessity, not a luxury,” said Lecce. “This agreement will help remove barriers for women and girls by allowing them to access products at school, free of charge. It is another important way that we are helping to build more inclusive schools that empower all girls to have the confidence to succeed.”

The agreement with Shoppers Drug Mart is set to begin in the 2021-22 school year and will run for the next three years. Currently, the Ontario government is working with Shoppers Drug Mart to supply school boards with the menstrual products, and it's expected they will be distributed by late fall.

“Inequitable access to period products, particularly for students, can lead to missed opportunities ? school, work, and other activities ? and creates barriers to success,” said Jeff Leger, President, Shoppers Drug Mart. “This donation will provide thousands of students in Ontario with free access to period products, thousands who won't have to make that difficult choice. We are proud to be a part of this initiative, and grateful to our stores, our partners, and our customers for their support.”

The Peel District School Board strongly supports the initiative, having been working to end the stigma around menstrual products after a Peel student launched a campaign to educate on the topic.

“We understand the importance of free and available menstrual products for Peel District School Board students, in part due to a delegation at our June 17, 2020, Regular Meeting of the Board,” said Malon Edwards, PDSB Manager of Communications. “This delegation, a PDSB student, reported to the Board about her campaign to end the stigma around periods and how essential it is to provide free and accessible menstrual products to all female students.”

After meeting with the student, last year the PDSB began its own initiative to make menstrual products free to students, a campaign that will continue.

“In our 2020-2021 school year operating budget, PDSB approved a multi-year plan to make menstrual products free and available for our students in all PDSB schools. The first phase of this pilot project provided these products to our secondary schools,” Edwards said. “The next phase of the project will provide menstrual products to our elementary schools. This second phase of the pilot will take place in the coming months and is expected to be completed before the end of the year.”

Caledon Trustee Stan Cameron is glad to see menstrual products become more accessible while having the cost factor taken out of

the equation across the province, something he's proud of the PDSB and Caledon schools for already implementing.

"Menstrual products have been available to students for many years in our secondary schools," he said. "Schools have found ways to give easy access to young women so as not to bring shame or embarrassment for a student to ask. Facilities management has been filling the dispensers in washrooms for many years now. Our school leaders have worked hard to ensure that these resources are made available to their students.

"Since September 2021, the products have been free to students via the dispensers. As the age of girls starting their menses continues to be younger, sometimes as young as 10 years old, this plan should open up to our Middle School aged girls as well. It's important to normalize periods as part of everyday life. It also helps with emergencies as the products would be free and available in bathrooms."

Cameron knows how important this is to students and the community as a whole because of the need to destigmatize periods and take unneeded pressure off students.

"There has been a lot of attention of late to the disproportionate toll on girls and women in regard to the fees and expense of just being a female. The cost of the products themselves creates barriers for some. This initiative spotlights systemic changes to our educational institutions and the access we can provide to those necessary resources. If the products are provided in a separate budget given to each school, by the Ministry, then individual school board budgets would be protected against absorbing the cost.

"Giving girls access to free menstrual products may not only help make it normal and something more openly talked about, but also supports those who financially might not be able to afford products and sometimes may miss school as a result. Also, having free products available in schools provides access to those where culturally sensitive conversations around period products might not be occurring, so access might be limited. In addition, this will continue to provide all students, regardless of socio-economic status, the ability to access resources equitably. Some of the issues related to period shaming and poverty shaming can hopefully also be addressed with this initiative."

There can be multiple factors that impact students from accessing menstrual products despite them being a necessity for women and those factors aren't fair, says Cameron, making it a must to provide them for free.

"Our school leaders understand the importance of equity of access to essential items," he said. "All girls take a Grade Nine physical education course. They are made aware of how and where to find menstrual products. Our next step should be to consult with stakeholders to ensure the culturally appropriate products are available, perhaps not just pads and tampons. For an essential item that is required by women every month, for possibly 40 years of their life, the cost can be prohibitive to many families. Government of Ontario to provide free menstrual products in schools."