

Menstrual Equity Testimony – Michaela Whitelaw
Maryland House Bill 208: Public Schools – Provision of Menstrual Hygiene Products
Presented to the Hon. Anne Kaiser and Members of the House Ways and Means Committee
January 30, 2020 1:00pm
POSITION: SUPPORT

My name is Michaela Whitelaw, and I am a Master's in Public Health student at the Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health. **I submit this testimony in support of House Bill 208 – Public Schools – Provision of Menstrual Hygiene Products.**

Since starting my MPH program and delving further into the issues surrounding menstrual health and gender equity, including discussions with administration about providing free menstrual products on campus, I have come to understand why access to menstrual hygiene products is an important public health issue and one that has been overlooked in policy and by institutions for far too long.

According to Maryland's 2018 Fall public school enrollment, there are over 200,000 female students grades 6-12,¹ providing an estimate of the number of students who are or will be experiencing menstruation during secondary school. The current limited access to menstrual hygiene products in schools does not allow these students to privately address their basic biological process of menstruation. Such lack of access to menstrual hygiene products can lead to an educational burden on students, including effects on self-esteem, ability to concentrate in school, and missed school time.²

The inaccessibility of menstrual hygiene products in public schools, as well as the potential added financial burden placed on students and their families when menstrual products are not readily accessible,³ present not only a health and hygiene issue, but a gender inequity and affront on human dignity that our policies must address. Students spend on average 6.5 hours per day over 180 days per year in school.⁴ Providing menstrual products in school bathrooms at no cost allows for an improved educational environment where students who menstruate can more fully engage and participate in their education. The proposed House Bill 208 tackles issues of access related to both economic costs and convenience. It acknowledges that menstrual products are part of addressing the necessary health needs for all menstruating individuals and that providing them in schools provides access at a major point of need.

States across the nation have already taken steps that recognize this need, including Illinois, New York, California, and New Hampshire. Others including Virginia, Delaware, and Massachusetts are currently looking at similar bills to provide free access to menstrual products in school bathrooms. Maryland must also take the lead on providing greater access.

It is simple. We urinate, we defecate, and for around half of us, we menstruate too. One would never propose that students bring their own toilet paper or hand soap to school with them, and these are necessary items that protect our health and our dignity. Why, then, are menstrual hygiene products not provided for free in bathrooms when students may need them if they are menstruating? Maryland must continue to implement progressive legislation that recognizes basic

biological needs and improves gender equity throughout our institutions. House Bill 208 takes us another step forward in doing so. Improving access to menstrual products is just one important puzzle piece in creating a gender equitable society and allowing all individuals to live with dignity and the highest opportunity for success.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

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¹ Reznik K. et al. Maryland HB133 – Fiscal and Policy Note First Reader Public Schools Provision of Feminine Hygiene Products. (Regular Session, January 21 2019).

² Periods, Poverty, and the Need for Policy: A Report on Menstrual Inequity in the United States. UDC David A. Clarke School of Law; 2018 May. (Bringing Resources to Aid Women’s Shelters (BRAWS)).

³ Weiss-Wolf J, Coryton L. Period Posse Presents Webinar: Ending the Tampon Tax: Mobilizing Policy Change in the US and the UK; 2019 Oct 8.

⁴ Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) [Internet]. National Center for Education Statistics; [cited 2020 Jan 28]. (National Center for Education Statistics). Available from: https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/tables/sass0708_035_s1s.asp