

## **Period Poverty and Legislation—Updated April 1, 2025**

### **AAUW Iowa Periods With Dignity Task Force**

**AAUW Iowa** is a nonpartisan organization that works to advance educational and economic opportunity for women and girls. We are a state affiliate of the national AAUW, with local branches across the state.

Iowa legislators took a step in the right direction in 2022 when they eliminated the “*luxury*” **sales tax** on period products and diapers (SF 2367, pages 15-16), freeing up a small amount of money for individuals to spend on other necessities. The House Education Committee this year approved [HF 543](#) (period products in public schools) by a vote of 23-0 on March 4. The renumbered [HF 883](#) was assigned to the [House Appropriations Committee](#).

Providing a sufficient supply of period products in our public schools is **not a partisan issue**. Period poverty occurs in Republican, Democratic, and no party households, in both rural and urban areas of Iowa.

### **Period poverty**

Simply put, “period poverty” refers to a lack of access to a sufficient supply of menstrual products. In many cases this is because

- Individuals don’t have the money to buy products.
- Products are hard to find in neighborhood stores or are prohibitively expensive — or both.
- Transportation to stores is lacking or difficult to arrange.
- Students not living with a parent or guardian who are in foster care may not feel comfortable talking about a need for the products.
- Students who are unsheltered / homeless may lack the money, a place to keep the period products or transportation to a store.

Lack of access to period products means some girls may miss classes, entire days of school, or after school activities. Insufficient access to menstrual products can impact physical health, as well as social and emotional well-being. A sufficient supply of products allows girls to attend school and focus on learning.

### **Income and ability to purchase period products**

Poverty remains the prevailing reason in Iowa and nationwide for difficulty in acquiring menstrual products.

- An estimated 13,816 Iowa girls ages 12-17 live below the poverty level. (2019-23 U.S. Census data / U.S. *HHS 2025-family of three \$26,650-family of four \$32,150*)
- The percentage of those under 18 years in poverty by Iowa county shows a low of 4.9% in Dallas to a high of 23.2% in Lucas. (U.S. Census data from 2022)
- Iowa Department of Education 2023-24 Free and Reduced-Price Lunch data reports an average of 41.8% of Iowa students are eligible for the program. About one third of those qualify for free lunch.

- The average percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced lunches has ranged from 41.5%-43% in the past ten years.
- In 2023-24, eligibility percentages for individual Iowa school districts ranged from 6.7% to 68%, with one district reporting 100% student eligibility.
- Precise data regarding Iowa students and access to period products are not available, but we can infer from the numbers of students qualifying for free and reduced-price school lunches that income is a factor in how families must spend their money, some having to choose between things like paying for housing, purchasing food or buying period products.
- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (**SNAP**) benefits or food stamps cannot be used to buy hygiene products such as pads or tampons.
- Increased numbers of Iowa families struggle to pay for housing, to put food on the table and provide for other basic needs. When families have to make the choice between buying food or period products like pads or tampons, understandably often the choice is food. *Girls may have to miss school due to lack of these basic health care items.*
- A statewide survey of school nurses in Missouri revealed that nurses in urban and rural areas were equally likely to say they know students in their schools who are missing school due to their periods, and that some students struggled to afford the period products they need and were using homemade products to get by. (Period poverty and its reach across the US, Brookings Institution, Nov. 27, 2024)
- In 2019, an online national survey revealed that around 20% of U.S. teens ages 13 to 19 reported trouble accessing or affording period products when needed. (State of the Period, commissioned by thinx and PERIOD)

### **Health consequences and period related absenteeism**

Girls don't just face embarrassing odors, leakage or stained clothing, but health risks due to infection when they don't have sanitary period products or a sufficient supply of them. So, what do girls do if they don't have pads or tampons?

- In order to attend school some may use a product for longer than recommended or safe.
- Using a tampon longer than recommended could lead to the rare, but life-threatening condition called Toxic Shock Syndrome, in which bacteria and toxins spread into the bloodstream, potentially causing infection, severe organ damage or rarely, death.
- More rarely, pads used too long can also lead to bacteria entering the bloodstream.
- When period products are unavailable, some may use wadded up toilet paper, tissues, paper towels, cloth, rags, pieces of diapers, or newspaper; none of which is adequate or sanitary, not to mention can be very messy.
- Use of these items leaves girls vulnerable to a heightened risk for urogenital infections, such as urinary tract infections and bacterial vaginosis, or vaginal itching, skin irritation, and discharge.
- Some students are self-conscious, anxious, embarrassed or ashamed when they must ask a gatekeeper--like an administrator or teacher--for access to the products. It's better to have supplies readily available in bathrooms.

### **School funding and period supplies**

Decreased state funding for public schools in the past 14 years means many Iowa school districts simply don't have the money to purchase period products for their bathrooms, especially when they already face cutting budgets and reducing staff.

- Iowa's school funding has declined from an average 5% yearly increase in 1973-2010, to only an average 2% per year increase from 2011 to the present.
- It appears there will be only a 2% increase again for 2025-26 school year.

### **AAUW Cedar Falls-Waterloo: one example**

After learning about period poverty and its relationship to absenteeism, about five years ago Cedar Falls-Waterloo AAUW began donating pads and tampons, as well as underwear to the Waterloo and Cedar Falls public schools. But the need is greater than we alone can meet.

73% of Waterloo students qualify for free or reduced lunch, meaning of the approximately 3,300 girls in middle and high schools, about 2,500 girls may potentially have difficulty obtaining period supplies.

About 27% of Cedar Falls students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Roughly a quarter, or about 400, of the approximately 1,200 junior and high school girls may have difficulty obtaining period supplies.

Our local organization's fundraising and member donations helps out in two of the over 300 public school districts. Other groups are helping in some schools, but this scattered approach is not good enough if we want to remove barriers for girls in obtaining an education.

**AAUW Iowa believes our state should provide funding so that every girl has equal access to these basic health and hygiene necessities, same as soap, toilet paper or paper towels, in rural and urban public school district bathrooms.**

**We support legislation to require school districts to provide period supplies in half the public school bathrooms, with allocation of state funding for this purpose. In light of the limited state funding since 2011, we urge lawmakers to seriously consider removing the three-year limitation on funding for the products to assure equitable access in every public school district.**