

## TESTIMONY

### In support of

### **LD 452: “An Act to Require Certain Schools to Provide Menstrual Products”**

### **Grace Leavitt, President, Maine Education Association**

### **Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2021**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and esteemed members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs,

My name is Grace Leavitt. I am a Spanish teacher, National Board Certified, on leave from Greely High School while serving as President of the Maine Education Association. The MEA has nearly 24,000 members—faculty and staff in our pre-K-12 public schools, our institutions of higher education, and many dedicated retired educators.

I am speaking on behalf of our members in support of LD 452: “An Act to Require Certain Schools to Provide Menstrual Products”, and really I am speaking on behalf of the students our members work with every day.

First, I have a confession. Although I have always considered myself to be someone who has worked to make our society more just and equitable, both as an educator as well as in my personal life, and despite my over 43 years in the classroom, until I heard from my fellow state association president in New Hampshire about their recently passed legislation to address ‘period poverty’, it had never occurred to me just how important it is that this be addressed, nor had I ever stopped to think how incredibly unfair it has been for our students that menstrual products are not freely and openly provided in our public schools. I am ashamed to admit that I had not thought of this much, much sooner, but I include this admission because perhaps you are having a similar thought.

Did you know that nearly 1 in 5 girls in our country have missed school because they lacked menstrual products?<sup>1</sup> You might think this is only a problem in other parts of the world—but it is a problem right here in the United States.

And like so many things, the issue affects some more than others, just making it all the more unjust.

“Menstrual hygiene products aren’t covered by national food stamp programs and are subject to sales tax in 30 states, excluded from the list of essential items exempt from taxes like food and medication. But the coronavirus pandemic and the economic downturn that followed have only exacerbated the problem, leaving marginalized populations who were already struggling to afford menstrual products at even more of a loss.”<sup>2</sup>

As of this writing, only four states--California, Illinois, New Hampshire and New York--require that schools provide menstrual products in schools for students in grades 6-12. I sincerely hope that Maine will be the fifth, and that all others soon follow.

But it isn’t only an issue of fairness or even of affordability. Having access to menstrual products can help to positively impact a girl’s confidence and thus even affect her future.

You may be thinking that schools already provide these products—and perhaps they do—in the nurse’s office. But why should a girl have to go first to the nurse’s office? Why can’t the products be supplied in the restrooms? Should a girl have to take additional time away from her school day just for this necessity? Not to mention, the nurse may well be busy, most especially now, during the pandemic. And also not to mention, not every one of our schools is staffed with a full time nurse—making such a plan even less accessible when the products should just be made available in the restrooms.

There is a fiscal note, a significant one, on this LD, which I find rather absurd. First, as I mentioned, likely menstrual products may already be supplied, to some extent, in a nurse’s office. But second, yes, there is a cost—that is part of the unfairness—a cost borne by girls and their families simply because they are girls, and for too many of our students, a real challenge. The latest report from the Maine Children’s Alliance, the 2021 Maine Kids Count, stated that the poverty rate for Maine’s children in 2019—pre-pandemic—was nearly 14%, with the rates above 20% in four of Maine’s counties.<sup>3</sup> During this past year, we can likely assume that rate has increased, perhaps drastically.

Then there is the ‘other’ cost—not the fiscal one, but one you can’t put a monetary value on. That is the cost of the effect on our girls’ confidence, comfort, and health that not providing menstrual products in our schools’ restrooms has. Menstrual products should be provided just as readily and accessibly as our schools provide other necessary items like toilet paper and soap.

One last point, while the proposal specifies providing these products in our 6-12 schools, ideally lower grades would be included as well, since girls as young as 9 years old may begin menstruating.

We urge your support of LD 452.

Thank you for your time, and I am glad to answer any questions.

<sup>1</sup><https://news.pg.com/press-release/pg-corporate-announcements/nearly-1-5-american-girls-have-missed-school-due-lack-perio>. Accessed November 13, 2019.

<sup>2</sup><https://www.statnews.com/2020/07/07/pandemic-health-disparity-period-poverty/>

<sup>3</sup>2021 Maine Kids Count, Maine Children’s Alliance

Additional information:

<https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/period-poverty-everything-you-need-to-know/>

<https://www.amwa-doc.org/period-poverty/>

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