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Testimony of Denise Tepler presenting
LD 452, An Act To Require Certain Schools to Provide Menstrual Products
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Good morning Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and distinguished colleagues of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. I am Denise Tepler, representing House District 54, all of the Town of Topsham. Today I am happy to present to you **LD 452, An Act To Require Certain Schools To Provide Menstrual Products**.

I would like to begin with a story. For several years, the Honorable Katherine Cassidy, a former Representative from the Machias area, worked on educational issues for young girls in West Africa, mostly in the country of Sierra Leone. I supported her work with small donations and followed the issues with which she was concerned on Facebook. One effort provided menstruation packs of reusable menstrual pads to young women who were not attending schools during their menstrual periods due to a lack of supplies. I was horrified that this was happening and made a small donation for this effort in particular. Why should girls in Sierra Leone be educationally disadvantaged by a normal, natural process?

Imagine my surprise when a representative of the Maine Education Association came to me in the fall of last year to tell me that several teachers had come to him with similar concerns — in Maine and in the U.S., young people were not going to school because of a lack of access to menstrual products.

What is sometimes called “period poverty” is very real in our state. I have fought for 7 years now to have the sales tax removed from these products as an acknowledgment of that fact. Until last year, however, I somehow missed that this was an issue in our schools, that was keeping young menstruators from attending to their education.

Our society treats menstruation and menstrual blood as shameful and embarrassing — a fact of life that must be kept secret. Euphemisms for this healthy and normal condition are the norm for referencing it in public. “Sanitary” items they are called, because of perceptions that menstrual blood is somehow unsanitary.

In less well-off households in Maine, it is not uncommon for menstrual products to be rationed. A limited number of pads or tampons might be available to a young teen. The products are expensive, and not covered by SNAP dollars or by WIC. Many schools currently provide pads and tampons in a Nurses Office. If a student is taken by surprise by their menstrual period, or if they were to run out of products during the school day, they must request a visit to the Nurses Office.

Picture this, I am a 12 year old experiencing my period for only the 4th time. My mom has given me a pad but only 1 extra and by 2 p.m. I know I will need another soon or face the embarrassment of bleeding

through onto my jeans. I ask the teacher if I can go to the Nurse's Office. She asks if I am feeling all right. If I say no, she may refuse my request unless I can articulate exactly what I need. If I say yes, I am lying, and she will be confused by my return to the classroom in 15 minutes and possibly asked what happened. When I get to the Nurse's Office, I must again articulate what I need to the Nurse.

This is a form of shaming for young people who have their menses. They are not unwell. They are experiencing a healthy and normative bodily function. And this is why they should have unfettered access to menstrual products in school bathrooms. Yes, there will probably be some waste, but I haven't heard anyone suggest that we not supply toilet paper just because it might be stolen to use in pranks. Imagine instead of the current scenario in many schools, I ask to go to the restroom. I am able to take a pad from a box or machine there. I can put it on, breathe a sigh of relief and go right back to class.

The fiscal note attached to this bill is problematic as many schools already supply menstrual products, perhaps just not in the way this bill requires. I believe some folks will testify to this fact. Also, Senator Breen has a companion bill to this one which removes liability for those donating menstrual products. A group of young people at Mahoney Middle School in South Portland have worked with their district to ensure that the menstrual product dispensers in their bathroom facilities work without charge and the parents are footing the bill. This seems like a sensible approach. You will hear from one of those parents today.

Access to menstrual products is access to educational opportunity. A lack of access to menstrual products is a lack of educational opportunity — a very real inequity for some. Maine can and should overcome this problem for our young people.

Thank you for your time and I am happy to answer questions.