



Mass NOW
2023
Menstrual Equity in Schools
Policies, Programs & Best Practices Report

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INTRODUCTION

What is Menstrual Equity?

In 2012, the World Health Organization and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund attempted to [define what it means to manage menstruation](#): it includes "using a **clean menstrual management material** to absorb or collect menstrual blood, that can be changed in privacy **as often as necessary** for the duration of a menstrual period, using soap and water for washing the body as required, and having **access to safe and convenient facilities to dispose of used menstrual management materials**. They understand the **basic facts linked to the menstrual cycle** and how to manage it with dignity and without discomfort or fear."

The current menstrual management policy landscape in the United States, specifically pertaining to the needs of students in educational spaces, is a budding policy area. It is a field that is intertwined with themes of educational equity, reproductive health, bodily autonomy, and student voice.

According to [Periods Gone Public](#) author Jennifer Weiss-Wolf, menstrual equity can be defined as the state in which "menstrual products are safe and affordable and available for those who need them." Policies addressing menstrual equity target a wide range of areas in order to achieve this goal, including 1) the removal of "tampon taxes" that levy taxes on period products, thus increasing prices and impacting affordability and 2) fighting against period poverty, which often entails the provision of free products to vulnerable populations including but not limited to K-12 students in public schools.

Period poverty is defined as the "[lack of access to menstrual products, hygiene facilities, waste management, and education](#)" and can plague menstruators of any age. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), [1.8 billion people](#) worldwide menstruate. However, school aged students are particularly vulnerable to the condition and consequences of period poverty. As of fall 2021, [49.4 million students](#) were enrolled in public schools in the United States. Approximately half of those students are menstruators.

In the United States, as of 2022, over [9 million children](#) or 12.4% of children under the age of 18 years old are living below the poverty threshold. In Massachusetts specifically, [1 out of 7](#) children live in poverty, highlighting the necessity of legislative action to provide students with free menstrual products. Furthermore, even those children and adolescents who are from financially secure backgrounds may not have consistent control over when and how to purchase period products.

Furthermore, the definition of period poverty emphasizes the importance of menstrual education to achieve menstrual equity. It is vital to implement programs to increase knowledge for both menstruators and non-menstruators surrounding the menstrual cycle and safe and effective menstruation management practices. Sexual education in schools is one important way menstrual cycle and management education can be shared. On September 20, 2023, the [2023 Health and Physical Education Framework](#) was passed by the Massachusetts Board of Education, notably updating sexual education frameworks in Massachusetts to include menstruation education.

Menstrual Product Access Policies

With respect to product access, legislation to address period poverty is being proposed and considered at [both the federal and state levels](#). As of January 2024, nearly half of the country, [19 states and Washington D.C.](#) require the provision of free period products in schools, while an

additional six states specifically earmark state funds for period products in schools. Massachusetts is thus falling behind on taking action for this bipartisan public health issue.

While several menstrual equity bills have been introduced in the Massachusetts state legislature over the past five years, Massachusetts does not yet have a state law requiring the free provision of menstrual products in schools. The LAM bill, currently being considered in the Massachusetts state legislature, seeks to require free and accessible period products in 1) Massachusetts public schools, 2) shelters, and 3) incarceration facilities for all menstruating individuals.

Massachusetts Public Schools and Menstrual Access Efforts: Fall River & New Bedford Public Schools

In the summer and fall of 2023, a research team from Mass NOW convened to assess the current efforts of Massachusetts public schools in the fight against period poverty. The research team included a high school student, college student, a Master's in Public Health student, and public health professor. Together, the team gathered data from across the state regarding schools' menstrual access programming; a data collection process that was part of an ongoing data collection project conducted by the Mass NOW menstrual equity research team starting in 2021.

The Mass NOW research team surveyed news articles on **12 different Massachusetts public schools including: 1) Boston Public Schools, 2) Brookline Public Schools, 3) Cambridge Public Schools, 4) Framingham Public Schools, 5) Medfield Public Schools, 6) Medford Public Schools, 7) Natick Public Schools, 8) Needham Public Schools, 9) Northborough and Southborough Public Schools, 10) Salem, 11) Somerville, and 12) Wellesley Public Schools.**

This report provides a summary of the menstrual access efforts taking place in the aforementioned public school systems. The report more specifically examines the free period product programs enacted by two particular school districts in Bristol County, Massachusetts: **New Bedford and Fall River**. Ultimately, this research makes recommendations surrounding the future implementation of similar programs and policies to advance menstrual equity.

Stakeholders

There are a number of key stakeholders involved in Mass NOW's menstrual equity work in Fall River and New Bedford. [In 2022, Mass NOW was awarded a \\$150,000 grant from the Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development Community Empowerment and Reinvestment Grant Program \(CERP\).](#) The grant was issued in support of a Menstrual Equity Program in Fall River to distribute free menstrual products and share menstruation education. Simultaneously, Fall River Public Schools opted to offer free products in bathrooms at all middle and high schools, thanks to ongoing advocacy of students, school committee members and CAPP. The 2022 grant supported a partnership between Mass NOW, the Fall River Mayor's Office, and the Coalition Against Period Poverty (CAPP). CAPP is a coalition composed of over 30 agencies working since 2019 to address period poverty throughout Fall River. Mass NOW hired and trained local educators to facilitate workshops in both schools and community centers. A "Fall River Advisory Group" also convened, starting in 2022, which consisted of individuals from organizations and offices including but not limited to the Fall River Mayor's Office, YWCA Southeastern Massachusetts, Southcoast Hospital Group, Citizens for Citizens Family Planning, and Aunt Flo. Together, Mass NOW and these various partners have worked to support menstrual equity throughout Fall River and New Bedford. In 2023, Mass NOW was re-awarded the CERP grant to sustain the program in Fall River and include New Bedford

community organizations. Many of the community partners already served New Bedford too, and people travel between the cities often. New Bedford Public Schools were also expanding their menstrual product distribution program. As will be presented in the recommendations section below, a team of stakeholders across sectors is often necessary to ensure the successful implementation of menstrual access programming.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Menstruation in US Public Schools

Schools are a particularly important setting for achieving menstrual equity, as research shows students are an especially vulnerable population when it comes to period poverty. A [2020 survey](#) of high school students in St. Louis, Missouri found that 64.4% of students reported menstrual product insecurity. This finding is echoed by a [2022 study](#) conducted with middle and high school students in the Midwest, who also reported lacking access to period products. Findings from a [2019 study](#) of women who attended public schools in the U.S. show that only 42% of respondents attended a school that provided period products, and oftentimes students were still required to pay for these products.

These issues of period product insecurity and inaccessibility at schools are witnessed by teachers and other school stakeholders. 70% of teachers reported having one or two students approach them each year to ask for period products, with over half of the teachers who do have products on hand paying for the products themselves, [one study found](#). This aligns with and even compounds existing data suggesting that teachers pay an average of [\\$750](#) per year of their own money towards school supplies to support their students.

A [survey of Black and Latinx students](#) in New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago suggests that discomfort and shame surrounding menstruation can contribute to this lack of access, preventing menstruators from discussing their needs for products with parents and guardians. Period poverty is also a racial justice issue, as the effects of period poverty disproportionately impact Black People, Indigenous People, and People of Color (BIPOC). One [2021 study](#) about period poverty conducted among college-aged women in the U.S. found that Latina women reported the highest levels of past-year period poverty, at 24.5% of respondents, followed by Black women, at 19% of respondents. Indigenous communities also bear the unequal consequences of period poverty. Grocery prices in Indigenous communities are often much higher than prices outside of reservations, and this is no different for period products. One [2017 article](#) shows that the price of a 20 count box of tampons on the Pine Ridge Reservation cost 86% more than the same box at a Walmart 100 miles away.

Period product insecurity has tangible effects on students' lives, including students missing school, being late to school, leaving school early, reporting negative impacts on learning, and experiencing health issues, according to the [2019 study](#). Similarly, one-third of the [St. Louis high school students](#) surveyed reported having missed school because of a lack of access to period products. In addition to missing school, [students in the Midwest](#) also reported struggling to change period products in the limited time available to them and fear of period blood leaks. Inadequate

access to period products negatively impacts menstruating students' school experiences, contributing to a culture that marginalizes menstruation.

Menstruation Policies in the US

Numerous studies across the country have attempted to analyze the implementation of policies and programs that provide students with free access to period products in schools. While each study faced its own unique path towards implementation, many of these plans noticed similar breakthroughs and setbacks. One study conducted in New York City examined New York's Menstrual Equity in Schools Policy. The policy mandated that NYC public schools provide free access to menstrual products inside bathrooms for students in grades 6-12.

The [study](#) examining the New York City policy emphasizes the importance of “continuous community dialogue” in designing and implementing menstrual equity policies in order to include the experiences of all menstruators in the policymaking process. Community dialogue also influenced legislators by providing narratives surrounding the necessity of the policy. Researchers also pointed to the vitality of consulting student needs, finding that student suggestions of placing products within bathrooms rather than elsewhere addressed barriers such as needing to request products from a staff member and missing more class time. According to students, placing products within bathrooms instead of with nurses or teachers increased student agency and privacy. In terms of successfully passing menstrual equity legislation, this study suggests implementing pilot tests to demonstrate feasibility and focusing on the role of policy champions, whose primary goal is to garner support and advocate for the policy.

Another study analyzed menstrual equity policies of four universities in the United States that all provided free menstrual products to students. Across all of them, a number of similar breakthroughs and challenges presented themselves. Mainly, researchers found that policy champions, as well as larger social support, were critical to successful implementation of period policies. In the university context, the champion role was primarily filled by undergraduate student activists, who served as point people and bolstered a sense of unity.

One challenge for university students from the [study](#) was obtaining social and financial support for menstrual equity policies. To garner support, students at each of the schools ran a pilot program on campus to show their administration the necessity and feasibility of free period product policies, as well as dispel fears of student misbehavior with products. Once policies were implemented, challenges in stocking products on a larger scale arose. Fulfilling student suggestions of stocking all bathrooms on campus proved difficult, influencing all four schools to only stock high-traffic restrooms with products. Due to these constraints, schools also had to make difficult choices between stocking more women's bathrooms or stocking men's bathrooms too. In terms of implementation, recommendations from these focus groups included using gender-neutral language, constructing long-term solutions, and utilizing available data and evidence.

In February 2020, Purdue University announced that they would be providing cost-free pads and tampons in women's and gender-neutral bathrooms. A focus group study was conducted in February 2021 to learn more about the experiences of menstruators at Purdue in regard to this

policy. One common theme that came up in the focus group discussions was concern about product quality. Students expressed the preference for easy applicator tampons as well as high absorbency pads and tampons to increase comfort. There was even disagreement regarding what kinds of products should be stocked, with some students preferring thicker pads, while others preferred thinner ones, pointing to the importance of product variance.

Additional concerns from the [focus groups](#) emerged as well, including students' preferences for environmentally friendly products. Another common theme discussed was that menstrual product dispensers were not sufficiently stocked, preventing students who needed products from accessing them. A final topic of the focus groups was awareness, as many students were unaware that Purdue even changed their policy. Some focus group participants thus suggested social media posts or the signage in the bathroom as avenues to inform students about menstrual product availability.

The aim of menstrual equity policies in schools is to not only give students more access to free menstrual products, but also to limit the shame and embarrassment that people may feel surrounding menstruation. By creating inclusive, supportive policies that will provide greater access to free menstrual products, these policies can help to garner a safer, less stressful environment for menstruators.

Ultimately, the above studies reveal varying experiences implementing menstrual policies, but they found important takeaways to be used for future programs. Although many of these studies had different backgrounds, they had crucial findings surrounding how menstrual equity policies can be implemented. Some of the most common findings were that organizations struggled to stock all bathrooms, so they focused on the most high traffic areas. Other schools faced this challenge as well, and they had to resort to deciding between which bathrooms can be stocked, thus limiting inclusivity.

Another common challenge was gaining support from administrators, as implementing these policies can be a very large task to take on. In these studies, they often found that the use of policy champions and spreading awareness on campus was the best solution and offered the most support to students on campuses. The findings from these studies can be used to inform policymakers as well as other institutions to improve the implementation of menstrual equity programs in the future.

Inclusivity

One common challenge in instituting effective menstrual equity policy is a lack of inclusivity. Menstruators who are trans and non-binary are often left out of important discussions and policymaking processes regarding menstruation due to misconceptions that periods are solely a "women's issue."

An [interview-based study](#) aiming to add perspectives of trans and non-binary menstruators into the menstrual equity discussion found that one specific barrier to menstrual management was public bathroom design, including limited stalls and a lack of period product

disposal bins in men's bathrooms. Many interviewees indicated gender-neutral bathrooms as a safer space for menstruation management compared to men's bathrooms, but pointed to the necessity of having free period products in *all* bathrooms, especially in schools.

In addition to issues with bathroom design, respondents interviewed also indicated preferences for gender-neutral language regarding menstruation, preferring "menstrual products" over "feminine hygiene products." These results highlight the importance of inclusive language. A [review of menstrual policies in Kenya, Senegal, and the United States](#) also concludes that menstruators marginalized by disability and gender identity are excluded from decision-making processes regarding menstrual policy, and should be centered going forward to address inequalities in period policies.

Overall, figuring out how to design menstrual equity policies in an inclusive way was a critical challenge in the policymaking process. There were a number of proposed designs, but each came with a series of challenges and limitations. Additionally, using inclusive language in policy design was a struggle due to the fact that many referred to menstruation as a "female problem." As the aim of these policies is to help menstruators, more thought needs to be given to how different policies can be designed to be fully inclusive to all people who menstruate. These studies and their findings were crucial to helping learn new ways to make menstrual policies more inclusive and open to everyone who may need menstrual products.

METHODS

Access to Menstrual Products in Massachusetts Public Schools

In the summer and fall of 2023, an intercollegiate research team from Mass NOW, including a high school student, undergraduate student, Master's in Public Health student, and a public health professor from Simmons University did a scan of news articles and available reports regarding menstrual access in schools across the Commonwealth. The team examined articles on 12 different schools across the state of Massachusetts including: 1) Boston Public Schools, 2) Brookline Public Schools, 3) Cambridge Public Schools, 4) Framingham Public Schools, 5) Medfield Public Schools, 6) Medford Public Schools, 7) Natick Public Schools, 8) Needham Public Schools, 9) Northborough and Southborough Public Schools, 10) Salem, 11) Somerville, and 12) Wellesley Public Schools. Furthermore, a survey was sent to school contacts in the fall of 2023 to collect updated information on recent practices. Responses were received from Needham, Framingham, and Cambridge Public Schools.

Case Studies: New Bedford Public Schools and Fall River Public Schools

New Bedford and Fall River were specifically chosen as case studies for this report due to the pre-existing relationships between the CAPP, Mass NOW & local government, and the income and racial inequalities in these areas contribute to period poverty. As Massachusetts' tenth largest city, Fall River has a population of approximately 94,000 people. New Bedford comes in right ahead of Fall River as the ninth largest city in the Commonwealth, with a population of approximately 100,000. Both cities have poverty rates twice the Massachusetts average, with one out of every five residents living in poverty.

Income disparities intensify in both cities when broken down by race. In Fall River, 51% of the Hispanic population, 37% of the Native community, 34% of the Black population, and 25% of the Asian population live in poverty compared with 18% of the White population. Similarly, in New Bedford, 47% of the Hispanic population, 67% of the Native community, 29% of the Black population, and 37% of the Asian community live in poverty compared to 14% of the White population. Additionally, the median household income in Fall River from 2017-2021 was \$49,000, and the median per capita income was approximately \$28,000. In New Bedford, the median household and median per capita incomes were approximately \$51,000 and \$28,000, respectively. According to 2021 census data, “female persons,” make up 52% of Fall River and 50% of New Bedford residents.

FINDINGS

Over the past six years, public schools across Massachusetts have sought to meet the needs of their menstruating students in diverse ways. Without any state mandate, school districts have done everything from partner with community organizations as well as found funding in their own budgets to supply menstruating students with free menstrual products while at school. Many of these efforts extend beyond using nurses’ offices as the sole point of access.

Furthermore, the majority of school efforts and district level changes have come from the activism of students themselves. Table 1 below details the programs, policies, and efforts in places like Cambridge, Medford, Natick, Brookline, Medfield, Northborough and Southborough, Salem, Framingham, Somerville, and Boston. See full list of schools in Table 1 below. Note: the list of schools in Table 1 is not an exhaustive list but instead a collection of examples.

Table 1: School Districts in Massachusetts with Menstrual Product Availability: Products and Practices

Name of District	Year Launched	Products and Practices	Population Served	Additional Notes
Boston Public Schools (BPS)	2019	<p>Boston Public Schools launched its menstrual access pilot program in the fall of 2019.</p> <p>Aunt Flow and other branded tampons and pads are available from nurses’ offices for free upon request. In some BPS schools, teachers and other school staff are points of access as well.</p>	Products are available to students in grades 6-12.	<p>Boston Public Schools is currently attempting to pilot an effort with EGAL: Pads on a Roll to get EGAL pads into individual bathroom stalls for student use.</p> <p>Note: BPS</p>

				educates over 54,000 students across 125 schools.
Brookline Public Schools	2019	Products are freely available in all high school bathrooms through dispensers as well as through the nurse's office.	Products are available for high school students.	First municipality in the country to implement free period products in all public restrooms regardless of gender.
Cambridge Public Schools <i>Note: Information for Cambridge Public Schools was provided through the fall 2023 survey; the survey was completed by the Director of Facilities.</i>	2016	Tampons and pads are available in gender-neutral and girls' bathrooms through dispensers, EGAL: Pads on a roll (in progress), baskets in bathrooms, products in bathroom stalls, and from the nurse's office. Cambridge also has dispensers in restrooms, Egal dispensers in stalls (in progress), nurses and family liaisons have supplies so they can give out larger quantities. Cambridge has a community partner who supplies them over the summer when products might not be available from nurses or liaisons.	Products are available K-12 as mandated by School Committee Policy.	Period Education: Working with the communications department to increase awareness of availability of these products both for immediate use and monthly (take home) supplies. Partnership with community organizations to provide period products to students over the

				summer.
Fall River Public Schools	2022	<p>Fall River Public Schools put dispensers in bathrooms of the middle schools and the high schools (in the girls' bathrooms).</p> <p>Note: Fall River Public Schools have not recently restocked products (January 2024).</p> <p>Note: Southcoast Hospital donated products to United Neighbors who have distributed products to Fall River Public Schools (fall 2023).</p>		
<p>Framingham Public Schools</p> <p><i>Note: Information for Framingham Public Schools was provided through the fall 2023 survey; the survey was completed by a school nurse.</i></p>	2021	Tampons, pads, menstrual cups, and period underwear are freely available from nurses' offices and grade offices.	Products are available for grades 9-12.	<p>Period education through adolescent health nurses and health classes.</p> <p>Noted that students expressed preference for tampons without cardboard applicators.</p>
Lowell Public Schools		Dignity Matters built free menstrual product "closets" in Lowell elementary, middle, and high schools.		
Medfield Public Schools	2022	Products are available in gender-neutral and girls' bathrooms through dispensers at Medfield High School and at the Blake Middle School.	Products are available for middle and high school students.	Project initially started due to student activism with products funded by students' families and donations.

Medford Public Schools	2022	Pads and tampons are freely available through the nurse’s office with current efforts to get products in bathrooms through dispensers.	Products are available K-12.	“Free the Pad” campaign started by students to organize for free period products in Medford Schools.
Natick Public Schools	2021	Pads and tampons freely available in gender-neutral and girls’ high school bathrooms through containers.		Student-led initiative helps offer these free products with funding from one-off education grant.
Needham Public Schools <i>Note: Information for Needham Public Schools was provided through the fall 2023 survey; the survey was completed by the Assistant Director of Building Maintenance (DPW)</i>	2023	Aunt Flow period products offered freely in gender-neutral and girls’ bathrooms and the nurse’s office through dispensers.	Products are available for grades 6-12 (no official policy).	Aunt Flow has educational resources regarding use on each package. Also, the school curriculum starts educating on menstruation in 6th grade. “Aunt Flow products are used. The products are well liked by the students as they are sized appropriately for middle school and

				high school aged menstruating individuals.”
New Bedford Public Schools	2021	Pads are currently offered for free through dispensers in female identified and gender neutral bathrooms in all public middle schools and New Bedford High School.	Products are available for middle and high school students.	Tampons will be made available early 2024.
Newton	2023	In May of 2023, students at Newton South High School started a petition to increase the availability of menstrual products in Newton public high schools. (See Mass NOW Menstrual Product C... report for further information).		
Northborough and Southborough Public Schools		Pads and tampons are freely available through the Student Council initiative in all gender-neutral bathrooms and four girls’ bathrooms as well as the nurse’s office. Products are freely available in dispensers in middle school bathrooms as well.	Products are available for middle and high school students.	
Salem Public Schools	2022	Aunt Flow products are freely available in gender-neutral and girl’s bathrooms through dispensers. Pads are available in the elementary, middle, and high school bathrooms and pads and tampons are available in the middle and high school bathrooms.	Products are available in the elementary, middle, and high school bathrooms.	
Somerville Public Schools	2017	Products available in middle and high school girls’ bathrooms and through the nurse’s office.	Products are available for middle and high school students.	Some reports of student misbehavior regarding period products in bathrooms.

Wellesley Public Schools	2022	Pads and tampons are freely available; initially through baskets in four gender-neutral bathrooms, four boys' bathrooms, and four girls' bathrooms and then through dispensers.		
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Note: This table was generated based on information found in the articles hyperlinked in the leftmost column of the table. Note: Information and sources for Fall River and New Bedford are further detailed below.

Case Study #1: New Bedford

Following a wave of student activism, one middle school in the [New Bedford school district installed dispensers offering free period products during the 2018-2019 school year](#). These dispensers and products were purchased and installed by the district. Prior to this initiative, free period products were available to students through the nurse's office only.

During the 2021-2022 school year, product access was further expanded to all female-identifying New Bedford High School bathrooms. By the start of the 2022-2023 school year, all New Bedford Middle Schools had period product dispensers in their female identified and gender-neutral bathrooms (there are gender neutral bathrooms at both the middle and high schools). Product dispensers were later added to gender-neutral restrooms in the high schools as well.

In the summer of 2022, New Bedford Public Schools ordered dispensers through the company Milhench. The dispensers cost approximately \$445 each. 54 cases of maxi pads to fill the dispensers cost approximately \$2,200 (\$41.49/case).

Overall, in the 2022-2023 school year, there were 2,368 nursing visits for menstrual products compared to 2,519 visits from the 2018-2019 school year. (Note: This difference is a 6% decrease in the amount of students visiting the nurse's office for menstrual products). This finding is particularly notable considering the low promotional and education efforts for the program.

During the implementation of these policies, there was concern from school leadership about misconduct involving the menstrual products in restrooms. However, a follow-up with the high school Custodial Manager revealed no major issues with maintenance or upkeep of the dispensers. The Custodial Manager



indicated that at the Middle School, at the start of the program there would be times when products were found on the floor or otherwise misused, but that this is no longer an issue. The Custodial Team of the Middle School shared similar experiences that behavior is not an issue and misuse of products is rare. Both Custodial Managers also expressed that restocking is not an issue, and that products are always adequately stocked.

Figure 1: Packaging of Maxi Thin Pads Provided by New Bedford and Fall River Schools

Currently, New Bedford Public Schools has dual pad and tampon dispensers. As of December 2023, only pads were stocked in the dispensers; however, efforts are being made to add tampons to the dispensers by the end of January 2024. Nurses' offices at various middle schools and the nurse's office at New Bedford High School does currently offer free tampons.

Case Study #2: Fall River

Beginning in 2019, Wendy Garf-Lipp of United Neighbors of Fall River began convening the Coalition Against Period Poverty (CAPP) which includes 30 local organizations in New Bedford and Fall River. CAPP, alongside Mass NOW, has fought to make menstrual equity a reality in Fall River.

Throughout the 2022-2023 school year, products were offered for free in 6-12th grade bathrooms across Fall River Public Schools. Dispensers were made available in the middle school and the high school bathrooms; specifically in the girls' bathrooms. In August of 2022, the Chief Operations Officer for Fall River Public Schools shared that distribution would be extended to elementary schools and gender neutral bathrooms as well. In the Fall of 2023 it came to our attention that there had been a delay in product distribution due to vandalism. As of January 2024, Fall River Mayor Paul E. Coogan's office shared that the Fall River School Department will resume supplying free menstrual products to their students in grades 6th through 12th grades. For elementary schools, the products are stocked and available in the nurse's office and the Fall River School Department will have a plan in place for the distribution of free menstrual products in grades 6th through 12th by mid-February. The Chief Operations Officer, Fall River School Department, Ken Pacheco, has confirmed these items will still be provided by the district themselves.

Furthermore, it was identified that select bathrooms were being converted from faculty bathrooms to create gender neutral bathrooms. For example, across the elementary, middle, and high schools, a select number of bathrooms were said to be marked as for "students" (without any identified gender). It was noted by the Chief Operations Officer that these bathrooms would remain unlocked at all times (however, it was not clear whether or not dispensers were added to these bathrooms).

In the fall of the 2023-2024 school year, it came to the attention of United Neighbors of Fall River (UNFR) that products were not being restocked in Fall River Public Schools. UNFR received donated products from Southcoast Hospital and fielded requests from individual Fall River schools in need of products. Previously, products were paid for by Fall River Public Schools with funding for menstrual products being provided through the Office of the Chief Operations Officer for Fall River Public Schools. The Fall River Mayor's Office expressed their commitment to

achieving menstrual equity in schools; however, it is unclear (as of January 2024), why products were not restocked.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings from the literature review, the information collected on school districts throughout the Commonwealth as well as the New Bedford and Fall River case studies, the Mass NOW research team suggests the following recommendations for implementing free period product policies and programs in schools. The recommendations include 1) implementation efforts, 2) product preference and quality, 3) promoting inclusivity, and 4) standardizing data collection.

1. *Implementation Efforts*

Having both financial and community support for free menstrual product policies in schools is vital for ensuring the success of implementation efforts. For example, both the [“Menstrual Equity Initiatives at USA Universities”](#) and the [“A Policy for Addressing Menstrual Equity in Schools: A Case Study From New York City, U.S.A.”](#) studies emphasized the importance of policy champions to advocate for the desired policy in the community. The New York study also addressed the importance of continuous community dialogue for garnering community support. Ultimately, cross sector collaboration and communication across stakeholders is essential for effective implementation of menstrual access programming. For example, there was tremendous student activism and community support in both New Bedford and Fall River. It is because of this cross sector communication between students and organizations in Fall River that the problem of period poverty was first identified. However, students and community partners should not be relied upon to sustain programming. Ensuring that the appropriate parties are held accountable for stocking and restocking products is essential and must come from district and local leaders. Appropriate parties with respect to policy include district superintendents while we look for Operations Managers within the Public School System to carry out procurement and distribution. If a bill passes in the state legislature, the superintendent and operations management team remain the responsible parties for enacting sustainable systems of implementation.

2. *Product Preference & Quality*

The variety, quality, and environmental consciousness of menstrual products made available to students, as well as how these products will be distributed, are important considerations in menstrual access program design. Students should be consulted, as exemplified by focus groups conducted at [Purdue University](#), about their needs and preferences regarding products. Furthermore, many of the schools presented in Table One above only provide pads to students. It would be beneficial to survey students on product preferences and expand availability to reflect the responses. (Note: [Mass NOW’s 2022 Fall River Report](#) includes focus groups and surveys with menstruators in Fall River, including students, and questions about their menstrual product preferences. See report for more details).

It is necessary to consider the importance of choice and having a variety of options for students as they seek to manage menstruation at school. For example, having a variety of pad options is essential due to the variability in thickness, wings, etc. Depending on the flow of menstrual blood, some students may prefer a thicker pad, or one with wings.

Additionally, as presented in the literature review, student comfort levels may vary regarding points of access. For instance, obtaining products in common spaces in bathrooms where there may be visibility from other students may be uncomfortable to students and serve as a barrier to access. Within stall access points are commonly shared as a preferred option.

Lastly, there is growing consideration and preference for [products that are more environmentally friendly](#). The products purchased by New Bedford schools are included under the Massachusetts FAC118: Environmentally Preferable Cleaning Products, Programs, Equipment and Supplies list that provides cost savings for institutions who are willing to purchase products that are more environmentally sustainable.

3. Promoting Inclusivity

Inclusivity is another vital consideration when implementing free period product policies and programs. The manner in which products are distributed and the language surrounding periods are ways that schools can ensure all menstruators are included. Trans and non-binary menstruators interviewed in a [2020](#) study emphasize the need for menstrual products and disposal bins in all bathrooms to make period management accessible to all. As seen in Table One, districts such as Cambridge Public Schools offer period products to students in both girls' and gender neutral bathrooms. Wellesley Public Schools reportedly includes products in bathrooms marked for both girls and boys. It is important that all people who menstruate, including menstruators who use gender neutral bathrooms and [men's bathrooms](#), have access to menstrual products.

4. Standardizing Data Collection

There is a need to standardize data collection efforts across Massachusetts K-12 schools. While the [Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#) is commonly used as a survey instrument to collect data on student behaviors regarding a variety of health topics, the survey currently does not include menstruation related questions.

Collecting information on the menstrual needs of students is essential in order to inform adequate interventions and support the health and well being of menstruating students. Furthermore, data collection regarding distribution methods and points of access is necessary to track not only student use but other health and academic indicators as well. For example, as reported above, New Bedford has been able to stock free menstrual products in a total of 44 bathrooms, and has experienced a 6% decrease in the amount of students going to the nurse's office for menstrual products. Collecting this type of data is necessary to ensure that implementation efforts are effectively reaching essential health and academic equity goals.

CONCLUSION

The above report describes the menstrual access efforts of schools across the Commonwealth, with particular focus on New Bedford Public Schools and Fall River Public Schools. Based on current menstrual access programming efforts across the state of Massachusetts, a number of recommendations were formulated surrounding 1) implementation efforts, 2) product preference and quality, 3) promoting inclusivity, and 4) standardized data collection.

Ultimately, collaboration and communication across stakeholders is an essential part of successful menstrual access programming. With the [I AM bill making great strides in the Massachusetts state legislature](#), it is necessary to ensure effective implementation strategies are in place. Fully staffing and resourcing menstrual access programming is necessary.

Historically, menstrual access programming has fallen upon school nursing staff. Menstruation management and student health and well being, however, is not exclusively the task of school nurses. Various stakeholders, including facilities management offices, are key players in the movement to ensure menstrual equity in schools.

Furthermore, student voice is a critical factor in the fight against period poverty. Many of the school systems featured in this report that have implemented menstrual access programs did so in reaction to student activism. However, students should not be relied upon to initiate and build sustainable menstrual access systems. It is the duty of multiple stakeholders and teams to ensure that students have access to basic essentials for their bodily needs. As more and more states pass policies to end period poverty, this is an exciting time for Massachusetts and advocates everywhere to be in the fight for menstrual equity.

We believe in a future where no students have to worry about missing class due to not having access to menstrual products, teachers can spend their energy teaching instead of distributing products, and nurses can focus on their already long list of responsibilities in supporting student health and well being. It's our hope that this report helps pave the road to menstrual dignity for all students in the Commonwealth.