

Period Poverty

By Gino Amato

Worldwide, there is a growing movement to address the issue of period poverty in schools, by providing free tampons and pads to students. In the last year, the issue has also been creating debate here in South Australia.

SAASSO's Survey

In November 2019, SAASSO conducted a survey of our members (public school parents and school staff), in response to the Victorian Government's announcement that girls at every public primary and secondary school would get free tampons and pads – citing them as essential as toilet paper and soap.

SAASSO had 1,362 individual responses to the survey. You can download the report at www.saasso.asn.au/surveys.

93% of our respondents identified themselves as parents, with 47% answering that they worked in schools.

When asked if the SA State Government should provide free sanitary products in our public schools:

- 79.41% answered 'Yes'
- 20.59% answered 'No'.

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Comments from respondents were clear that many schools and school staff already provide sanitary products to students, for emergencies – but these are not funded and are often paid for by school staff. School leaders were also clear that while they were supportive of the idea, they could not fund such a program out of existing school budgets.

Commissioner For Children & Young People's Survey

In May 2020, The SA Commissioner for Children and Young People conducted a survey covering the issue. This survey received 2,517 responses.

The respondents to the Commissioner's survey were:

- 89% aged 7-21
- 76% were school students
- 99% were female and gender diverse
- 16% identified as LGBTQIA+
- 3% were Aboriginal
- 14% were CALD – from a linguistically diverse background
- 5% live with a disability
- 6% were young carers

The Commissioner's report, released in May, revealed that having a period was, 'both a barrier to attendance and to participation of school'.

- 26% reported having missed school because they did not have tampons or sanitary pads.
- 51% did not have access to period products or know how to access them at school.
- 55% were primary school age (7-12 years) when they had their first period.

The two main ways students got a hold of hygiene products at school were:

1. Asking friends – 76%
2. Asking a teacher or other adult at school – 20%.

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Students reported a number of barriers to getting a hold of period products; including embarrassment to discuss the topic with a teacher, the lack of availability of products at school (and the lack of funds to purchase them from a school vending machine), lack of friends who may be able to lend them a tampon or pad (particularly at primary school), lack of adequate bins and strict rules around going to the toilet during school.

Due to not having a tampon or pad, 70% of respondents had been forced to use toilet paper, tissues, socks and even torn sheets.

Many students reported witnessing or being subjected to bullying and teasing for having their period.

A number of countries have already introduced programs to end period poverty, including Scotland, England, New Zealand, Canada, South Korea, USA and



recently the state of Victoria here in Australia.

Trial in South Australian Public Schools

In April 2020, SA Best member of South Australia's upper house, the Hon Connie Bonaros introduced a bill to parliament, calling for a trial program for free menstrual hygiene products in our public schools.

The Education Department began a trial in 15 disadvantaged schools during term one. The trial was carried out during terms one and two and has now been extended into term 3.

These 15 schools represent secondary, area and primary schools. The trial has involved the provision of a grant to assist these schools to maintain their ongoing commitment to the provision of sanitary products for those who may need support in this way.

The department has maintained contact with the schools during the trial to check on any further support that they may require. At the end of term 3, data will be collected from the schools used to base recommendations for the Minister. ■

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