

Briefing Paper: Menstruation Matters and the School Uniforms Bill

Background:

Menstruation Matters is a non-profit campaign organisation that spearheaded the law-changing campaign for free period products in schools in 2020 and in public buildings in 2022. We tackle the issue of period poverty and inequality and reshape the conversation on periods.

We are focused on menstrual equity, dignity, and inclusion in education and public life. We work directly with young people, parents, and schools to break the stigma around menstruation and to ensure environments - including school settings - are designed to support, not shame, those who menstruate. Our founder, Katrina McDonnell, currently sits on the Department of Education's Free Period Products in Schools Steering Committee, ensuring that the voices and lived experiences of those impacted are reflected.

Key issues identified through our work with schools:

Uniform colour & style contribute to stigma – Light fabrics, tight fits, and inflexible uniform increase fear of leaks and embarrassment, particularly during menstruation.

Rules often prevent discreet protection – Some students are told off for layering (e.g. tying a jumper around the waist) or for wearing alternative clothing such as PE clothes, even when it helps them manage their period discreetly.

Soiled underwear and tights are a common issue – Pupils frequently report incidents of leaking onto underwear or tights, especially when school policies restrict access to toilets during class or don't permit changing into PE clothes. This causes embarrassment, anxiety, and often leads to students requesting to go home or missing lessons - directly impacting learning and participation.

Economic strain – Families often need to purchase additional uniform items, particularly tights and underwear, to manage menstrual accidents. This places further pressure on low-income households already struggling with the cost of uniform compliance.

Student testimony:

"I always dread wearing my light grey skirt during my period. I like to wear my jumper around my waist as an extra layer but my teachers say it's not uniform. One time I

leaked and didn't realise until break - people in my year weren't the nicest about it and I went home early. I always say I wish we could wear black trousers when we need to, or wear PE clothes. It would make me and others feel much more comfortable about it all."

- Aimee, 14, Belfast (Year 10)

Recommendation:

Young people who menstruate often face challenges related to inflexible, uncomfortable, or impractical school uniforms - such as being required to wear tight-fitting, light-coloured trousers or skirts, or being restricted from wearing additional layers that help them feel more secure and confident during their period.

Students are often left managing leaks, anxiety, or shame during the school day - sometimes resulting in missed classes, participation avoidance (especially in PE or trips), or leaving school to go home to change.

Menstruation Matters **recommends that all school uniform policies explicitly consider the menstrual health and dignity of students.** This includes offering options for dark-colored, or loose-fitting clothing during menstruation and ensuring affordability of these items, especially for those who menstruate.

Conclusion

Just as the Bill rightly seeks to address cost and sustainability, it must also protect the comfort and dignity of those who menstruate - a large proportion of the student population. Uniform policies that fail to acknowledge this reality will continue to contribute to shame, distraction, and exclusion.

We urge the Department of Education to embed an affordable, **period-aware uniform policy** within the statutory guidance. This is a crucial step towards ensuring that no student's education is limited by what they're wearing during their period.