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Community organizes drive for menstrual products for Madison schools

By Amber C. Walker Aug 16, 2017



A menstrual product dispenser in a second floor, gender neutral bathroom at East High School. The machine dispenses free pads and tampons for students who need them.

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Photo by Amber C. Walker

With the start of the school year rapidly approaching in Madison, members of the community are working to make menstrual hygiene products free and accessible for students.

Michael Johnson, CEO of the Boys and Girls Club of Dane County, met with a group of local women who spoke with him about the issues some low-income students face in getting sanitary products.

“I didn't realize this was a major issue for our kids,” Johnson said, “We wanted to do something about it before school starts.”

So far, the Boys and Girls Club of Dane County has partnered with NBC 15 and Hometown Pharmacy in Fitchburg to collect menstrual products for students. The Boys and Girls Club will distribute the donations at the organization's annual Back to School Bash and Backpack Giveaway on August 26.

“I want to fill up a truckload of tampons,” Johnson said. “Teachers and nurses shouldn't have to pay for this stuff out of pocket.”

Last school year, Madison East High School was part of a pilot program to install dispensers that distribute free hygiene products in bathrooms used by menstruating students.

East principal Mike Hernandez said he consulted with an ad-hoc committee of students about the type and size of products to distribute. Hernandez plans to continue providing the items for menstruating students as a part of the school's budget for the 2017-2018 school year.

Johnson said he wants to raise funds to purchase dispensers for all Madison Metropolitan School District middle and high schools to ensure that more students have access to menstrual hygiene products.

State Rep. Melissa Sargent, D-Madison, is an advocate for access to menstrual products in schools and other bathrooms that receive state funding. Sargent also wants to eliminate the sales tax Wisconsin imposes on the products. The Wisconsin Fiscal Bureau estimated that the state collects \$2.7 million each year from taxes on sanitary products.

“To me, it is a public health issue, it is a gender equality issue and it is the right thing,” she said.

Sargent, an East alumna, partnered with the school to install the dispensers. She spoke with students and staff after the pilot and said their responses were “overwhelmingly powerful.”

“Every person that menstruates has a story that they can tell about when they got their period and was not prepared with tampons or pads,” she said.

“Knowing that you could just go into the bathroom and take care of their business really kept people in the classroom.”

Sargent said the product donation drive is a “noble effort,” but also wants state and local governments to implement a long-term solution for menstrual equality. Sargent referenced Dane County Supervisor Heidi Wegleitner and her work in 2015 to pass a resolution that provided free tampons and pads in locations throughout the county that serve low-income women.

“I look forward to having permanent and real cultural change so we don’t have to have fundraisers or drives to provide menstrual products,” she said.

“There will be a day when women and people who menstruate will walk into a bathroom and have everything that they need in the bathroom the same way that men do.”

Amber Walker