



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Period Products (Free Provision) Bill:
Council for the Curriculum, Examinations
and Assessment

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them to learners who menstruate, as well as to provide educational support in the school setting. Education is a key factor in addressing the stigma surrounding periods and promoting respect and understanding, as well as enabling open discussions about what people may experience when menstruating. The pilot scheme also aims to tackle period poverty by helping learners who menstruate to reach their potential. Period poverty generally refers to poor menstrual knowledge and/or access to period products and all the associated factors that come out of that, including absence from education.

The main objectives of our project are to introduce a pilot scheme to provide free period products in schools; support and increase pupils' confidence in managing periods in school; address the stigma associated with periods while promoting the scheme; support pupils to attend school and carry out their normal activities, including their education, during their period; and make provision on a similar basis to that which exists in schools in England, Scotland and Wales, promoting fairness and equality. It is important to note that the scheme is designed to be inclusive. The educational aspects of it are intended to bring boys into the conversation from an early age, ensure that the taboo associated with menstruation begins to be reduced and, over time, transform the understanding of young people and society in general about those important issues.

Our response to the consultation reflects our support for the Bill. We see that the Bill will help to address period poverty across Northern Ireland and support educational development, as it will contribute to the development of more widespread understanding of the issues surrounding period dignity and will promote more openness around periods and respect for people who menstruate. That was CCEA's response. The Bill supports our steering group's intentions in taking forward the period poverty project. Its purpose is to put in place legislation to ensure that products are obtainable free of charge, in accordance with arrangements established and maintained by the Department, for all persons who need to use them. We are also in favour of the consultation, and we think that that is best way to ensure that all perspectives are taken into account. We support the fact that it is focused on provision of period products in all public places at point of need; that it is educational and supportive of the improvement of societal understanding of period dignity and the associated stigma of poverty, shame and taboo, which can have a detrimental long-term impact on individuals; that it is free of charge and accessible; and that it is consultative through all the Departments.

That is, basically, our project and why we are so interested in and have supported the Bill. Our key deliverables for the project will, we hope, be supported by the legislation, if it comes into effect. One of our deliverables is a communication strategy around the scheme. Obviously, our project started in April, and we had to raise awareness at pace about the project and what it is about and develop a communications plan to reach schools in enough time to enable CCEA to provide support in the autumn term of 2021. We have successfully done that, and we have now provided training and support to a range of teachers, with more sessions planned for the new year. We have a school engagement plan in place. We are also updating some of our curriculum materials to include approaches to challenging negative attitudes and stereotypes around gender inequality and periods generally and to help remove the taboo, not just for girls but also for boys, to ensure that, going forward, young people have a better understanding of how this natural process takes place. They really should be able to cope with it in a better way. Our teacher professional learning, which my colleague Deidre Coffey is taking forward, includes information about the scheme and how to access the products and procure them through the Education Authority, but it also addresses some of those key aspects.

Deidre will talk later about the issues that have been raised by teachers and by schools generally. Key issues have included the need for a policy for schools. We have provided a template policy through our website, as well as guidance on how to set up an appropriate free period product scheme in a school. We have conducted surveys, including one at the beginning to baseline opinion and get an understanding of Northern Ireland's understanding of period poverty, and that has helped shape our thinking about what is needed in the project going forward and how we deliver it.

That is it in a nutshell, and, clearly, you can see the link with the Period Products (Free Provision) Bill. It will clearly support our initiative and help to drive forward change over time, and we would very much welcome the legislation being put in place as soon as possible.

Deidre, do you want to add anything about the project? Maybe the Committee wants to ask questions. That will help us to focus on your specific interests.

Ms Deidre Coffey (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment): Yes, we should move on to questions. I think that you have covered everything, Roisin.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Sheehan): OK. Thanks for that, Roisin, and thanks to you and Deidre for coming today. You have answered most of the questions that I had.

As a matter of curiosity, do children currently receive any education on menstruation in schools?

Ms Coffey: They do, through the likes of science and biology classes, and some schools will have incorporated that into their relationships and sexuality education-type curriculum as well. The areas of gender equality, accessibility and other areas around menstrual dignity have not really been tackled effectively in most schools to date. That is a big area, and we are trying to encourage schools and help and support them in delivering that type of education.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Sheehan): Absolutely. If the issue of menstruation is being taught only from a biological perspective and does not include gender equality and issues like it, I do not see us making much progress. You say that it is just being taught in science and biology. That suggests that it is in post-primary school rather than primary school: is that right?

Ms Coffey: A lot of primary schools have sessions with the girls in their schools. Many separate them from the boys and treat it as a gender issue relating to girls. They maybe separate the girls for a little talk about periods and what to expect. However, we have found that, to date, it is not integrated into the whole-school curriculum in most schools. A lot of schools think that the girls might be embarrassed to learn about it in a mixed group. Teachers find it challenging as well.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Sheehan): Do you agree, therefore, that it is important that it is treated as learning for girls and boys? It is important, particularly, that boys are made aware of issues around menstruation.

Ms Coffey: Most definitely. Some boys responded to the original survey. After all, boys have sisters, girlfriends and mothers who have periods. They have friends who have periods or will have them. Therefore, it is really important that boys understand the issues. They should understand the basis of it as well as the issues and the embarrassment that can come with it. We are trying to encourage teachers to look at that aspect. The training for schools is open to all boys' schools, as well as mixed and girls' schools. We are trying to encourage teachers from all the school types to attend the training.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Sheehan): Thanks for that. I will open the meeting to other members. Harry Harvey, would you like to ask some questions?

Mr Harvey: Thank you, Deidre and Roisin. I fully support anything that provides for the needs of our ladies at all their ages and stages in a respectful manner. Has your pilot scheme started? Did you say that it had started, or that it was starting in April?

Ms Radcliffe: It started in April 2021. We spent a few months preparing the questionnaire for the baseline survey and developing the training and communications strategy. Deidre started rolling out the training in September 2021, and further training is planned for the spring term of 2022. There really is a need for a further year, at least, on the project to roll it out fully.

Deidre, you might want to provide some information on the data that we have on teacher attendance. That might be useful at this point.

Ms Coffey: We ran online webinars for primary and post-primary teachers. Primary teachers could sign up to one three-hour session and post-primary teachers to two three-hour sessions because, obviously, there is more detail to be covered in post-primary school. The webinars occurred in November and December. The scheme was launched on 21 September, so we gave the schools a chance to sign up their period dignity contacts in the school and decide who would attend the training.

We had quite a healthy sign-up, considering the short time span and the pressures that schools are under due to COVID and related issues. Altogether, 452 webinar sessions were booked. About 151 primary teachers and 226 post-primary teachers attended sessions. Primary teachers had a choice of two three-hour sessions to choose a date, and post-primary teachers had the same opportunity. Some teachers chose to attend different sessions, so the numbers are not exact.

We received positive feedback on the training from teachers. We used the training as an opportunity to glean their thoughts on the project and their feedback on their challenges. We also used it as an

opportunity to show them the resources that we are developing and to get feedback on them. The resources are being reviewed in the light of that feedback. They will go through the editing and design process and will be available to schools over the coming months.

Mr Harvey: Excellent. Deidre and Roisin, I appreciate those answers. What have you learned in the first year? Was all the feedback useful? Was anything particularly useful?

Ms Radcliffe: We have had an overwhelmingly positive response. That surprised us because of the short time that we had in which to promote and communicate on the project. We got off to a flying start. We have had great support from the steering group, which is a mixed group that includes young people. All of that has fed into the product, which is the training, and into the support and guidance that we have put on the website. The opinions that we have been able to gather through the surveys have really helped to inform all of that. People sometimes make assumptions, for example, about primary schools' level of awareness or potential interest, but we have been delighted with the response from teachers and young people, male and female, which has been almost 100% positive.

Deidre, do you want to add anything from your individual sessions? I know that you have had closer contact with the teachers.

Ms Coffey: All feedback is useful, whether it is positive or negative. Some of the challenges for teachers are around their workloads and the constraints that they have at the minute. We expect teachers to have a school policy, so there are challenges for them if they have never written a policy before. We are trying to help them. We have provided a template for writing a policy, and we will run a workshop session or two in the new year — this term — to help them to define and develop their policies, which they should do also in consultation with their pupils, pupils' parents and board of governors.

As Roisin said, we have the results of the initial baseline survey that was done in June and July last year. It ran for only two or three weeks, but we had a healthy response to it — over 2,000 responses — from young people and teachers, which is helping to progress the project and show us the way forward. A follow-up survey was launched on Monday. It is, obviously, a bit early for any results to come from that. Again, that is for pupils and teachers. Any feedback from it will be passed to the steering group, DE and the EA and will help us to look at how we might improve the scheme and address any challenges that schools have.

Mr Harvey: OK. Thank you very much, ladies. How has COVID hampered your findings? I am sure that it has made things a lot more difficult, has it not? You can give a simple answer to that, perhaps.

Ms Radcliffe: We were pleasantly surprised at the uptake, because schools have been disrupted to some extent, and there are other pressures on teachers. It is an evolving situation. We hope that our support webinars in the spring will go equally well. The fact that the training is online has helped. Teachers can access the support very easily. In a way, we have all learned a lot from COVID, and we are probably reaping some of those benefits through the way in which we have planned the delivery of our programme.

Mr Harvey: Thank you very much. It is excellent to be doing good in a difficult situation. I really appreciate what you are doing.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Deidre and — sorry, what is your first name?

Ms Radcliffe: Roisin.

Mr Butler: Roisin. It just says "Radcliffe" on my screen. I used to detest being called by my second name at school: "Butler!"

Thank you for your update. Most of the questions have been asked. Pat touched on one that was burning in my head, but you covered it, Deidre, with regard to boys being included in the conversation. If we are going to tackle the stigma and the barriers, it is important that everybody is involved in the conversation.

As Harry hinted, you have been running the pilot for the best part of 10 months. Has there been any learning in that time or surprises or beneficial unintended consequences? I imagine there is enough

flexibility to change midstream and improve what is happening. Some of the bodies promoting the scheme probably have you well versed on the requirements, but, at the coalface, have there been barriers or things that have come as a surprise?

Ms Coffey: I do not think so. That being said, the project has been running for 10 months. The scheme was launched in schools only at the end of September, so it is a short time for schools, first of all, to get on board, and a number have not yet engaged because of the pressures they have had. Some schools are beginning to engage now and sign up. We have a database of key period dignity contacts, so there is continual pushing to get people to sign up to that. We find that head teachers are having so much information given to them at the minute, so many emails, that it is better to have a designated person in a school to give the information to. They are then tasked with disseminating that information in the school and helping to implement the scheme. It has been a learning thing. Some people designated as key contacts have not had all the information passed on to them. It is important that those key contacts are signed up in order for the right information to reach the right person in a school at the right time.

There are challenges, particularly in primary schools, around the embarrassment of talking to children and young people about periods, particularly the level of maturity and when those young people are ready for that sort of education. What is appropriate at what stage? Young people can differ. One 10-year-old or 11-year-old is not the same as another, so it is very much down to teachers knowing their pupils when deciding what is age-appropriate to talk to them about and the approaches used.

There are many challenges in schools at the minute, and this is another challenge. One thing that I would emphasise is that we encourage schools to have mixed-gender classes when talking about periods. A lot of teachers find that challenging. That will change over time but not overnight. A number of parents might not be too happy about it either. There might be challenges from parents.

As with everything, it is a learning process as we go along. We will take on board all the feedback that we get through the training and surveys but also through emails from teachers about the challenges that they have. Overwhelmingly, it is positive feedback that we get, such as, "This is a fantastic initiative. We're really behind it. We just need support to deliver it."

Mr Butler: My next question is slightly more clinical. That is extremely positive, but no two young girls or women will experience a period in the same way. I imagine that there are more severe cases, where there are clinical or medical issues. What is the strategy for equipping the teachers of those who present with the gateway to parents or GPs or that type of thing? What does that look like if, in the conversation, it becomes obvious that the young girl is suffering more than, perhaps, she needs to? It is about stripping back the barriers, giving the information and building up the knowledge and stuff, but what does that look like?

Ms Coffey: We are developing resources on period issues such as endometriosis and PCOS. The resources will help teachers to deal with those in a whole-class format, because it may be that young people do not have the symptoms to begin with but those symptoms gradually increase with age and so on. We also have a section on menstrual well-being on our RSE hub, where there is support, guidance and information on the organisations and NHS trusts to contact if you have issues. We have information on organisations that can help and support people with PCOS and the different issues. That guidance on our RSE hub is linked to the period dignity pages of our website. We cover it in training as well.

Mr Butler: Brilliant. You covered this in a way, but there has to be an age-appropriate approach to delivering that, whether in primary or post-primary schools. You probably get up into year 12, year 13 and year 14. Could that be linked into starting a conversation to inform more senior pupils about menopause and perimenopause? That is the evolution further down the line for some people, quite early in some cases.

Ms Coffey: We have not done that yet, but we are looking at it. We are pretty early on in the pilot scheme. As with all the RSE topics, period dignity and so on, it is evolving. We will have to work through the issues. There is a plan to look at things like menopause as well, but we have not got to that stage.

Mr Butler: That is fine. I have a final question, which I asked just before Christmas. It is just something that came to me. How do we ensure that the quality of the product is the same and linear across every school, regardless of the budgetary pressures that a school is under? How do we ensure that a school

does not have to go for bargain basement products for young girls to avail themselves of, because its budget is pressurised, while those who go to a more affluent school get the gold standard?

Ms Radcliffe: A range of products is available. There are three types: a basic product, an eco-product and a branded product. We have tried to ensure that there is a range. Part of the pilot is about assessing what we can learn from the uptake and usage of the products. That will shape what happens next. However, in this initial stage, it is just about going with the products that are most commonly used by young women and taking it from there.

There are issues around branding. Society puts value on things like that, unfortunately, and young people are influenced by that. It is always about trying to get a balance between the environmental aspects of the products, the likelihood of young people using them and the products being well suited to the environment and context that they will be used in. Hopefully, that answers your question

It is a learning process for us as well. We will see how many schools take it up at the end of the year. A decision was made that how much of a budget a school would get to use on this would be based on the number of young people in that school. I am sure that the Department will look more closely to see if that is the best way to do it. A range of factors are being taken into account, including free school meals and disadvantage, but those are not the only factors, because, obviously, the more children you have in a school, the more children you have who are menstruating or likely to menstruate. We will have to see how all of that goes.

We have representation from the supplier on our steering group. That collaborative approach has been one of the most interesting parts of the project. It has been really useful to bring together young people, teachers, organisations such as CCEA and the EA. We have representation on that group from Homeless Period Belfast, which flags up the wider societal issues, and from further education. We have had rich discussions about the choices that were made. We meet monthly, so there is little that can pass that group without being scrutinised to the hilt. In addition, we get regular feedback from teachers and schools. There is some good practice already. We are behind Scotland and England in introducing the initiative, but schools have already set up their own schemes. We are always interested to hear how those schemes are running so that we can provide better guidance to schools that are coming on board with it. It is a bit of an evolving thing.

Mr Butler: I appreciate that. Your point on branding is well made. I agree with that, Roisin. On quality assurance, sometimes, brand does not mean quality. Thank you, Roisin and Deidre.

Mr McNulty: Thank you, Roisin and Deidre, for your succinct but important presentation. How does it reflect on us as a society to be talking in 2022 about removing the taboo around menstruation for both girls and boys?

Ms Radcliffe: That is the big question, which it would probably take a wider session to answer. CCEA responds to the needs raised by schools and the changes in society over time. For the last few years, we have been involved in a development project on relationships and sexuality education that includes menstruation. We have set up a hub for that. That project was set up specifically to address gaps in provision. Obviously, digital usage among young people and levels of awareness have come a long way since 2000. The whole world has changed, and that is a fact of life for education. We just have to continue to seek funding to fill the gaps and meet the social and educational need.

Clearly, we have a cultural identity in Northern Ireland that colours the way in which some societal aspects come through in education. We work to bring transparency and transform the thinking of educators, parents and young people, with a view to changing society and improving the social and educational outcomes of young people. Yes, it is a pity that it has taken until this stage, but the good thing is that we have taken immediate action. As soon as we were given the opportunity to do so, we have moved forward with the project at pace. It is the same with consent, LGBTQ+, domestic violence and all the other important and key aspects of relationships and sexuality education that, before, were possibly skirted around.

In my time at CCEA, we have looked forward to see how we can make a difference to education. We now need the school leadership to buy into that and utilise the good guidance and materials that are provided on the CCEA website and through our network of stakeholders and partners in the projects. We do not do it alone; we have strong stakeholder engagement. We have collaborated widely in order to provide the guidance and support that is in place. We just keep going.

I do not know if that answers your question. It is a big issue.

Mr McNulty: That was well said, Roisin.

You mentioned problems with mixed-gender classes. Give me more information on that. Is it a teaching issue? Is it about how comfortable teachers are in dealing with it?

Ms Radcliffe: It is probably an issue of teacher confidence. Teachers require training on how to deliver teaching on sensitive issues in a safe way for young people. We have provided guidance on that, but we no longer have a remit to provide training. Substantial training is needed in this area of RSE. We can provide guidance and lesson plans that teachers can use off the shelf, but support is also available through health trusts and other partners. We have created a space on our website to signpost schools to where they can access further training and development for teachers. We are still evaluating how effective that is.

Clearly, there is a need for all teachers to be trained in it from initial teacher training, so that, when they are brought into this arena, they are confident and capable of delivering everyday classes for everyday problems. There is a huge range of issues with teaching girls and boys together. It is about how teachers deal with sensitive issues in that context. Teachers are very good. They are able to look at the cohort in front of them. They can develop strategies and use our resources to develop excellent ways in which the information can be presented. It is just the time factor: there is so much to be done and so little time. If there are opportunities for teachers to have further training and development, we would very much support those.

Mr McNulty: As Pat alluded to earlier, we were all taught the biological piece at school, but we were never taught about the social and emotional impact of periods on girls. That is important. As you mentioned, it is about the everyday things. We as a Committee should probably take representations on that.

Ms Radcliffe: From the point of view of boys, too, it all links to the idea of respect. Most of our guidance is based on respect. We are trying to ensure that boys are introduced to life concepts at an early stage and that respect for women is developed early. We have a way to go with that. We would like to see all teachers promoting that in their classrooms. We would like to see schools and every other workplace promoting it so that, over time, we can transform and modernise the thinking of young people.

Mr McNulty: I absolutely agree. You have spoken about transforming thinking with a view to changing society, your determination to make a difference and how respect for women is fundamental: I am on board. Thank you very much, Roisin and Deidre.

Ms Radcliffe: Thank you.

Ms Coffey: Thank you.

Ms Brogan: Thanks, Deidre and Roisin. It is great to hear from you. It has been a really interesting discussion. I am fully behind this. I am really glad to hear that you are bringing the topic of gender equality into the classroom and teaching children about respect at a young age, including teaching boys how to respect girls. That ties in with the violence against women and girls strategy, the consultation on which was launched this week. It all ties in together, and it is really important. I am also glad to hear that you are working with and listening to children in developing the programmes. That is a vital part of it. I support the Bill. Anything that we can do to tackle period poverty and the stigma around periods will be a really positive step. All of that plays a part.

I will move on to the benefits of the Bill. One of the topics that I have raised, as we have gone through the evidence sessions with stakeholders, is the attendance at school of girls who either experience period poverty or just do not have the correct access to period products. Those girls can miss so much school, which then affects their educational achievement. One of the aims of the Bill is to reduce those levels. What are your views on that? Do you experience that in your role in CCEA?

Ms Coffey: That question was asked of pupils and teachers in the initial survey — the baseline survey — that we carried out in June/July. The survey is anonymous, but it showed that a number of pupils miss school. Over 8% of pupils with a period who responded to the survey said that they had missed

school because they did not have access to sufficient period products. That does not include pupils who missed school because they have period issues: cramps, feeling washed out and all the rest of it. Some 9.7% of those who missed school did so many times because they did not have sufficient period products, which could be for various reasons. Of the teachers who responded, 70% said that they had noted a pupil asking another pupil or a member of staff for period products. The survey backs up the fact that there is definitely an issue. We feel that attendance is core to the scheme. It is not only that pupils are unable to afford the products but the embarrassment of not having the products with you in school and maybe having to go home because of leakages and so on.

It is important, first, that the products are available and, secondly, that they are easily accessible to pupils. Teachers must have an understanding that the scheme is running and understand the issues that pupils may face through either being unable to afford products or not having the right products with them on the day. We are very aware of that, and a lot of teachers are aware of it. We must make sure that everyone in the school is aware, because the period dignity contact may not be the person who is available for those pupils at that particular time.

Hopefully, the scheme will improve not only attendance at school but confident attendance at school. If a pupil is sitting in school worrying about not having the right period product or leaking in the class or is unable to move from their seat because they think that they have leaked, they will not be learning or concentrating. We want to take those taboos away and understand what the issues are. Confident school attendance not only in class but in sporting or other extracurricular activities is at the forefront of our minds. It is about taking a holistic view of the issues that arise from not having period products available.

Ms Brogan: Thanks, Deidre. I completely agree with you. It is a point that we have made before. We want girls to have the confidence to ask whomever it is that they need to get the products from, so that they are not distracted in class by leakages or worrying about where they can get the product. We must break down the taboo so that girls feel confident to ask, know that the products are there and available and can feel at ease.

We have touched before on the environmental issue with period products. I think that it is fair to say that young people have driven the action against climate change and on environmental issues. I have asked other stakeholders whether we should promote environmentally friendly period products, the likes of menstrual cups, instead of the standard towels and tampons. What are your views on that? Should we promote those, or is it a matter of getting out the products that are needed at the time?

Ms Radcliffe: We need to bear in mind the setting. We have considered menstrual cups, reusable pants and stuff like that, but the issue is how you do that hygienically in a school setting. What would that be like in school toilets? Would it be practicable? At this stage, we have decided that it is not. Over time, we will continually review the products that are used and what requests have come through for others. We are conscious of the environmental aspect, but there is a balance to be struck between that and what will make this work effectively overall for schools. I take your point that it is important. We will have to see how best to deal with that. Things can be done. For example, facilities can be put in place to enable menstrual cups to be used. However, right now, it would be tricky for schools to do that safely and hygienically.

Ms Brogan: That is fine, Roisin. I appreciate the point. It probably would be difficult to use the likes of menstrual cups, especially, in schools. It should be factored in though because, as I say, it is children and young people who are driving action against climate change; they are so invested in it. However, I understand that there are certain difficulties with it and that there is an immediate need for products to be readily available to girls.

Thanks very much to both of you. It was a very interesting discussion.

Ms Radcliffe: Thank you.

Ms Coffey: Thank you.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Sheehan): Thank you, Roisin and Deidre, for your evidence.