

Don't leave Wales behind: teach Menstrual Wellbeing in schools

Dear Members of the Children, Young People and Education Committee, Mark Drakeford MS, Kirsty Williams MS, Vaughan Gething MS, Jane Hutt MS,

We are writing with regards to the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Bill to request that menstrual wellbeing is made a compulsory component of the new curriculum, specifically within the Health & Wellbeing Area of Learning and Experience.

At present, the curriculum offers schools and teachers the flexibility to decide whether or not to teach menstrual wellbeing. This has the potential to see the topic overlooked, leaving young people without the information they need to know what a normal menstrual cycle is, and when to seek medical help.

Menstrual health conditions affect a significant proportion of girls, women and those assigned female at birth across the UK, such as heavy menstrual bleeding (20%), fibroids (20%), endometriosis (10%), polycystic ovary syndrome (10%), and premenstrual dysphoric disorder (5%).

Despite these large numbers, many do not realise they have a medical condition that can be treated: for example, 50% of women with heavy menstrual bleeding do not appreciate that it is a medical condition, and diagnosis can take many years. The average time to diagnose endometriosis in Wales is 8.5 years, meaning many young people will suffer in silence for the majority of their school life, resulting in frequent absences from school and missed exams. The potentially devastating impact menstrual health conditions like endometriosis can have on someone's education, future career, and their physical and mental health cannot be overstated.

A study by Plan International found that one in seven girls (14%) didn't know what was happening when they started their period, whilst more than a quarter (26%) didn't know what to do. The same study also found that 48% of girls in the UK feel embarrassed by their period, and 49% of girls in the UK have missed school because of their period.

To overcome taboos and reduce health inequalities in Wales, all young people need access to reliable, accurate information about menstrual wellbeing. This is so that the topic can be openly and unashamedly discussed, myths debunked, and individuals sufficiently empowered with the knowledge they need to seek medical advice when appropriate.

We believe this work is vital in schools as it cannot be assumed that young people feel comfortable and confident discussing menstruation and related issues with a parent, carer, or vice versa. Many face additional cultural barriers to talking about menstrual wellbeing in the home, especially those from minority communities. Additionally, those in non-traditional family units, care, or boarding school are all examples of pupils who may not necessarily have ability to discuss the topic at home.

It is clear that the Welsh Government wishes to equip pupils with the knowledge to 'overcome barriers to learning and achieve full potential'. This includes giving students the information they need to recognise indicators of mental or physical problems, the ability to communicate these, and the means to seek support. We believe that to follow through on these intentions, menstrual wellbeing needs to be mandatory within the curriculum.

The Welsh Government has already recognised the vital importance of compulsory menstrual wellbeing education. A report, Endometriosis Care in Wales, commissioned by the Welsh Government in 2018 and supported by the Cabinet Secretary for Health & Social Services, Vaughan Gething, concluded that menstrual wellbeing education should be compulsory in Wales. We therefore ask that the Welsh Government does not go back on this commitment and request that the draft Curriculum is amended accordingly.

Compulsory menstrual wellbeing will be on the school curriculum in England from September 2020; failing to follow suit will leave children in Wales unfairly behind those in England.

We request two very simple amendments to the new Wales school curriculum's Health and Wellbeing Area of Learning and Experience as follows:

- Pupils should understand the concept of menstrual wellbeing, including the key facts about the menstrual cycle. As part of this, pupils will understand what constitutes a 'normal menstrual cycle' and how to spot the warning signs of a menstrual condition
- Pupils will be given the knowledge, confidence, and skills to seek help if they are concerned they have a menstrual health condition

We ask that you acknowledge the huge impact menstrual health conditions have on a young person's education and future career, and ensure that menstrual wellbeing education in Wales's schools is mandatory for all pupils.

Kind Regards,

The Women's Health Cross Party Group in Wales, Endometriosis UK, and Fair Treatment for the Women of Wales (FTWW), in partnership with:



Jenny Rathbone MS, Chair, Women's Health Cross Party Group, Dr C Helen Munro, Consultant in Sexual Health at Hywel Dda UHB and member of the CPG Women's Health, Dr Amanda Davies, Consultant in Gynaecology and Sexual and Reproductive Health at Swansea Bay UHB, Rhun ap Iorweth MS Ynys Mon and Deputy Group Leader, Plaid Cymru, Bethan Sayed MS, South West Wales, Heledd Fychan, Councillor Town Ward Pontypridd RCT