

# Period poverty forces girls to miss schooling

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MORE than 70 per cent of female students have to use toilet paper because their school does not provide sanitary products or asking staff for them is too embarrassing, a survey shows.

Almost a third of those who improvised said they could not afford pads and tampons.

The results come as SA Best's Connie Bonaros and Labour MLC Irene Pnevmatikos launched a period poverty petition yesterday, World Menstrual Hygiene Day.

The petition is calling on the State Government to provide free sanitary products across public schools, as Victoria did last year, with vending machines in toilets.

In SA, most public schools have emergency supplies of pads and tampons on request from the office or teachers.

"Every high school and primary school should have access to menstrual products that do not create shame and embarrassment or taboo," said the survey's author, SA Commissioner for Children and Young People Helen Connolly.

The survey found one in four respondents did not attend school while menstruating for a number of reasons.

Conducted last month, the survey involved 2518 students aged seven to 21 from SA primary and secondary schools and universities. Period poverty in SA was identified as a growing problem in a report by the commissioner last year.

Ms Connolly, pictured, said while cost was a factor in student access to sanitary products, she found an unexpected majority of girls were going without at school because they were simply not available in an emergency or access was stigmatised and embarrassing.

The survey found the average age of first period was in primary school.

"Asking friends for products was the most common way to access products at school but this is more challenging for students at primary school where peers do not have periods yet, or know about periods," Ms Connolly said.

Ms Pnevmatikos said the financial hardships of the bushfires and COVID-19 added to the urgency of addressing period poverty in SA.

Ms Bonaros said: "The need for these products is no different from the need for toilet paper – they should be universally available without exception. Just imagine if our male students were

forced to trot down to the office to request toilet paper.”

The State Government is running a trial with 10 SA schools to effect their own solutions to period product access in the next six months.

A Bill, co-sponsored by Ms Bonaros and Ms Pnevmatikos, legislating for a free menstrual hygiene products pilot program in the state’s schools was passed into the Lower House for debate earlier this month.