



Jersey City's Barack Obama Community School to host pilot program for free menstrual products

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By Joshua Rosario | The Jersey Journal

At least two to three young girls a day come to the nurse's office at Jersey City's Barack Obama Community School with a need for menstrual products their families often struggle to afford.

And, school nurse Debra Kennedy-Yorio and Principal Shante Jones said girls will often visit the nurse to not only ask for the products to use right away, but to take home as well.

"Some girls are hiding themselves and covering themselves with a hood because they may had an accident," Jones said. "The nurse tries to keep it private, but still, it's non-stop. They really don't have that individualized privacy because there is so many people around at all times."

"Sometimes the parents, too, will ask me," Kennedy-Yorio said.

To help, the Board of Education approved a pilot program run by the Flow Initiative in August that will place free sanitary napkin machines in all Barack Obama Community School girls' bathrooms. The initiative, a non-profit, says it's looking to make menstrual products more accessible for women — especially in poverty-stricken areas where women can't afford them — allowing for "menstrual equity."



School 34 nurse Debra Kennedy-Yorio in Jersey City on Wednesday, Sept. 15, 2021. (Reena Rose Sibayan | The Jersey Journal)



Photo by Jenna Toulantis for Alliance for Period Supplies.

The pre-kindergarten to eighth-grade school on Kennedy Boulevard says it gives families access to more services than traditional schools. Jones said the school regularly helps families with food insecurity and families often need help with menstrual toiletries, "because they are very expensive products."

The Flow Initiative surveyed 100 Jersey City girls and learned 28% of them had missed school because they didn't have access to sanitary napkins. About 90% of them needed a menstrual product while at school and 76% have had menstrual accidents during school.

Eiko La Boria, founder and CEO of the Flow Initiative, said one story she heard repeatedly from the girls was that they felt belittled when they asked school nurses for assistance. She said often, the girls had multiple women in their household, "so even if they could afford a box, it would kind of go pretty quickly — like somebody in the household was going to go without."

"Having an accident today in school when you have your period is something that's really very traumatic," La Boria said. "Everybody knows A) that you have your period, B) that you don't have a pad (and) now you stained your clothes, you stained the desk or the chair."

La Boria said one girl told her she would just go home after having an accident.

"It was that she didn't have these products," La Boria said. "She was using tissue. She always felt when the kids looked at her, (and) they were thinking, 'that was the girl who had the period accident.'"

Jones said at the Obama School, most of the older kids were on the third floor and would have to walk down to the nurse on the first floor," leading to more accident time as opposed to going right next door ... to the bathroom."



School 34 nurse Debra Kennedy-Yorio in Jersey City with feminine hygiene products on Wednesday, Sept. 15, 2021. Currently, the nurse gives students brown bags with menstrual products if needed. (Reena Rose Sibayan | The Jersey Journal)



“Nine times out of 10, the parents come and they give them a complete change of clothes or the kids just go home to take shower because they are a mess,” Jones said.

BOE Trustee Gina Verdibello said Hospeco, a cleaning and protection product manufacturing company, will provide sanitary napkins free for the first two months of the program. She said in the meantime, it will get feedback from the school so the district may expand the program to the other schools.

“The hope is that kids won’t miss school because of this,” Verdibello said. “They will be able to focus on their work and not on the fact they are leaving or uncomfortable. I really think they should really be in all the high schools and all the middle schools to start.”

The dispensaries will be set up by the end of the month, Jones said.