



PERIOD EQUALITY: A LESSON PLAN FOR TOILET ACCESS

Period equality research in the UK's secondary school teaching sector in relation to toilet access

#CreatePeriodEquality #phsPeriodEquality #PeriodEqualityInSchools



phs PERIOD EQUALITY IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS



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Executive summary

This report by the **phs** Group builds on our work to highlight the important issue of period inequality in the UK. This time we survey secondary school teachers, at least half of them specifically tasked with delivering PSHE (Personal Social and Health Education) in classrooms across the country.

Our latest research gauges teachers' awareness of free period product schemes, and it raises the serious matter of students being able to access toilets and menstrual products while they are in class.

The report adds crucial insight from the teacher's perspective to the substantial period equality research already undertaken by the **phs** Group, which has focused on the embarrassment, shame and stigma associated with periods in both schools and the workplace – and the accessibility and affordability of period products.

Our research for 2025 shows that while considerable steps have been taken towards period equality, much work remains to be done.

Secondary school and college teachers need to be better supported to become better informed, trained and equipped to educate and support students with their periods. For students, there is a barrier that needs knocking down once and for all: full access to toilets and free menstrual products to enable them to learn without disruption, shame or embarrassment.

Methodology

The research paper Period Equality: A Lesson Plan for Toilet Access was conducted by Censuswide among a sample of 501 secondary school teachers (aged 18+) – all genders – with at least 250 who teach PSHE (Personal, Social and Health Education). The data was collected between 03.02.2025 – 10.02.2025. Censuswide abides by and employs members of the Market Research Society and follows the MRS code of conduct and ESOMAR principles. Censuswide is also a member of the British Polling Council.

(All percentages have been rounded to the nearest decimal)



Introduction: A lesson plan for periods

In the six years since **phs** Group first shone a light on period inequality, significant success has been achieved in raising awareness about the issue, removing the stigma associated with menstruation, and removing the barriers faced by learners on their periods.

Now, all girls in the UK can access free period products at school, thanks to schemes led by local authorities with tailored approaches for each area, or via central strategies to ensure widespread availability of period pads and tampons.

Our initial research in 2019 revealed, for the first time, that female students were facing difficulties accessing period products, which was a main cause of school and college absenteeism.

Further studies highlighted the barriers that still need to be overcome, both for learners in schools, colleges and universities, and in the workplace where sick days continue to correlate with the time of the month for many female employees.

Today, we turn our attention to teachers, those on the frontline tasked with educating, facilitating and supporting students to learn and thrive.

While many obstacles to education have fallen over the years, one big issue remains for both students and teachers: periods and the disruption they cause to studies.

Our latest poll, conducted in the first quarter of 2025, offers key insight into the knowledge, experiences and attitudes of teachers around periods – from those delivering PSHE lessons, the subject most likely to cover the topic of menstruation, to teachers in other classes where periods are a fact of life but not learning.

Teachers urgently need a lesson plan for toilet access and its effect on period equality.

Locked toilets and stained uniforms

Our research shows worrying toilet policy, or lack of in many schools:

Two in three students (**65%**) are unable to access toilets at their school freely at any time, with almost **a third (29%)** needing permission from a teacher to leave the classroom and **15%** requiring a pass to be issued for toilet access.

And in a startling revelation, **5%** of teachers reported school toilets being locked at some point during the school day, including breaktimes, with nearly as many (**4%**) shut off to students without a key all the time.

Vaping tops the list of concerns about allowing washroom access during lessons (**48%**), followed by truancy (**46%**), students lying about needing to relieve themselves (**33%**), that learners are meeting up with friends (**32%**), vandalism (**27%**) and bullying or assaults (**27%**).

One in six teachers (**16%**) had prevented a student who has periods from using the bathroom during class in the belief that they merely wanted to skip lessons (**39%**) or meet friends (**34%**).

Almost a third of teachers (**30%**) felt that students on their periods should wait until the end of a lesson to access a toilet. As a result of their refusal to allow a student to leave the classroom early, a **quarter (26%)** admitted there had been a subsequent issue, such as a student bleeding through their uniform.

Even during school exams, students on their periods are facing barriers to washroom access and menstrual products. **Only 17%** of teachers reported students being allowed unrestricted toilet breaks with one in ten (**12%**) saying standard rules of access applied, while **19%** admitted to period products only being available on request.

65%

students are unable to access school toilets at their freely at any time

29%

of students needed permission from a teacher to leave the classroom

5%

of teachers reported school toilets being locked

16%

of teachers had prevented a student who has periods from using the bathroom during class

30%

of teachers felt that students on their periods should wait until the end of a lesson to access a toilet

26%

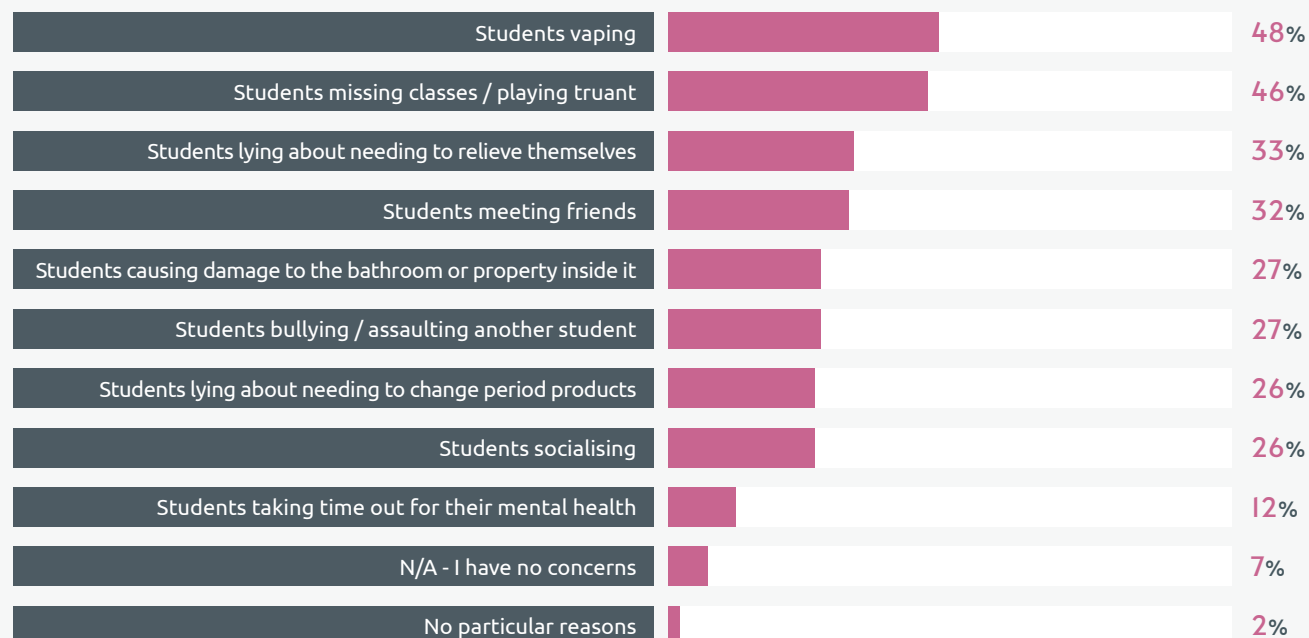
of teachers admitted there had been a subsequent issue, such as a student bleeding through their uniform

Key figures

What best describes the access students have to the toilets in your school?



What concerns, if any, do you have around students wanting to visit the bathroom during class times? (Select all that apply)



Key figures

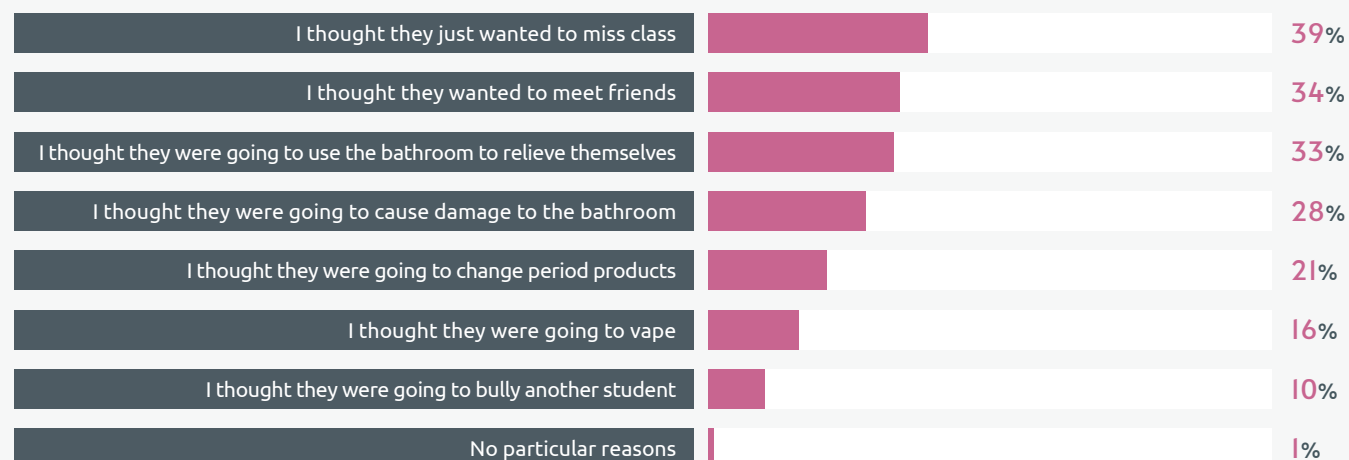
Have you stopped a student who has periods from using the bathroom during class? (i.e. somebody who is assigned female at birth)

No: **80%**

Yes: **16%**

Not sure: **4%**

You said that you've stopped a student who has periods from using the bathroom during class. Why was this? (Select all that apply)



Key figures

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “It’s fair that learners experiencing their periods should wait to access the bathroom after class”?

30% Agree (net)

14% Neither agree nor disagree

56% Disagree (net)

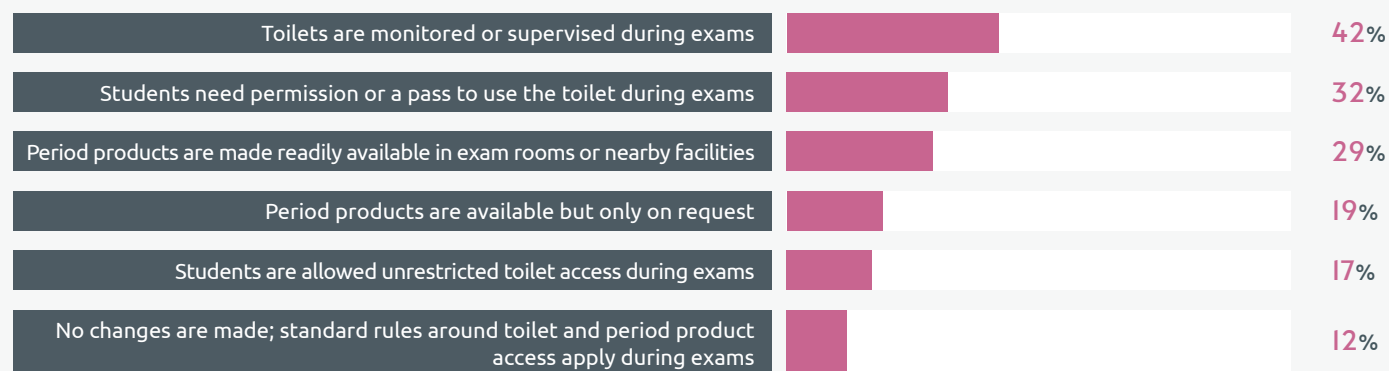
Have there been any consequences to your knowledge of refusing someone the opportunity to go to the bathroom during class? i.e they have bled through their clothing?

No: 65%

Yes: 26%

Not sure: 10%

What changes, if any, are implemented in your school around exams regarding toilet access and access to period products? (Select all that apply)



Summary

Even though a student may be desperate to go, some teachers questioned in our survey admitted the school toilets were off limits during lesson times and even being locked.

But for every teenager asking for a toilet break without a valid reason, there could be another who is about to bleed through their uniform.

Toilet access is essential for those on their periods. Learners do not choose when their period will start or when they might need to change products, and restricting toilet access during lessons will increase anxiety and is damaging to health and wellbeing.

While schools may need to tackle the misuse of toilets during lessons, it cannot be at the disadvantage of learners on their periods. If students feel unable to access toilets during their periods, they may well choose to stay at home instead to avoid the embarrassment and shame that for too long has been synonymous with periods.

It's time for schools to learn a new approach.



Free period products held back

While the vast majority of teachers (**92%**) are aware of Government schemes giving schools access to free period products for students, **one in twelve (8%)** are unfamiliar with the initiatives.

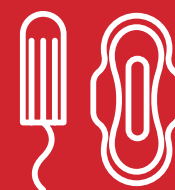
The survey shows that free products are mostly distributed through the school reception or nurse's office (**40%**), 'period-friendly' facilities (**35%**), a staff area (**29%**) or washrooms near basins (**27%**).

Most open discussions about period inequality take place during PHSE lessons (**80%**) or more broadly during lessons and assemblies (**31%**).

However, the poll worryingly highlights that some schools are not making period products freely available in washrooms due to concerns the funded schemes are open to abuse.

Almost a third of teachers (**29%**) fear products will be damaged, **23%** want to ensure students who need them most receive them and in **one in five cases (21%)** students are expected to ask for the products.

Some teachers expressed concern that free products would be taken to sell for profit (**18%**), there were not enough to go around (**12%**) or that students would give them to family members (**9%**).



“some schools are not making period products freely available in washrooms due to concerns the funded schemes are open to abuse.”

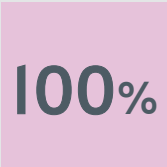


Key figures

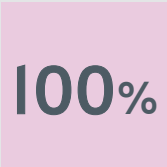
Are you aware of free Government schemes that allow schools to access free period products for students?



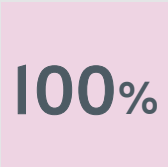
By region



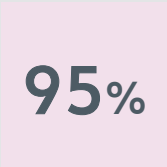
Wales



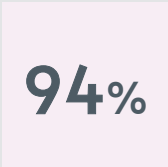
Scotland



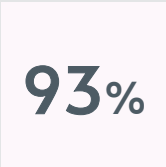
North East



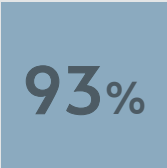
East Midlands



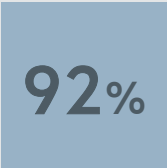
West Midlands



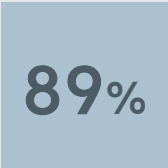
Greater London



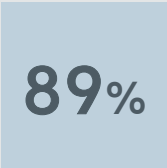
North West



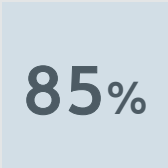
Yorkshire and The Humber



South West



Northern Ireland



South East



East of England

Key figures

When, if anywhere, do you openly discuss themes around period poverty / period dignity / period inequality in class? (Select all that apply)

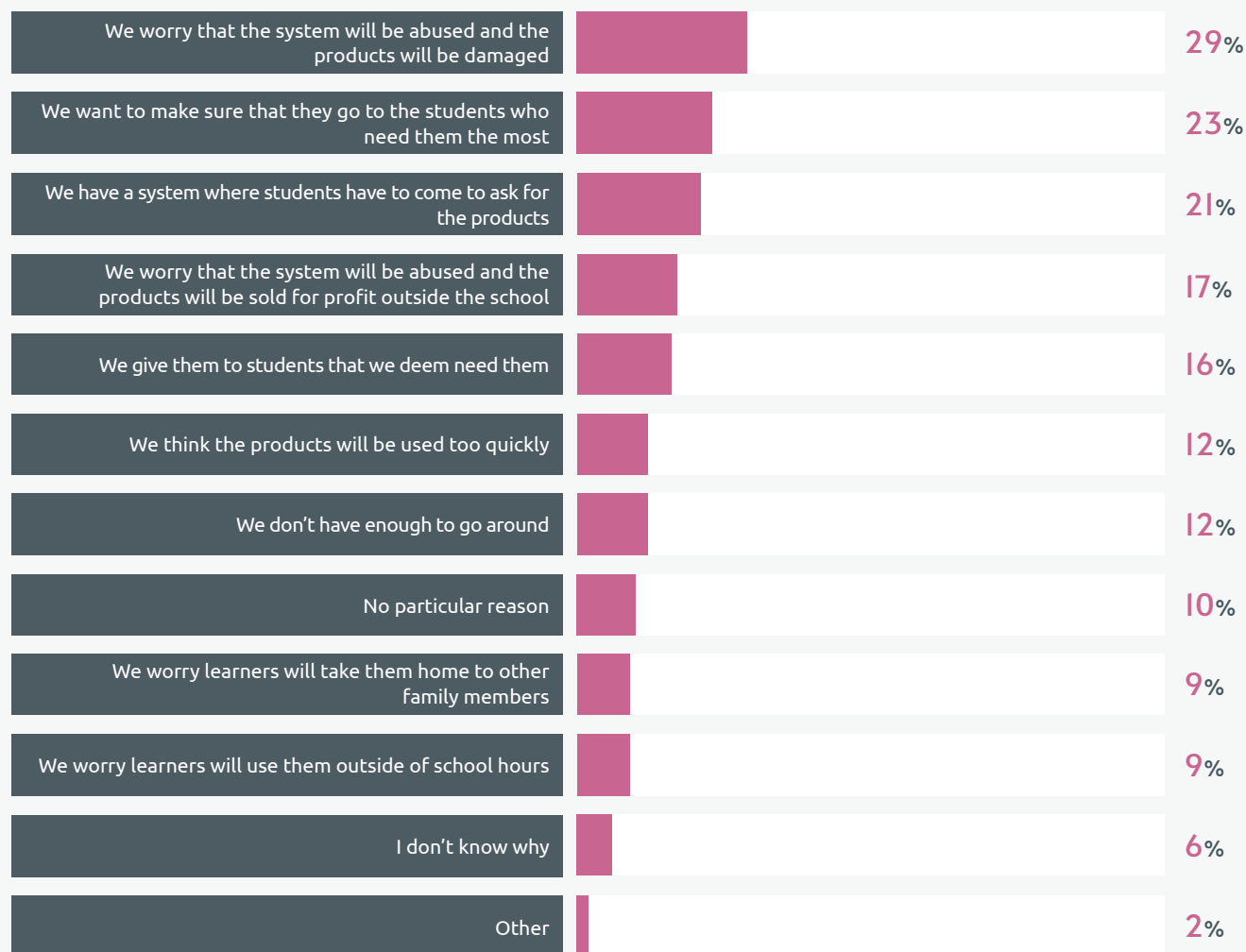
In PHSE lessons	More broadly within lessons / assemblies	Never	Other
80%	31%	6%	1%

How, if at all, is a period equality/period dignity scheme facilitated at your school or college? (Select all that apply)



Key figures

How, if at all, is a period equality/period dignity scheme facilitated at your school or college?
(Select all that apply)



Summary

There is no doubt that great strides have been taken in the mission to achieve period equality over the last few years, to remove the stigma in talking about periods, and to give girls access to free period products.

However, our research demonstrates once again that there is more work required to raise awareness about period inequality and to make free period products discreetly visible and easy to find, not hidden away or dispensed at the discretion of school staff based on preserved need.

While concerns about the potential abuse of the free period products scheme may be valid in some cases, this cannot hinder distribution and period equality and inclusivity must be promoted at all times.

Keeping period products out of sight further adds to the stigma and feelings of shame that many girls experience when having their period. It also adds to anxiety and embarrassment of young people starting their period in a place where there are no products immediately available, risking bleeding through clothes in the search for products.

Embarrassment and reluctance to ask can lead to girls wearing period products for longer than they should, which can in turn increase the risk of serious health problems from the prolonged use of soiled tampons like Toxic Shock Syndrome.



The education guide and toilet policy toolkit every school needs

As the UK's leading hygiene services company, period equality is a subject very close to our heart.

phs Group has campaigned to raise awareness and improve access to period products for millions of girls and young women across the country.

We want to ensure that no more learners go missing needlessly from classrooms; that teachers feel empowered and supported to do what's best for their students, and to give them the menstrual health education they deserve.

As part of our latest efforts, we have produced a best practice education guide for schools, colleges and universities to facilitate period equality.

The guide includes top tips on the best way to distribute free period products, raise awareness about period equality – not just among girls and women, but boys and men too – and provides guidance and advice on using the products.

It features some best practice case studies and provides essential practical advice for preventing the misuse of the free period products scheme.

We have also teamed up with the menstrual health charity Irise to promote their excellent toilet policy toolkit which can be found on their website

<https://www.irise.org.uk/uk-schools-toilet-policy-toolkit>

