

Period Poverty and Menstrual Equity in U.S. Schools

A workshop for school nurses and school leaders.

CONTENT OUTLINE

[View full presentation HERE](#)

Learning Outcomes

School Nurses and School Leaders will be able to:

- Describe the impacts of period poverty and stigma on student engagement
- Increase awareness about period poverty and menstrual health education
- Consider practical opportunities to advance menstrual equity in their school community

ABOUT PERIOD.

PERIOD. is a global youth-fueled nonprofit with over 300 youth-led chapters working to eradicate period poverty and stigma through service, education, and advocacy.

PERIOD. annually distributes millions of menstrual products to grassroots organizations serving their communities in need, authors stigma-busting menstrual health curriculum, and equips young leaders to advocate for menstrual equity policies such as the repeal of the tampon tax and mandating period products in public places.

www.period.org | @periodmovement

Opening Reflection*

- What is your experience with discussing periods, and menstrual health education, at your school?
- What trends stand out to you about the menstrual health needs of young people who menstruate?

Period poverty and stigma has been around for centuries, as a result of historical systems of oppression against women, girls, and people who menstruate.

63% of teens say the school environment makes them especially self-conscious of their periods.¹

The good news is that this is down from 70% in 2021.

The tide is changing. It's time we address period poverty and stigma in our communities, starting with our schools.

¹ Thinx, Inc., & PERIOD. (2023). *State of the Period 2023: The widespread impact of period poverty on U.S. students* [Data set].
*Reflections apply to all people, including those who do and don't, menstruate

PART 1: WHAT IS PERIOD POVERTY?

On any given day, 800 million people² on the planet are menstruating.

Managing a period requires resources like:

- Menstrual Health Education
- Period Products
- Safe and Private Restrooms
- Clean Water & Soap
- Safe Places to Throw Away Waste

Yet at least 500 million people don't have the adequate resources to manage their period every month.³

- That's more people than everyone living in Canada, U.S. and Mexico *combined*

PERIOD POVERTY: The limited or inadequate access to menstrual products or menstrual health education due to financial constraints or negative socio-cultural stigmas around menstruation.⁴

ABOUT HOW MANY STUDENTS in the U.S. STRUGGLE TO AFFORD PERIOD PRODUCTS?

- A. Nearly 1 in 8 students
- B. Nearly 1 in 20 students
- C. Nearly 1 in 6 students
- D. Nearly 1 in 4 students

Correct answer: *D. Nearly 1 in 4 students*

Common, Yet "Invisible"

Period poverty exists at the intersection of economic, gender, and racial inequality.

There may be students with limited access to basic needs. Menstrual products or menstrual health education might also be an unmet need in schools.

PERIOD POVERTY IN U.S. SCHOOLS

According to a 2023 State of the Period Study¹

- Nearly 1 in 4 teens struggle to afford period products, or was not able to purchase them at all.
- **2 in 5 teens** have worn period products longer than recommended because of a lack of access to period products.
- **42% of teens felt confused and unprepared** when they got their first period.

² Hehir, I. (2019, May 26). 800 million: Why we need to rethink the way we view periods. *UNICEF Australia*.
<https://www.unicef.org.au/stories/800-million>

³ The World Bank Group. (2018, June 7). Menstrual hygiene management enables women and girls to reach their full potential. *The World Bank*.
<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2018/05/25/menstrual-hygiene-management>

⁴ Glossary for the Global Menstrual Movement. (2022, January). Madami and PERIOD.
<https://period.org/uploads/Global-Glossary-for-the-Menstrual-Movement-v1.3.pdf>

- **81% of teens think that, along with reproductive health, schools should teach about policy around lack of access to period products.**

There are a variety of safe, disposable and reusable options for managing periods. Some students do not have access when and where they need them, impacting student's in multiple ways.

HOW DOES EXPERIENCING PERIOD POVERTY IMPACT STUDENTS?

- Physical Health
- Mental Health
- Human Rights
- Education
- Financial Stability
- Inclusion

IMPACT OF PERIOD POVERTY ON STUDENTS

PHYSICAL HEALTH: When period products are worn longer than recommended...

- Skin irritations can worsen due to the extended contact with moisture, common with pads or tampons
- Increased risks of reproductive infections including yeast infections, bacterial vaginosis, Urinary Tract infections, or Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS)⁵

MENTAL HEALTH: When students do not have access to period products...

- May feel ashamed, embarrassed, stressed, or sad
- Increased vulnerability to lack of confidence, risky behaviors, anxiety and depression^{6,9}

Period Poverty and Stigma ¹

- 44% of teens report stress and embarrassment due to a lack of access to period products
- 45% of teens have felt too ashamed or embarrassed to seek help when they have questions about their body
- 58% of teens agree the world is not set up for them to manage their periods with full confidence.

IMPACT OF PERIOD POVERTY ON STUDENTS

EDUCATION

- Students may miss class or not attend school at all

⁵ Rapp, A., & Kilpatrick, S. (2020, February 4). Changing the cycle: Period poverty as a public health crisis. *The Pursuit: Trending Topics from Michigan Public Health*. <https://sph.umich.edu/pursuit/2020posts/period-poverty.html>.

⁶ Schmitt, M. L., Hagstrom, C., Nowara, A., Gruer, C., Adenu-Mensah, N. E., Keeley, K., & Sommer, M. (2021). The intersection of menstruation, school and family: Experiences of girls growing up in urban cities in the USA. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 26(1), 94-109. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2020.1867207>

⁹ Hennegan, J., Winkler, I.T., Bobel, C., Keiser, D., Hampton, J., Larrison, G., Chandra-Mouli, V., Plesons, M., & Mahon, T. (2021) Menstrual health: A definition for policy, practice, and research. *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/26410397.2021.1911618>

- Can lead to increased student absenteeism, lower academic performance, and increased vulnerability to dropping out of school.^{5,6}

FINANCIAL STABILITY

- Some may have to choose between purchasing period products or other basic necessities.⁷
- Others might have to miss work because of a lack of access to period products⁵

PERIOD POVERTY IN U.S. SCHOOLS¹

- 1 in 4 students are unable to do schoolwork due to a lack of access to menstrual products.
- More than 3 in 5 students agree that too many people miss valuable school time because they do not have access to period products.
- Lower-income students and students of color (particularly Latinx students) are more impacted by lack of access than white and middle-income students.

REFLECTION

- How does this data compare or resonate with the experiences around periods and menstrual health in your school?
- What are some possible 'hidden signs' that a student might be experiencing period poverty at your school?
 - *Consider: Physical and mental health, financial stability, absenteeism, confidence, socio-economic risk factors, etc.*

IMPACT OF PERIOD POVERTY ON STUDENTS

INCLUSION: When period products are not available or accessible...

- Students can be prevented from participating in sports, extra-curricular activities, community and social events
- Students who menstruate can be unintentionally excluded from your school community

HUMAN RIGHTS

- Our Human Rights include the rights to an education and participation in cultural life.⁸
- Menstrual health is a matter of human rights, and for students who experience Period poverty, access to basic human rights and self-dignity are limited

CONSIDER:

How easily and safely can students access period products at your school if they need them?

- Who has access to period products? Where are they located?
- How can you ensure all students who menstruate, regardless of gender, have access and appropriate facilities to manage their periods at school and extra-curricular events?

⁷Thinx, Inc., & PERIOD. (2019). *State of the Period: The widespread impact of period poverty on U.S. students* [Data set].

⁸ United Nations General Assembly. (1948). *Universal declaration of human rights*. United Nations. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

PART 2: EQUIPPING STUDENTS WITH MENSTRUAL HEALTH EDUCATION

MENSTRUAL HEALTH:

A state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in relation to the menstrual cycle⁹

Achieving menstrual health implies that women, girls, and all other people who experience a menstrual cycle, throughout their life-course, are able to:

- Access accurate, timely, age-appropriate information about the menstrual cycle
- Care for their bodies during menstruation
- Access timely diagnosis, treatment and care for menstrual cycle-related discomforts and disorders
- Experience a positive and respectful environment in relation to the menstrual cycle, free from stigma and psychological distress

Menstrual health education looks different around the country

- The information students learn about menstrual health is impacted largely by where in the country they live, race/ethnicity and culture
- Not all menstrual health education is equal
- People who are low income are less likely to know where to go for information about their periods/period products¹⁰

STUDENTS WANT MORE¹

- 78% of teens say they are taught more about the biology of a frog than the human female body in school
- 81% of teens think we need more in-depth education about menstrual health (up from 77% in 2021)
- 78% of teens agree education around menstrual health should be a part of the core curriculum, just like math (up from 73% in 2021)
- 90% of teens think schools should normalize menstruation.

ARE YOUR STUDENTS EQUIPPED?

- Data suggest that young girls across the United States are developing puberty at younger ages than currently expected norms.¹¹

⁹ Hennegan, J., Winkler, I.T., Bobel, C., Keiser, D., Hampton, J., Larrson, G., Chandra-Mouli, V., Plesons, M., & Mahon, T. (2021) Menstrual health: A definition for policy, practice, and research. *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/26410397.2021.1911618>

¹⁰ U by Kotex. (2021) *U by Kotex Period Poverty Awareness Week – Survey Results* [Data set].

https://allianceforperiodsupplies.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/U_by_Kotex_Period_Poverty_-_PPAW_Data_Set.pdf

¹¹ Herman-Giddens, M. E., Slora, E. J., Wasserman, R. C., Bourdony, C. J., Bhapkar, M. V., Koch, G. G., & Hasemeier, C. M. (1997). Secondary sexual characteristics and menses in young girls seen in office practice: A study from the pediatric research in office settings network. *Pediatrics*, 99(4): 505–512. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.99.4.505>

¹⁷ Uterine Health Guide. (2023). *Let's talk about periods*. <https://www.uterinehealthguide.com/>

- For students who menstruate, periods will start, whether we talk about them or not.

CONSIDER:

How do students learn about menstrual health at your school? Which students learn about it, and what is taught about menstrual health?

- What is the role schools have to inform students about the menstrual cycle, and the variety of safe, disposable and reusable period products available to manage a period?

MENSTRUAL CYCLE:⁴

A complex reproductive process in the female body that begins at puberty with menarche or the first period, and ends at menopause when menstrual periods stop permanently

The menstrual cycle has four phases: Menstruation, Follicular Phase, Ovulation and the Luteal Phase. Menstruation marks the beginning of the menstrual cycle

Menstruation, or a period, marks the beginning of the menstrual cycle.

PERIOD HEALTH

Let's make sure we're all on the same page – what exactly is a period?

A period, also known as menstruation, is the normal monthly bleeding from a woman's vagina.

A period occurs when the inner layer of the uterus sheds; if there is no pregnancy, this typically happens every month or so in female bodies.

Not every period is the same.¹⁷

Check out the Uterine Health Guide for additional resources to learn about uterine health!

ARE YOUR STUDENTS EQUIPPED?

Menstrual Cycle is more than just a period

Equipping all students with information about the Menstrual Cycle is directly related to family planning and pregnancy prevention.

It is common for students to not be aware of the changes happening in their body because periods are not often openly discussed at home or school.¹

Schools can bridge the gap in menstrual health education, by empowering students to make informed decisions.

See PERIOD's [What is a Menstrual Cycle Chart](#). Use for educational purposes is highly encouraged!

Menstrual Health Management

Equipping students with information about period product choices can increase self-confidence, and allows students to make informed decisions about how to manage their period.

Key Reminders:

- Some students may not be comfortable with trying different or new period product options
- Honor student's autonomy in managing their periods and bodies in the way they choose.

See PERIOD's [Period Products Chart](#) you can use!

MENSTRUAL HEALTH MANAGEMENT

Disposable Period Products

Disposable Period Products are period products used one time for a few hours to manage menstrual flow and are then thrown away.¹²

Also referred to as 'disposables' or 'single-use' products.

Benefits

- Widely available
- No need to clean or maintain

Impacts

- High negative environmental impact
- High lifetime cost

PADS

- Widely used at younger ages

TAMPONS

- 71% of adolescent menstruators use tampons
- Yet menstruators have reported difficulty with use¹³

Reusable Products

¹² PERIOD., Aisle, & Green Periods. (2022). *Planet-Positive Periods*.

<https://periodaisle.com/pages/sustainable-period-toolkit#:~:text=The%20Planet%2DPositive%20Periods%20Toolkit,source%20format%20available%20to%20anyone.>

¹³ Hochwalt, A. E., Abbinante-Nissen, J. M., Bohman, L. C., Hattersley, A. M., Hu, P., Streicher-Scott, J. L., Teufel, A. G., and Woeller, K. E. (2023). The safety assesment of tampons: Illustrations of a comprehensive approach for four different products. *Frontiers in Reproductive Health*, 5(1167868). <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37408999/>

Reusable Period Products are period products intended to be washed and used many times to catch or absorb menstrual flow. Also referred to as 'reusables'.¹²

Benefits

- Long-lasting (typically last for years)
- Low lifetime cost
- Low environmental impact

Why aren't reusables more commonly used?

- Accessibility
- Period blood stigma
- Initial learning curve

*You are welcome to use PERIOD's **Planet-Positive Periods** toolkit, in partnership with Aisle and Green Periods, to learn more about reusable menstrual products*

Racial And Class Disparities In Menstrual Health

Period stigma around managing period pain and the use of certain period products is disproportionately prevalent in communities of color, immigrant, rural, and first-generation menstruators, further increasing the menstrual health education gap.

According to a 2019 study on African American women:¹⁴

- 1 in 4 women prefer the use of pads, because they are unfamiliar with tampons
- More than half (55%) of participants reported that more education on tampons would be useful

When possible, schools could have samples or access to both reusable or disposable products to increase awareness about menstrual product options.

REFLECTION:

- What are the implications for your students if your school does not offer comprehensive menstrual health education for all students?
-

¹⁴ Holmes, T. & McMaster, C. (2019, September 17). *Tampax radiant aims to help reverse period miseducation among black women* [Press Release]. P&G. <https://news.pg.com/news-releases/news-details/2019/Tampax-Radiant-Aims-to-Help-Reverse-Period-Miseducation-Among-Black-Women/default.aspx>

PART 3: MENSTRUAL EQUITY IN SCHOOLS

MENSTRUAL EQUITY:

The affordability, accessibility & safety of menstrual products for all people, including laws & policies that acknowledge & consider menstruation¹⁵

MENSTRUAL EQUITY IN THE UNITED STATES

- Menstrual Products are *not yet* required free of cost in *all* school restrooms, prisons, or federally funded public bathrooms.
- Some states still tax menstrual products as luxury items, when items like Viagra, or Rogaine, are not.
- We're on a mission to change that.

PERIOD PRODUCTS IN SCHOOLS, BY STATE

****[See the PERIOD. And Alliance for Period Supplies US Map image](#) ***

- What menstrual equity laws have been passed in your state?
- Is there funding available for schools?

For an up to date list, see PERIOD and The Alliance for Period Supplies' [Period Products in Schools Tracker](#)¹⁶

MENSTRUAL HEALTH EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS

There are **no standardized menstrual health education standards** in the United States.

- *Some states* mandate menstrual health education (ie: OR, D.C.)
- *Others* are threatening to limit a school's ability to talk about periods with students in lower-grade schools. (ie: 2023 FL HB 1069)

35% of teens say their health teacher appears to be uncomfortable discussing menstruation.¹

Less than half (43%) of teens are actually comfortable talking about their periods at school.¹

Black and younger teens are more likely to express discomfort around those conversations.

REFLECTION:

- **What is the culture around periods at your school site?**
 - **What would it look like for your school to truly consider the impacts of period poverty and menstrual health?**
-

¹⁵ Weiss-Wolf, J. (2017). *Periods gone public: Taking a stand for menstrual equity*. Arcade.

¹⁶ Alliance for Period Supplies. (2023). *Period products in schools*. <https://allianceforperiodsupplies.org/period-products-in-schools/>

PART 4: TAKE ACTION AND NEXT STEPS

HOW YOU CAN BE A PART OF THE CHANGE.

School nurses, in partnership with teachers and school administrators, can be positioned to help address period poverty and menstrual equity at school sites.

Take action through Education, Service or Advocacy

TAKE ACTION THROUGH EDUCATION

TALK ABOUT PERIODS

There are hundreds of educational resources to talk about period poverty and menstrual health. Work with your health educators or school culture leads to discuss how to foster a period-friendly school environment for all students and staff.

Learn more at: period.org/education.

CONSIDER:

- What common questions have you received about periods, menstrual health, or period products?
- Are there any trends you've noticed?

Resources to Consider:

- [You've Got Your First Period, Now What?](#)
- [What is a Menstrual Cycle Chart](#)
- [Period Poverty Fact Sheet](#)
- Oregon Department of Education [Instructional Resources](#)
- [Planet-Positive Periods Toolkit](#)
- [UterineHealthGuide.com](#)

TAKE ACTION THROUGH SERVICE

INCREASE ACCESS TO PERIOD PRODUCTS

- Some states require menstrual products in school restrooms. Others don't.
- Connect with your school administration to discuss how to address this need.
- Does your state mandate period products? Does your school need to host a period product drive?*

*Learn more about how to host a period product drive at period.org/service.

CONSIDER:

- Does your state mandate or fund menstrual products?
- Does your school administration know how period poverty may impact your student attendance, academic performance or extracurricular participation?

Resources to Consider:

- [Period Products in Schools PDF](#)
- [Period Poverty Fact Sheet \(2023\)](#)

Curriculum and Implementation Guides

- [Planet-Positive Periods](#)
- [OR / CA Implementation Handbooks](#)

TAKE ACTION THROUGH ADVOCACY

MAKE SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Support your students to advocate for period-friendly policies at all levels of governance, starting with your school.

In 2023, over 125 pieces of legislation were introduced around the country focusing on menstrual equity.

Does your state have current legislation? See in PERIOD. And The Alliance for Period Supplies' [Active Menstrual Equity Tracker](#)

Learn more about menstrual equity legislation at period.org/advocacy.

CONSIDER:

- Are there a group of student leaders or on-campus clubs that can support or advance local or state menstrual equity policies?
- Who should students speak with at your school to advocate for a more period-friendly school environment?
- Consider how PERIOD's Chapter model and Youth Leadership programs can support student advocates at your school.

WE KNOW SHIFTING CULTURE AROUND PERIODS IS NOT EASY.

It is not comfortable to talk about periods or menstrual health at school or school leadership meetings. It is even more uncomfortable to *not have* the products or education needed to successfully manage a period as a young student.

Where other resources may not reach students, schools do.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS*

- How might a **period-friendly school environment** impact your students' success?
- What is **one next step** you can do to address period poverty and menstrual equity at **your school**?

Consider the various resources we discussed in today's presentation. Visit us at period.org to learn more!

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