



LET'S TALK ABOUT IT.

period



Odd.

Three Oregon teenagers fought for their school district to provide free menstrual products in all school bathrooms. Their next mission? The entire country.

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It's a November evening in rainy Eugene, Oregon. On a school night like this, you might expect to find a high school sophomore downtown at the local skate park, at lacrosse practice, or perhaps at home catching up on some homework before the weekend. Tonight, however, three 15-year-old girls sit in the front row of a Eugene school district board meeting, amid a sea of empty plastic chairs—and facing a string of uncomfortable faces.

One of the girls wears a t-shirt featuring the name of a prospective college—Harvard—while another anxiously clutches her sticker-laden Hydroflask. They listen intently and eagerly await the portion of the weekly school board meeting open to the public.

The girls' attendance tonight is not unusual—they have been showing up for weeks now, giving their testimony to school board members and policy makers alike.

They want free menstrual products provided in all public-school restrooms, and they say they're not going to stop showing up until they're taken seriously.

"Ever since I got my period, I've never been afraid to talk about it," says Posey Chiddox, a sophomore at Sheldon High School, one of four public high schools in Eugene.

Chiddox, Violet Neale and Nabikshya Majhi are three student leaders behind PERIOD Eugene, a branch of the global non-profit PERIOD. The Portland-based organization promotes education about menstruation and attempts to address many of the stigmas associated with it.

The girls contend that the failure to provide free menstrual products in public restrooms is an equity issue—both socially and economically. According to Nadya Okamoto, founder of PERIOD, one in five girls in the United States have at one point left school early, or missed school altogether, because they lacked proper access to menstrual products, a phenomenon often referred to as "period poverty." Menstrual inequity is such a broad issue that it exists even among those who are lucky enough to afford products.

"I noticed that all my friends would hide their tampons and pads up their sleeves when they went to the bathroom, and I thought *this isn't how it should be*," says Chiddox. "I was never the type of person who would hide my tampon or my pad. I would always just carry it to the bathroom, and I thought that that needed to be normalized."

Such a mindset, however, is not in the majority among people who get their period, especially in the minds of anxious high schoolers, notes Chiddox. She explains that most high school girls would rather be marked late or

miss class entirely than have to admit that they were late due to struggles obtaining a tampon.

Chiddox did not understand why this natural occurrence was anything to be ashamed of, but she could see that the stigma obviously existed. So, when she heard about PERIOD through her Women's Advocacy Club, she decided to start a chapter in Eugene to help advocate to end the stigma. She wanted to teach others—first other high schoolers, and then policy makers—to see it her way.

"The first few times we spoke, the board members' responses were along the lines of 'Thank you so much for coming; we appreciate you being student activists'—and then they wouldn't actually do anything," says Chiddox, president of PERIOD Eugene. "It took so long for them to realize that we weren't gonna leave until they did something about it."

The girls of PERIOD Eugene insist that the overall problem that breeds menstrual inequity is lack of education. Once people understand that the problem of menstrual inequity exists, the common sense of providing free period products is realized. The lack of education and open discussion is what yields the uncomfortable boardroom faces and hesitation to take the issue seriously, the girls argue.

Neale, a sophomore at Churchill High School and PERIOD Eugene's policy director, mentions an instance when their team hosted a drive outside a local grocery store to collect tampons and pads for donation. A woman came up to the girls and asked if the products were going to be delivered to impoverished children in Africa—when in reality, the menstrual products were being delivered to individuals right there in Eugene who could not afford them.

"It's the inequity of not having these products, and the fact that a lot of people at my high school and around Eugene couldn't afford these products in the first place," says Neale. "Having to lend them to my own friends because they can't get them at home was really difficult to see."

Neale explains that Churchill High has a wide socioeconomic range of students in comparison to other high schools in Eugene. This gap drives some in the Churchill community to be extra conscious.

"Students will purposely put pads and tampons in the girls' locker room to share with everybody on a regular basis," says Neale. "It's just something that the Churchill community does for each other."

Chiddox, Neale, and Majhi represent different high schools in Eugene. Chiddox's formation of PERIOD Eugene allowed the girls to unite in their shared experiences of dealing with menstrual inequity. Once the



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Nabikshya Majhi has
been a vocal leader for the
PERIOD Eugene branch
since August 2019.

A menstrual cup is typically made of premium, medical grade silicone and is free of bisphenol A and other toxic chemicals typically found in tampons. This sustainable product is often used by people looking for a more eco-friendly option.



period poverty

(pirēəd / pävərdē) • *noun*

inadequate access to menstrual products.

chapter was approved and roles were established, the girls got to work creating policy and attempting to make their dream a reality.

The process wasn't easy. Nearly every week since last September the girls have been familiar faces in public forums, fighting for period equity. Neale explains that they all had their doubts regarding whether or not they'd be able to convince policy makers to act or to get a full understanding of the issue.

"I think just looking at the school board members' faces, you could sense a little bit of uncomfortableness, even from some of the people who were supportive—just from us talking about periods so blatantly, calling it a natural need, and calling out the school board for not taking action," says Chiddox.

Though the initial reactions were not exactly what the girls were hoping for, their testimonies at weekly meetings paired with the support from school board members like Gordon Lafer helped them to garner more respect from the board members.

Not only is Lafer a member of the Eugene's 4J district school board, but he also has a daughter in eighth grade. He says he knows that periods often come at inconvenient times of teen anxiety and general stress. After he saw a story that New Hampshire passed a policy mandating free pads and tampons in middle and high schools and found further research that there were similar policies in place in New York, Illinois, California, and even Portland, he knew it would be realistic to achieve something similar in Eugene.

"It's obviously a gender equity issue," Lafer says. "If more guys menstruated, the common sense of this would have been obvious a long time ago."

In August 2019, Lafer proposed a policy to provide free menstrual products in the restrooms of the 4J school district. While a majority of the board agreed with the reasoning behind his proposal, some did not believe that the provision of free pads and tampons should be made an official board-mandated policy.

"People on the board argued that policy should be reserved for bigger issues," Lafer says. "We have a policy that says that we need to integrate pest management for cockroaches in the schools. I don't think this is a less big deal than that. So that's one of the places where I think the student testimony was really helpful."

After months of working with Lafer and weeks of the girls advocating their cause behind the microphone of countless school board meetings, the proposed policy passed unanimously.

As of January 2020, all schools in the 4J district are required to have dispensers in the restrooms filled with free period products. This accomplishment, however, is just the first step. The students and Lafer aren't settling

for complacency; they want to institute a wider policy regarding period inequity.

"After we passed 4J, we realized that this is much bigger than just a Eugene issue," Neale says.

Neale has since been reaching out at city council meetings to push a policy of providing free menstrual products in all public restrooms in Eugene, not just in schools.

The Eugene City Council has recently agreed to implement a trial run of providing free products in public places such as the Eugene Library. And, if it goes successfully, these products will be provided in all Eugene public restrooms.

"We're gonna keep showing up and making sure they follow through with it, but this is our next big thing. It's exciting," says Neale.

While PERIOD's eventual goal is to implement this public policy in public restrooms all across Oregon, Neale explains that the organization has hit a bit of a roadblock in terms of reaching out to representatives, due to the fact that the next legislative session isn't until 2021. The girls plan to contact Julie Fayeh, a state representative and supporter of the movement, again later in the year to reiterate their cause as the session gets closer.

If the Eugene City Council determines the trial run as a success, all of Eugene's public spaces will provide free menstrual products, thanks to the efforts of the girls at PERIOD. And if the legislation the girls are helping to write and are planning to propose passes, products will be free everywhere in Oregon. Then, perhaps, nationwide. Lafer believes this dream isn't unrealistic at all.

"We wouldn't have bathrooms without toilet paper or soap," says Lafer. "Based on what it costs it seems like something worth pushing."

Most people can attest to the sheer panic of sitting down on the toilet in a public restroom, only to realize that the stall they're in is out of toilet paper. The awkward yell into the abyss of the bathroom that follows, asking if anyone has any toilet paper that they can kindly pass under the stall.

Sure, it's a bit uncomfortable—but it's normal. Everyone uses toilet paper.

Only people who menstruate can relate to the anxiety of meticulously planning a trip to the bathroom. Awkwardly sliding a tampon up their sleeve as they attempt to make it out of the classroom and to the bathroom stall—and that's assuming that they even have easy access to affordable menstrual products in the first place.

But thanks to the efforts of Chiddox, Neale, Majhi, Lafer, and the states already on board with the PERIOD movement, this equity issue is on its way to being resolved. Periods may never be fun or glamorous, but someday lawmakers may be able to address them just as these girls did. 🍌