



# If/Then

If You Care About Menstrual Equity, Then  
You Should Care About **Sex Education**

*Here We Flo*



Jennifer Weiss-Wolf originally coined the term menstrual equity in her book “Periods Gone Public” where she makes the case that “to have a fully equitable and participatory society, we must have laws and policies that ensure menstrual products are safe, affordable, and available for anyone in need”.<sup>1</sup> To reach true menstrual equity, this framework must be applied to all public institutions but this report will primarily focus on the need for equitable access to menstrual products AND coinciding education in schools.<sup>1</sup>

Similar to many other topics discussed in sex education, menstruation continues to be taboo for many cultures and communities across the United States. The menstrual health information youth receive from their peers and families may be inadequate or laced with misinformation and stigma. According to PERIOD.’s annual State of the Period report, they found that 45% of teens report being affected by period stigma and 63% of teens say the school environment makes them especially self-conscious of their periods.<sup>2</sup>

An ideal place to provide adolescents with accurate information about menstruation, and a myriad of other topics, in a culturally sensitive manner, is in sex education classes! According to the National Sex Education Standards, menstruation should be taught by 5th grade and should be taught to all young people, not just people who menstruate.

In the US, the majority of American young people who learn about menstruation, if at all, learn about it during a 5th or 6th-grade “puberty lesson.” For some Americans – this is the only sex education they will receive. Additionally, many will receive it in gender-segregated environments, leading to incomplete or inaccurate information, or ignoring the topic completely. Incorporating quality menstrual health education into sex education requires instruction be provided to students early enough to prepare for menarche, or one’s first menstrual period, which occurs between ages 9 to 13 years old. Furthermore, sex education allows students to understand their bodily function and learn how to communicate their needs and concerns, which is necessary so young menstruators feel comfortable requesting menstrual products or alerting a trusted adult if experiencing any menstrual dysfunction such as irregular bleeding or pain.

## What sex education can do vs. what it currently does

Most states only instruct on how to manage “menstrual accidents” (ie bloodstains on clothes) or on topics such as period cramps and navigating menstrual products. Most importantly, students do not feel that they are prepared for their first menstrual period or that they can openly discuss menstruation in schools. Although most schools’ health education mentions pubertal health, the inclusion of menstrual education is much more limited. Few states cover menstrual product topics and only three state curriculums cover “menstrual management”. Without menstrual education, students can internalize and perpetuate stigma surrounding menstruation which can lead to bullying. However, when students receive instruction on what is happening in their developing bodies in an environment of understanding and respect, then menstrual stigma and bullying are reduced.

Adolescents and parents want this education in schools and it must be provided to them. Sex education is capable of closing disparities and gaps when it comes to menstrual education, leading to decreased stigma and increased confidence surrounding menstruation. Sex education should include age-appropriate information that normalizes the menstruation cycle; explains menstrual disorders and symptoms; elaborates upon period health and hygiene; and empowers young people to make their own decisions surrounding menstruation.

Sex education must be comprehensive and inclusive to ensure young people have all the information they need to lead healthy lives. Learning this vital information – which includes menstrual health – is their right.

<sup>1</sup> ACLU National Prison Project, & Period Equity. (2019, December). *Menstrual Equity: A Legislative Toolkit*. ACLU.org. <https://www.aclu.org/wp-content/uploads/legal-documents/121119-sj-periodequitytoolkit.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Thinx & PERIOD. State of the Period 2023. New York City (2023). Available at: <https://period.org/uploads/SOTP-2023.pdf>

# If You Care About Menstrual Equity, Then You Should Care About **Sex Education**



## By advancing sex education, you are supporting the right of all menstruators

Menstrual equity and quality inclusive sex education are interconnected in promoting holistic well-being and gender equality. While we believe school districts and other state entities must provide access to menstrual products to combat the lack of access for some menstruators, that alone is not enough. By including menstrual health education in sex education curricula, we equip students with crucial knowledge about bodies that menstruate and foster a positive understanding of menstruation while destigmatizing it. This integration not only ensures access to menstrual products but also cultivates empathy, respect, and inclusivity, contributing to a more informed and equitable society.

### Sex Education that is Comprehensive Works

- ✓ Sex education often serves as young people's first critical touch point for information regarding menstruation, menstrual disorders, and menstrual hygiene.
- ✓ Informing young people about menstrual symptoms supports young people's confidence and knowledge when they get their first period.
- ✓ Sex education clarifies myths about periods and menstrual disorders. Educating young people on periods clarifies information regarding symptoms and treatment for all people, lowering stigma and misinformation surrounding periods.
- ✓ Without sex education, young people can feel scared, confused, and or shamed when they have their first period. However, sex education that includes menstrual education can counteract these negative emotions and promote knowledge and empowerment among all young people.

### If You're an Advocate

- ✓ Support federal legislation like the Menstrual Equity for All Act of 2023 and the Real Education and Healthy Youth Act (REAHYA) that would make menstrual supplies and quality sex education more accessible nationwide.
- ✓ Follow organizations that are leading the charge for menstrual equity like PERIOD. The Menstrual Movement
  - Use their interactive Menstrual Equity Legislation tracker to see bills currently being considered by state legislatures.
  - States with recently passed menstrual equity legislation can help to create handbooks and toolkits to improve implementation
- ✓ Advocate for free menstrual products to be distributed in all bathrooms; including infographics on how to use products
- ✓ Advocate for resources to ensure educators are trained and feel comfortable speaking to young menstruators about menstrual health

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6121217/>

<sup>4</sup> Rubinsky V, Gunning JN, Cooke-Jackson A. "I thought I was dying." (Un)Supportive communication surrounding early menstruation experiences. Health Commun. (2020) 35(2):242–52. doi: 10.1080/10410236.2018.1548337

<sup>5</sup> Thinx & PERIOD. State of the period 2021. New York City (2021). Available at: [https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/0795/1599/files/State-of-the-Period-white-paper\\_Thinx\\_PERIOD.pdf?455788](https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/0795/1599/files/State-of-the-Period-white-paper_Thinx_PERIOD.pdf?455788).

<sup>6</sup> Sebert Kuhlmann A, Hunter E, Wall LL, Boyko M, Teni MT. State standards for menstrual hygiene education in U.S. Schools. J Sch Health. (2022) 92(4):418–20. doi: 10.1111/josh.13135

<sup>7</sup> Sebert Kuhlmann A, Hunter E, Wall LL, Boyko M, Teni MT. State standards for menstrual hygiene education in U.S. Schools. J Sch Health. (2022) 92(4):418–20. doi: 10.1111/josh.13135

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10021325/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://osse.dc.gov/page/dc-menstrual-health-education-standards>