Michela Bedard:

And so a part of what makes menstruation unaffordable is not just the expensive product. It's pain relief. It's needing to take time off from school and work. It's laundry. It's clean water. It's the ability to talk to a caregiver, or a nurse that will really listen to you.

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Donna Mazyck:

Hello, I'm Donna Mazyck. Executive director of the National Association of School Nurses. Welcome to School Nurse Chat. Today we'll be talking about menstrual equity. Our guests today are Ms. Michela Bedard. Michela is executive director of Period. And she is so committed to building a better future. She believes that every person deserves dignity, and the chance to be seen for their full humanity.

And you'll see how that comes through in this topic. We also have with us Dr. Kate King. Dr. Kate has been in school nursing for a couple of decades. She has a doctorate in nursing practice. And she is a strong advocate for supporting school health services through practice, and legislation. Creating voice in school nurses, and promoting and providing healthcare to children and adolescents. Welcome, Michela. Welcome Dr. Kate.

Michela Bedard:

Thank you so much. Great to be here.

Kate King:

Thank you.

Donna Mazyck:

So glad you're here. And there is a lot on this topic, that we want to touch on. So I will give you some guiding questions, but you know this material. And we want this word to get out to all of our listeners, about menstrual equity. So let's get started with describing the issue of menstrual equity. What is it? First Michela, then Kate.

Michela Bedard:

Well, thank you so much for tackling this topic. It's a big one. It affects a lot of people, so I'm excited to get into it. Menstrual equity is what we are aiming for. Menstrual equity is a world in which no one needs to miss out on their life or their economic circumstances, because of a natural need. The fact is, is that today nearly one in four US students can't afford or access period products.

Additionally, period products are taxed as luxury items in almost half of US states. You currently cannot purchase period products through government programs like SNAP or WIC. And so what we are working towards is a world where none of those things happen. And everyone has access and affordability of menstrual products. That would be a world where we would see true menstrual equity.

Donna Mazyck:

Thank you for framing that, Michela as what's now, and what you're aiming for.

Dr. Kate.

Kate King:

In my two decades, 21 years of school nursing, I've seen the topic of menstrual equity emerge and change. Having been in schools 21 years ago, and also being the director of a large health services department for a large urban school district, and now back in a school, how things have changed. Which gives me hope. When I started as a school nurse, girls were expected to bring their own product. There was quite a stigma around periods. There was a stigma around not having what you needed.

Your parents should have given it to you. And you were expected to take care of that yourself, for the most part. Except that school nurses helped out quite a bit at that time. And so, I do see quite a change. I see opportunity for more support, and more change in that regard. And making sure again, that our students have the menstrual products that they need.

I think Michela, what you said is when students cannot afford their own products, is a change from 20 years ago that I can see. That may have been the case many years ago, but we didn't see it as much. So again, I have hope that we are moving forward. And I hope this podcast can help educate more people to support that cause.

Donna Mazyck:

It's good to hear the then, and now. And understand that there's still a need. And that aim is still what we're reaching for.

In what ways does period poverty, another term I'll use here, impact students who menstruate.

Kate King:

When students don't have the period products, the menstrual products that they need... When I look at it from a school perspective, they are taking time out of their class, out of learning to find products. So when we have period poverty, students don't have a menstrual product in their purse. Or when they go to the bathroom, they have to again go somewhere to find some period products. From a school nurse perspective, that's keeping them away from learning.

I've also seen, and I think this gets in a little bit further into our questions. But I've seen students who come to my office... I have a story from a little while ago. I just kept all my period products on a shelf behind my door, and I came in to find a girl just stocking her backpack full of period products. And what it did was, giving me the opportunity to explore her period poverty.

In that of course, there were three other women in her home. And they all of course, had their period at the same time. And there were no period products at home. So she was really not stealing, she was trying to provide for her family. I was able at that point, to help her mom find where to get products at a free store. And again, that period poverty also causes shame. It causes girls to not use period products, and bleed through clothing and pants. And wear their sweatshirts around their waists. So we have the actual problem of being out of class. The actual problem of getting that. And then the shame of not having correct products I think, it's probably the most heart-wrenching for me.

Michela Bedard:

Well thank you for sharing that story, Kate. The team at Period in our period chapters, we hear the students' side of that. We hear the students' stories all the time. And we know that school nurses are really on the front lines of those experiences. Because if students are able to advocate for themselves at all, it usually is with the school nurse. But we know that there's a lot of students who don't go to the nurse, or the nurse doesn't have product. And so, they simply stay home.

Or the really difficult scenarios of the caregivers at home making decisions between period products for the people in the home that need it, and other essential goods. And so the more we can really de-stigmatize this conversation and make sure that students know how to talk about it, and know how to talk about their needs. And also do the work to equip nurses that are listening to this podcast right now. To know how to talk about it with their students, is going to go a long way in helping students be able to fully engage in both school and after school activities. And work, and their commute to and from school.

Everything that they need to do, that requires products.

Donna Mazyck:

I'm thinking of the future of nursing 2030 that was released in 2021, from the National Academy of Medicine. And in that future of nursing, it stated that nursing will advance health equity for populations. And so we're talking about these stories that we're hearing, that there are social needs. Stuffing the backpack for the family. And just higher level social determinants of health that impacts students on something that is a normal part of their lives, having a period. This is a topic that is so important for us to understand. Michela, You mentioned that you hear students' stories. Can you tell us a bit how that happens?

Michela Bedard:

So Period is a global organization with over 400 chapters around the world, that are largely youth-led. And so a lot of our chapters work to end period poverty in their own communities. And usually, that means in their own schools. And so we hear all the time from chapters that work to do product drives, or to advocate with their school administration to get products on site. And the students that come out and talk about how life-changing having these products are. Simply to have them on site. Because when you need them, you really need them. So there's stories like Kate told about the student needing it for her family. But there's also the stories of simply it coming, and having a student be unprepared. Or it coming, and the student knowing that they don't have anything at home. And so they can take a couple with them, to get them through the day and the night. And being able to come back to school the next morning.

And so what's exciting for us from a data perspective too is being able to see the change in absenteeism that, that creates. We currently have 18 states that mandate period products in public schools, that we now have almost a couple of school years under our belt there to collect that data. So we're really excited to see how this increases attendance. Because we just can tell from our hundreds of locations around the country, that it has a real impact on students. And it's interesting, Kate, to hear you say that 20 years ago, you weren't hearing people talk as much about affordability of period products. And I think that's largely because of the taboo and stigma around this topic. They just weren't talking about it before. We know it existed, but it really wasn't a conversation. And I just credit this younger generation right now, with bringing this topic to the forefront. And helping to de-stigmatize it so, that we can all grapple with it on a policy and programmatic position.

Donna Mazyck:

I can remember stories of talking to young girls who were improvising to try to figure a way to manage their periods, because they didn't have the funds needed. So they were rationing the store bought products. And interspersing them with home hacks, I called them. Trying to afford it.

And Kate, you mentioned also as Michela did, the issue of absenteeism. Well I know that it's different for every student, but generally you're going to have a monthly period. And if absenteeism connected with the period is an issue, speak a bit about the impact of that.

Kate King:

Well if students are missing one to two, even one day a month. Or one to two to three days a month, we're going to label that chronic absenteeism. And I think the key here is recognizing patterns, and then helping and assisting our students who are absent in that pattern. One part of that is having school nurses on attendance teams and attendance committees to address that, to be able to recognize that pattern. And to educate our other school staff on again, menstrual equity. And making sure that our students have what they need to come to school.

Often, we blame students and parents for absenteeism. There's a blame. And again, we get back to that whole thing of shame again. And I think that we really do need to make that connection with families, so that students can come to school and learn. If in fact, there is something other... When we got back to just a previous podcast on period pain and endometriosis, that's something that we can look at too with a medical excuse.

But if students are not coming to school or going home from school because of the lack of period products, that's like me saying well, you can't come to school because we don't have toilet paper. You can't come to school, because we don't have paper towels. Or we don't have pencils. If a kid needs a pencil, we give them a pencil. But sometimes I think that, that doesn't happen. So again, that attendance is so important for their learning. We know through research, that chronic absenteeism really affects learning. So our goal is to prevent absences. Because menstrual inequality, if we can do that, I think we can go a long way in curbing that absenteeism related to this topic.

Donna Mazyck:

You mentioned, Michela, that 18 states mandate period products now. What prompted that legislation that ended up with the policies?

Michela Bedard:

Well, it was prompted by student activists. And school nurses, and administrators. And teachers. Who all got together finally, probably after decades of seeing this and feeling this. And said, "We're going to start talking about it." And it was pretty famously first happened in New York State, and is now in 18 states. One of Period's largest pillars of work is in policy advocacy. And we work very closely with coalitions of students, nurses, diaper banks, teachers on the ground in lots of different states to get these policies passed. To have products in schools in at least half of all bathrooms. We are really excited to see a sea change in this conversation. In the last year or so, we've seen over 60 pieces of menstrual equity legislation be introduced around the country. And a lot of those starting to pass. So that really shows that the tide is turning in this conversation. And that people aren't really letting the taboo keep them from tackling this in a policy perspective.

It's also exciting that these are statewide. These aren't just individual schools or districts noticing that this is an issue, but statewide mandates even. And often funded, which is important for schools. And so that's really exciting, to see that advocacy take shape. It's also really exciting for us involved in the movement to have legislators reach out to us and say, "We've been hearing from students and teachers that this is a problem in our state. Will you help us draft a bill that we think could get passed in our state?" That's a pretty exciting phone call to get, after years of working for this topic. And so, I am seeing a real change there.

And thank you for likening it to toilet paper and pencils. I think sometimes we hear oh, this is a fringe issue. Or this is just an extra item. And why is this something you're pushing for? This item is a symptom of bigger issues that really lie where gender justice meets economic justice. So when we're talking about equity issues, this is a symptom of bigger fish. And so, this is something that we can do. It is relatively affordable. The number of students that need this... We have to remember that if about half or a little more than half of students menstruate, and they menstruate a few days a month. And only a portion of them really find themselves with lack of access or affordability. We're not talking about all that many students. But the students that it affects, it affects in a pretty profound way.

So this is an affordable and accessible policy that I think, all public schools and private schools can take upon themselves to do as something with pretty profound impact. And it's win-win. It's not partisan, it's not political. This is just something that helps with attendance, and helps students live the best lives that they can. Which as you said, is in everyone's interests. So we just continue to follow the lead of the youth leaders that are really at the forefront of this movement. And it's wonderful to see lawmakers and policymakers follow suit.

Donna Mazyck:

It's wonderful to hear about the students having the voice and the action to be able to move this whole issue of equity with menstruation along.

Kate, you've mentioned some things that school nurses can do. Do you see other roles that school nurses have in advancing menstrual equity?

Kate King:

I think one of the key roles of the school nurse is being able to connect the world of health, and the world of the community, and the school world altogether. Because, the school nurse knows about all three of those entities. So when we look at the school nurse on more of a systems level, advocating. That those people who are in administration, in authoritarian roles and leadership in schools and communities and in healthcare... And by communities, I also mean legislators. Michela, like you were talking about. How do we get all those folks together, to be on the same page? It's one thing to legislate this, but it's another thing to get buy-in from everybody to do this because it's the right thing to do. School nurses can speak to school boards, school nurses can advocate with legislators. School nurses can talk to community... Not only healthcare agencies, but PTOs, PTAs.

School nurses can talk to community organizations that are cultural. For example, at my school, more than 50% of my children are new Americans. So when I'm looking at what school nurses do to advanced menstrual equity, I have to look at not only cultural, but how do I reach out to the organizations that are supporting them and their families and communities? And then again, work together to provide those things for students. I also look at not just period products, in terms of pads and tampons. I do a lot of things at school to help students stay at school. I explain what our over-the-counter medication policy is to students and their parents, so that they could bring a small amount, that's our policy, of over-the-counter without getting in trouble. But you have to explain that to students and parents to do that, so they can take that.

I do a lot of warm compresses for students. I call them my little hot packs. But when girls are having menstrual pain, how can I do those things? It's not even medication. It's a warm compress, sitting in my office for a little bit. Those also have to do with menstrual equity. Because, we really want to look at that whole thing of having periods. Not just products. But how again, can I help students work through all of those things? And again, I think it is advocating at the school level. At the district level. School nurses can say look, this is how much it's going to cost in your $12 million budget. If you could just give me $50,000 for the year... Which sounds like a big amount, but not for a huge school district with a several million dollar budget, for menstrual products. Look at how that can improve. And when school nurses can link that with increased attendance, it makes all the difference in the world to our educators.

Donna Mazyck:

The data telling the story. So Michela, with Period.org, with the organization, tell us how the organization is advancing in this whole person perspective that Kate spoke of.

It's not just the products, it's the whole of a person. And that's in your aim to make life better.

Michela Bedard:

Well, it is. And so one of Period's things that were most proud of is that, we really do two things at once. Because we have three main programs of service, education, and advocacy, we do a lot of direct product distribution to folks in need. To solve the immediate need, with pads and tampons. And reusable products which are becoming more popular, which is really exciting.

Period underwear, menstrual cups, reusable pads. But we also do a lot of menstrual health and menstrual stigma education. We have to educate people about, what is menstrual equity? What are we fighting for? What is period poverty? That one in four number is pretty staggering. And when people say, I've never heard of this before, we have to talk about well, why? Because, it's a private issue. It's a stigma'd issue. We haven't talked about it. And probably over the last many, many decades, folks that have been in charge of deciding what essential goods are provided to students probably haven't had a period.

And so when we're looking at why this happened, we can unpack it. And so we do a lot of education around that, to get people to wake up to the issue. And then the third is advocacy. Now, how do we make systemic change out of this? And so when we talk about the whole person, that's what we're talking about. Let's look at how menstruation affects the full individual. And so a part of what makes menstruation unaffordable is not just the expensive product, it's exactly what you're talking about here. It's pain relief. It's needing to take time off from school and work. It's laundry. It's clean water. It's the ability to talk to a caregiver, or a nurse that will really listen to you. All of those things are an expense. Either an emotional, or a physical, or an economic expense. And so, we need to tackle all of that.

We have a lot of work to do to make our society understand that this is an essential need, and an essential part of our biology. And that like I said before, it's not a fringe issue. And so I think when we talk about menstrual equity, that's what we're talking about. We're not just a product organization. We're an organization that is fighting for the ability for a society to see menstruation as something that happens to all of us. And happens with great frequency. So I think we have a long way to go, before we can talk about it without a lot of shyness and stigma. But we're really getting there. And thank you for having a more full conversation about it too, that isn't just about product. We know that nurses are on the front lines of this. And so, I really appreciate this conversation.

Donna Mazyck:

And I appreciate you both. This is the round where there's last words. Anything you want to share, including where we can find more about Period, Michela. And then Dr. Kate King, your last words please.

Michela Bedard:

Please go to Period.org to join us in our work. To join what we call, the menstrual movement. It's going to take all of these to make these changes, but we know that we can do it in our lifetime. On our website, in addition to finding places to donate to us, there's also places to donate product. And to learn about where we have chapters. And who our partners are. So we'd love to hear from you, and would love to work together.

Kate King:

Again, thank you for allowing me to be on this podcast and highlight what school nurses do. And can do to achieve menstrual equity. Not promote it, not look for it, but achieve it. I think that is really the goal that we are looking for. I thank the agencies like Michela's for leading that charge.

The last thing I would like to leave you with, and Michela brought this up, is empowering and helping our students. Students are the most wonderful people, children in the whole entire world. And they can do a lot. And it just takes one. It just takes the school nurse to say to about a couple girls who are really angry about not having period products, or not having what they need. One person. The school nurse can say, you know what? Let me help you have your voice brought forward. It's always so much more powerful coming from them, than it is from me. Or even Michela. Or NASN. So helping our students get their voices and moving them forward I think, is really going to be the key to menstrual equity for our students.

Donna Mazyck:

Well thank you Michela Bedard and Dr. Kate King, for being with us on School Nurse Chat. We've learned a lot. And we have another understanding of what it means to talk about the whole student, the whole school, the whole community. Thank you so much for this conversation.

Michela Bedard:

Thank you.

Kate King:

Thank you.

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The Uterine Health Guide website is an unbranded patient-centered information resource that was created in response to needs identified by the Women's Health Patient Advocacy Community. The Uterine Health Guide, UHG was designed for patients living with uterine health issues to navigate their conditions and learn about menstrual health and period irregularities.

The UHG is intended to activate readers to take charge of their health, seek support. And talk to their healthcare providers. This resource is the culmination of efforts by Myovant and Pfizer, guided by the Women's Health Patient Advocacy community.