

That's On **PERIOD.**

Youth Voices On Menstrual Health In Schools

Youth Advisory Committee
2023-2024

FOUNDED BY:



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National
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About This Zine


This zine was authored by the 2022-2023 Youth Advisory Committee of the Trauma-Informed Schools Learning Network for Girls of Color. The zine is intended to raise girls' voices to inform educators, the public, policymakers, and others about their menstrual-related needs at school.

Created and written entirely by the Youth Advisors, it is the product of their spring semester capstone project, which was built on the theme of reproductive justice. Reproductive justice is a term coined by SisterSong, a U.S. Southern-based women of color-led collective. It is defined as the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent children in safe and sustainable communities.


About the Trauma-Informed Schools Learning Network for Girls of Color and the Youth Advisory Committee



The Learning Network for Girls of Color provides a secure platform for school system leaders and educators to learn from experts across the country about trauma-informed approaches for girls and gender-expansive youth of color and engage in peer-to-peer learning.



The Learning Network's content is guided by a youth advisory committee composed of girls and gender-expansive youth of color and a steering committee including experts in trauma-informed learning and/or issues relating to race, ethnicity, and gender.



Membership is free for educators, school leadership and support personnel, district leadership, school support staff, school counselors and therapists, and other members of school communities.

The Youth Advisory Committee is comprised of girls and gender-expansive youth of color between the ages

of 14 and 22 who guide the work of the Schools for Girls of Color Learning Network by providing recommendations to transform schools into supportive learning environments based on their life experiences. Membership on the Committee also offers leadership and public speaking skills to young people.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful for these champions who contributed their time, resources, and expertise:

Rebecca Epstein, Executive Director of the Center on Gender Justice & Opportunity at Georgetown Law and founder of the Learning Network

Dr. Sydney McKinney, Executive Director of the National Black Women's Justice Institute and co-leader of the Learning Network

Sade Smith-Edwards, Layout and Graphic Designer



Dear Readers,

Welcome to “That’s On Period: Youth Voices on Menstrual Health in Schools”, a Zine that showcases and explores the experiences of girls and gender-expansive youth of color. The Zine has three sections: Access, Education, and Legislation. Through youth-authored poetry, information on barriers students face when menstruating in school, and sample US laws, the Zine is intended to inform readers about the challenges young people face when managing their menstrual health and hygiene in school, from girls’ own point of view. We also offer guidance and action steps that schools can take to support the menstrual health needs of girls and gender-expansive youth of color.

Our aim is to advance reproductive justice in schools. Menstrual health is a part of achieving reproductive justice: the right to access comprehensive sexual education, menstrual hygiene products, and other resources and support from school officials to make informed decisions about health.¹

Students face many barriers in school that can cause stress to menstruating students and may make them feel insecure, including a lack of access to free products. In 2021,² a national survey found that approximately 3 out of every 5 students rarely or never find free period products in school bathrooms or public bathrooms. Low-income students are more affected by such lack of access.³

Shaming and stigma about menstruation also harms students. In the same 2021 survey, 76 percent of students said there was a negative association with menstruation and described periods as “gross” and “unsanitary,” and 65 percent agreed that society teaches people to be ashamed of their periods.⁴

School officials must create inclusive, respectful, and safe environments where girls and gender-expansive youth of color can feel comfortable and secure when menstruating. Read on to learn more about the barriers girls face in school and what you

can do to better support the menstrual health and hygiene of girls and gender-expansive youth of color. We hope this Zine will inspire educators to introduce conversations about menstruation in schools and work alongside girls and gender-expansive youth of color to identify and support their reproductive health needs.

Sincerely,
The '22-'23 Youth Advisory Committee



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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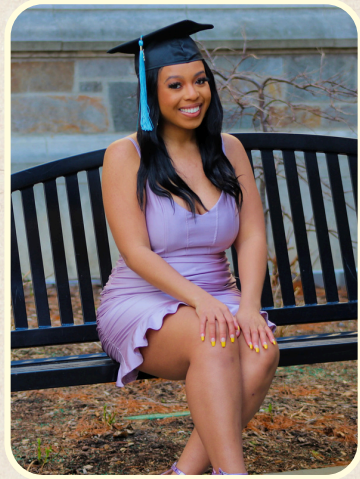
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Project Manager: Michaela Minnis, Youth Engagement Associate at the Center on Gender Justice & Opportunity at Georgetown Law

Michaela Minnis was the Youth Engagement Associate at the Center on Gender Justice & Opportunity at Georgetown Law during the 2022-2023 school year.





IN OUR WORDS

THREE POEMS ON

MENSTRUAL HEALTH



A Lack Of VS. Too Much

by Samantha Giles

A lack of care.

A lack of menstrual care products in school
bathrooms.

A lack of understanding.

A lack of awareness.

A lack of resources.

A lack of help.

A lack of support.

A lack that's growing

And growing

And growing.

Rarely does the school system truly care.

Rarely there are menstrual care products in
school bathrooms.

There is a lack of understanding.

There is a lack of awareness.

There are a lack of resources.

There is a lack of help.

There is a lack of support.

There is a lack that's growing

And growing

And growing.

When is it enough?

When will we matter enough?



Too much stigma.

Too much unnecessary embarrassment for a natural bodily process.

Too much misunderstanding.

Too much unawareness.

Too much misuse of resources.

Too much helplessness.

Too much shame.

Too much that's growing

And growing

And growing.

It will be enough one day;

It will be enough one day when we are listened to.

Understood.

Heard.

Not just by school officials.

Teachers.

Educators.

But the whole wide world.



The Song of Menstruation

by Tiffany Ofori

The song of menstruation

There is a melody that is familiar to me.
With sounds that show no boundaries.
It comes with a wave that fills my body.
In turn I feel a depth of emotion so profound.
The rhythm guides my body.
In step with nature's lively sway.
A symphony in red.
Its bittersweet echo fills our soul.
A feeling we can't escape or control.
One tune that knows creation.
A song of resilience and beauty.
A reminder of the power we hold.



I Am Human. Made Woman

by Marie Smith

This poem paints a portrait for me and many like me who deal with the pain, discomfort, and mental turmoil of menstruation alongside the expectations to still get it done, to still perform. More importantly, this poem addresses the disdain women and gender-expansive people experience when society, as a collective, refuses to address our humility, our limits, and our cries for help.

– Marie

Is it Woman enough for me to work a 9–5?

Bend and snap.

Do the heavy lifting no problem.

Cry in the bathroom stall instead of taking the day off.

Sit for hours at a desk despite my body's screams for respiration.

I am person.

Call me head of household.

Whatever that's supposed to look like.

Whatever that means.

I am person.

Who flows like crimson rivers.

From my body, I sing songs about mothers and babies.


A person and a baby.

Wombs that make life form without a hand clap.

And I build with my bones this society a foundation.

I am human. made of Woman.
And yet I wonder what Woman really means.
Like Sweet lady, but why do I have to be sweet?
When word on the street is I better have enough to live.
I want better jobs that supply,
Like my monthly needs.
My mother needs to call up the legislatures like she would to the
school over me.
Be woman.
And all of the responsibilities that come.
Like learning a body that hasn't learned me.
And why do I have to be defined by anything other than human?
Because remember that I am a person first.





ACCESS TO
RESOURCES &
INFORMATION

We believe that schools must create easy and free access to hygiene products and services. School officials must respect students' privacy and ensure confidentiality so that students can confidently manage their menstrual cycle while at school.

Did You Know?

A 2018-2020 study conducted by Columbia University researchers explored the experiences of 73 Black, Indigenous, and other girls of color (ages 15-19) in New

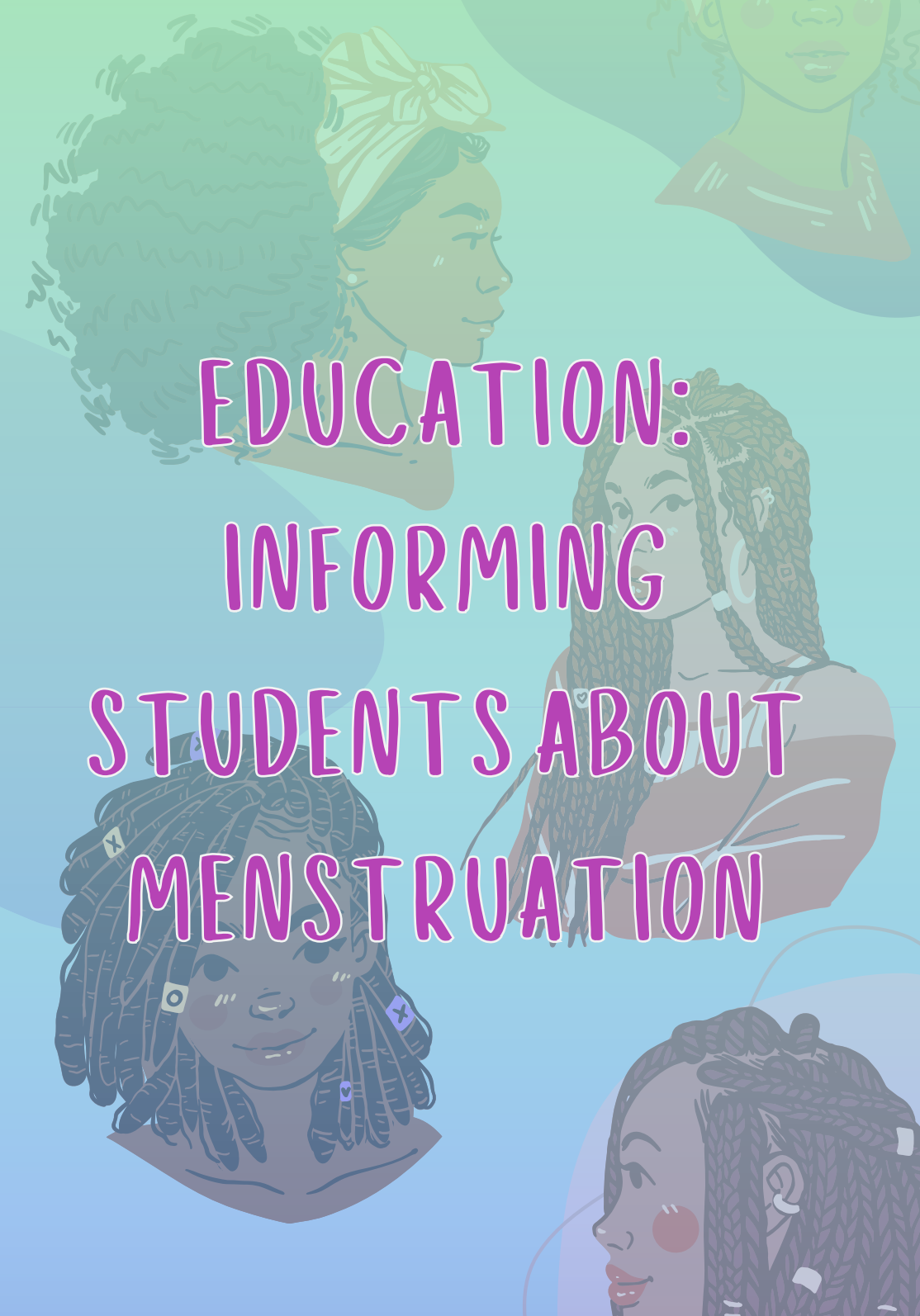


York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Researchers found that a common concern expressed by adolescent girls was a lack of support for managing menstrual pain symptoms in schools, including inconsistent nursing presence and limited mitigation strategies.⁵



Our Guiding Principles On Improving Access In Schools

- Provide a pass for students to go to the nurse. Teachers should allow students to see the nurse when students need to care for their menstrual health and hygiene so they can do so in private.
- Provide a menstrual-health care package to students when they visit the nurse's office. These care packages should include menstrual products, wipes, and warm towels.
- Stock all bathrooms and classrooms with free menstrual items of different sizes to ensure inclusivity.
- Create safe spaces for girls to address their menstrual health needs and support them when these needs affect their academic performance and engagement in school activities. For example, these spaces should be areas where students can go when they are experiencing cramps, such as a cot in the nurse's office.
- Educate teachers about menstruation, menstrual health, and menarche so that they can act as a resource for students who come to them for help. Professional development should include training on supporting young people's menstrual health care.

The background features four stylized illustrations of women's heads and shoulders. In the top left, a woman with a large, voluminous afro hairstyle and a light-colored headband with a bow. In the top right, a woman with short, curly hair. In the middle right, a woman with long, dark braids and a white headband. In the bottom left, a woman with short, dark braids and a white headband. In the bottom right, a woman with long, dark braids and a white headband. The text is centered over these illustrations.

EDUCATION:
INFORMING
STUDENTS ABOUT
MENSTRUATION

We believe that schools must provide students with accurate and adequate education about menstruation, including informing students about the uses of menstrual products so that they can make informed decisions about their menstrual health.



Informing Students about Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS)

The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists

(ACOG) defines Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS) as the physical and mood changes that occur in the days before menstruation.⁶

ACOG outlines some of the common symptoms associated with PMS, which include depression, anxiety, crying spells, angry outbursts, poor concentration, increased nap-taking, food cravings, breast tenderness, bloating and weight gain, skin problems, headache, and gastrointestinal symptoms.⁷

To be clinically diagnosed, a physician must identify these patterns:

- Onset during the 5 days prior to menstruation for 3 menstrual cycles in a row,
- Ending within 4 days of the start of a cycle, and
- Interference with normal activities.

It's important to note that even if students are not clinically diagnosed, they may still have PMS symptoms. While students may still be able to perform daily activities while experiencing symptoms, that does not mean they are not experiencing PMS. To assist in diagnosis, students should keep a record of their cycles and symptoms every day for 2-3 months.⁸



What can you do to manage PMS symptoms?

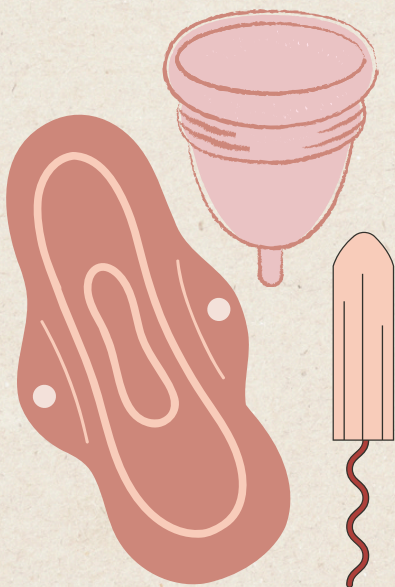
We've learned that many students see improvement in PMS symptoms when they make lifestyle changes

such as diet changes, regular exercise, relaxation therapy (breathing exercises, yoga, meditation), massage therapy, regular sleep habits, dietary supplements, etc.⁹ While these recommendations can improve symptoms, everyone's bodies and needs are unique. Youth should have support in identifying the best plan of action to navigate and manage their PMS symptoms.

Our Guiding Principles For Improving Education About Menstruation In Schools

1. Inform students about reproductive health. Schools should improve the education of all students -- including boys -- about puberty, menstruation, and the reproductive health system.

Students should be taught about the cause of cramps and health conditions related to menstrual health and provided with guidance about regular and irregular patterns, when to seek medical care for any shifts in the length of a menstrual cycle, and how to track their cycle.



2. Improve students' education about the uses of menstrual products.

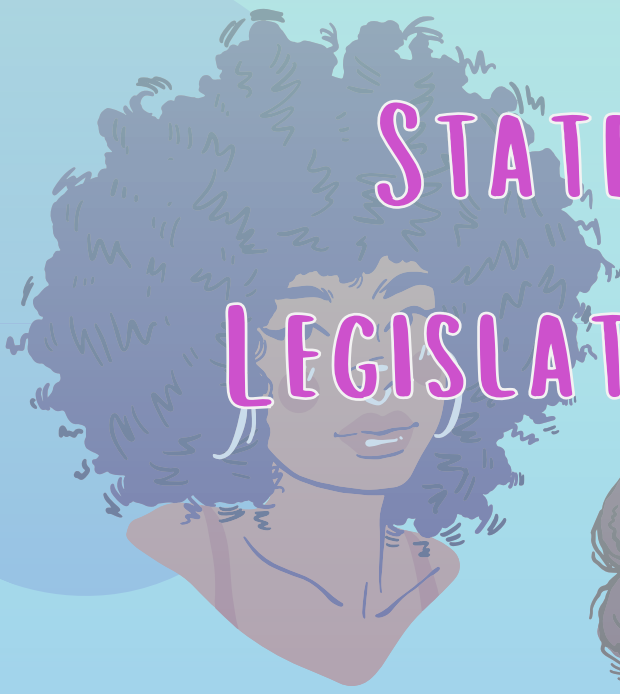
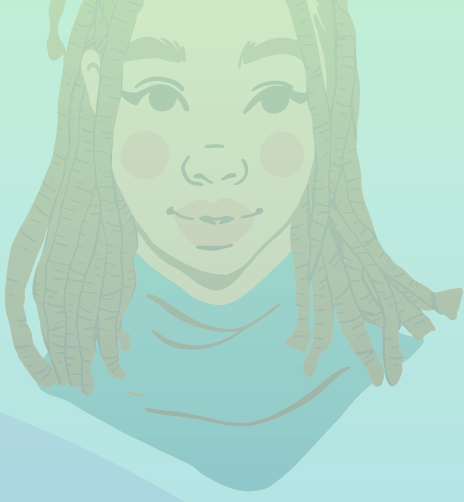
Schools should provide guidance to girls about the uses of menstrual products; help girls identify what the best product may be for them; and distribute pamphlets/fact sheets that discuss menstrual health care. This guidance should include information about:

- Why menstruation happens
- What happens when someone has their period (symptoms)
- Ways to alleviate stress while on students are on their period

- Information about the recommended uses of different menstrual hygiene products
- When to change a period product

3. Make resources accessible. School newsletters or newspapers should include information about where students can find menstrual health-related resources in their school.

STATE LEGISLATION



Promising Models

We decided to look at legislation in states that can provide models for states that have not yet introduced or passed bills to secure free menstrual products in schools. We examined 20 states that enacted legislation to provide free products in schools. Aunt Flow, a women-owned company that helps businesses and schools sustainably provide free period products in bathrooms¹⁰ developed a list of states that currently have legislation.¹¹ Using this list, we identified the states with the most ideal legislation, based on requirements to stock products, the range of bathrooms covered, and the minimum ages/grades of students eligible for mandatory access to products.

After examining Aunt Flow's list, we identified promising laws in **Hawaii** and **Washington State**. We scanned a legislation tracker to learn more.



Washington State House Bill 1273 was passed by law on July 25, 2021.¹² The law requires school districts, charter schools, state-tribal compact schools, and private

schools must make period products available at no cost in all gender-neutral and female bathrooms, as well as one male bathroom, serving students in grades 6-12.¹³

Hawaii Senate Bill 2821 was enacted on June 21, 2022.¹⁴ This law requires the Hawaii Department of Education to provide free period products to all students on all public school and public charter campuses. The state appropriates \$2,000,000 to fund this mandate in the state budget.¹⁵



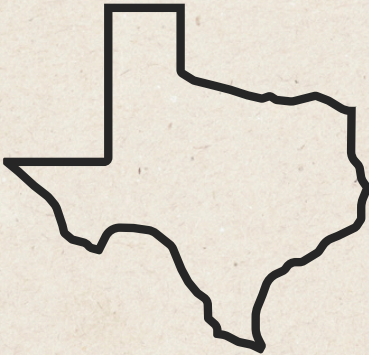
A key aspect of this legislation is the provision that requires that all students have access to period products. Importantly, access must be free of charge, which helps the many students who are experiencing period poverty. This should be clearly specified in any policy. Simply providing products for purchase would not meet the needs of low-income students.



Less Effective Legislation

We also reviewed a legislation tracker to identify states with the least effective laws on period products in school. We identified **Florida** and **Texas** as two examples.

Florida's law requires instruction on sexual health, but only for students in grades 6 through 12; students younger than sixth grade are prohibited from receiving this information.¹⁶ The law could prohibit students younger than sixth grade from talking about menstruation with their teachers.¹⁷



In **Texas**, a bill to ban a sales tax on period products was introduced in 2020, but no further action has been taken since it was sent to committee in May 2021.¹⁸ Texas law does not require schools to provide free menstrual products.¹⁹

Although high school students may enroll in a sexual health course as an elective, and middle schoolers are required to learn that course's curriculum, the curriculum does not include information about consent nor use language that acknowledges LGBTQ+ students.²⁰

Texas and Florida serve as examples of states where legislative efforts have yet to effectively address menstrual inequity, underlining the urgency of the need for policies to expand access to free menstrual products, provide comprehensive and inclusive sexual health curriculum to all students, and promote menstrual equity in schools.

Case Study: Free the Period in California, a youth-led grassroots coalition that fights to secure access to menstrual products in all California public institutions.



Youth are leading campaigns to advocate for legislation that will achieve menstrual health equity! We talked to Stephanie Wu about her experience advocating for a California law that mandates free products in schools.

Stephanie Wu started her menstrual equity journey in her senior year of high school when she saw first-hand the lack of awareness of menstruation in educational settings and its impact on young menstruators.

The Free the Period campaign drafted Assembly Bill 367, the Menstrual Health Equity Act of 2021, to

secure access to menstrual products in California.²¹ The bill, which was passed on November 18, 2021, requires public schools to provide free and accessible products in women's restrooms, all-gender restrooms, and in at least one men's restroom for grades 6-12. AB 367 also requires California State University and each community college district to stock free and accessible products in at least one designated and accessible central location on each campus.²²

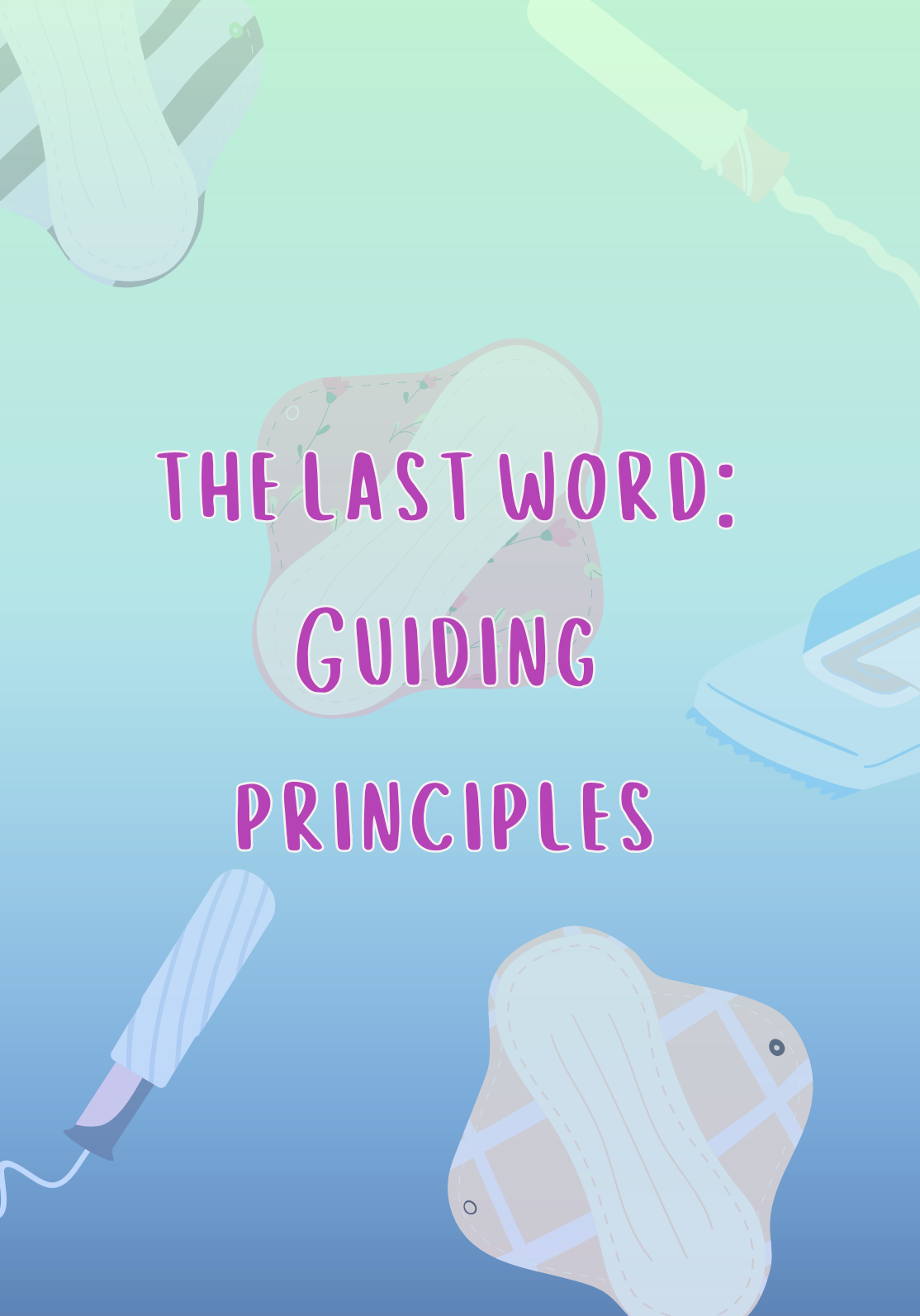
"The bill was difficult to pass, and we had to make a lot of compromises with California government officials," Wu told us. "One concession we had to make, for example, included changing the requirement that products be available in all bathrooms, to only requiring them to be available in one centralized location."

"I followed up with school leaders to ensure that the policy was being implemented in my school. When I went to an administrator of student services at my college to get an update on the implementation of AB 367, I was informed that the requirements of the law were being met because products were being stocked in one centralized location on



campus. Officials should work with students during the implementation process of a policy, to ensure that their needs are being met."

“Ultimately, the law opened the conversation about menstruation. As a result of Free the Period’s advocacy, the norm became that period products were available in at least a central location in school.”



THE LAST WORD:
GUIDING
PRINCIPLES

At our last meeting of the 2022-2023 school year, we drafted guiding principles for educators to better support the menstrual health and hygiene of girls and gender-expansive youth of color.

We, the Youth Advisory Committee, call on educators to...

- Educate yourselves
- Look for grants to fund the provision of menstrual products
- Understand that every girl is different and all girls have different needs
- End stigma around menstruation and build a curriculum about menstrual health awareness
- Remember to be patient, kind, and empathetic! As individuals, we are all having different experiences with menstruation
- Please listen to us and our needs. Keep in mind that everyone has different needs, so you should always



respond with compassion and grace

- Take the menstrual needs of students seriously when they ask for help!

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