Mahi B. is a leading participant in our Project Dignity initiative. She addressed our guests at the Women's Rights breakfast and filled the room with inspiration.

May 29, 2026

Good morning everyone,

I keep thinking about something we heard earlier today, the words "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." We hear them so often that they can start to feel finished, as if they are already fully achieved. However, being here today, listening to the history, the performances, and everything shared this morning, it feels more like those words are still something people are actively trying to make real.

My name is Mahi Bhati, and I'm a junior at Downingtown STEM, and I helped bring together a group of peers to start Project Dignity in my district, a project aiming to provide students with the proper menstrual products in the school bathrooms.

And what's been sticking with me the most is how many times people throughout history were essentially told the same thing in different forms: "not yet," "not you," or just flat-out "no."

No, you can't vote yet.

No, you can't work that job.

No, your voice doesn't belong in that space.

And no, your experience isn't enough to matter.

And what inspired me is that those people kept going anyway. They kept writing, organizing, and speaking even when it would have been easier not to.

I had never really done anything like Project Dignity before. But suddenly, I was sitting in on meetings and then later even speaking directly to adults in my district that were in positions of power, and that felt intimidating in a way I hadn't experienced before. At one point, I remember thinking it was surreal that I was having multiple meetings with my principal and vice principal because usually, that means you're in trouble rather than trying to implement a policy. I kept thinking I was just another student in the room, and at times I wasn't even sure if I should be there in the first place.

A driving factor of this project was the fact that despite many communities being

treated as less than, they still spoke up. So even if I'm viewed as "just another student", my voice will be heard.

I started having conversations with other students. A lot of us didn't even know each other well at first, we came from different friend groups, different classes, but as we talked, it became clear that our experiences were the same. There was this moment where we all kind of realized we were dealing with the same thing in different ways. And that's where Project Dignity started: a group of students who were connected by something we had all experienced.

I want everybody to close their eyes for a moment. Raise your hand if you've ever felt a gap between what people say is equal and what actually feels equal in real life. *cue them opening their eyes up again when you move on*

That's part of why this project started in the first place. Because for a lot of people, inequity doesn't always look dramatic or obvious at first. Sometimes it looks like missing class quietly. Or sitting in a bathroom trying to figure out what to do. Or feeling embarrassed over something completely natural. Our group decided to look into it.

We surveyed more than 200 students across secondary schools, and what we found made it clear our stories were not individual. Over 70% of students reported using substitutes when they didn't have products. Over 54% said they've had to leave school or miss educational time because of it. And 74% shared feelings of embarrassment or anxiety in those moments.

And behind those numbers are students who are trying to get through the school day. One anonymous response from the survey, that really stayed with me, said: "My family has not been able to afford menstrual products for me so many times, I got my period in the fifth grade and my mom will only ever buy the products if she is menstruating as well. Otherwise, I've used toilet paper, paper towels, and used pads for much longer than recommended because I knew there was a scarce amount of them. I've had to rely on school and church to get them but so many times I've been let down by the school in that aspect. It's the same as toilet paper and paper towels and should absolutely be free."

After gathering this, we brought it to a district policy committee meeting and shared both the data and student stories. And what became clear is the focus needed to shift

from having products somewhere in the building (usually in the nurses office) to students being able to actually access them when they need them, privately and consistently.

Right now, that looks different depending on the school. In some buildings, products are in the bathrooms. In others, they're only in the nurse's office. Access changes depending on where a student is, and that inconsistency is exactly the problem.

Because when access depends on location or staffing or individual decisions, it stops being reliable. And when it's not reliable, students are the ones who deal with the consequences in the middle of their school day.

After 3 long months of meetings, surveying, data collection, and a profusion of emails, the school district's policy committee is drafting a menstrual policy to protect the dignity of menstruating students in our district: breaking the stigma and protecting our education.

And I want to pause here for a second and challenge everyone listening to really think about this:

"What does it mean, in practice, for rights and dignity to be something everyone can actually access?"

What I've learned through this process is that change like this doesn't happen because one conversation goes perfectly. It happens because people keep showing up even when it feels repetitive, even when it feels like nothing is moving yet.

And in advocacy work, especially as students, you hear a lot of versions of "no."

- Not now.
- Not sure.
- Not enough.
- Not a priority.

But one thing I've realized is that you don't actually sense which "no" is the last one before a "yes."

So you don't stop.

You keep bringing the data. You keep bringing the stories. You keep showing up. You keep making the issue harder to ignore until it becomes something that has to be addressed.

Because when you look at the history we heard today, change comes from persistence,

from people who kept speaking even when they weren't immediately heard.

And I think that's what connects all of us here today: The willingness to believe that silence doesn't have to be the final answer.

So as we move into what comes next, I hope we don't think of tomorrow as something distant or abstract. I hope we think of it as something we are already building, whether it is in conversations like this, in decisions like this, and in the choice to keep going even when it would be easier not to.

Because somewhere across the world, there is a girl my age who is just like me

She has the same aspirations, the same grit.

Except she wouldn't ever be in a room like this.

She wouldn't be part of these conversations.

She doesn't go to school.

She is not asked what she thinks.

And I don't understand why I get that chance, and she doesn't.

But I do understand what that asks of me.

It means my voice is something I'm responsible for.

And that responsibility shows up most in the moments when it would be easier to stay quiet.

That's something I'm still learning.

But it's also the reason I've started speaking up now.

Because a voice only matters if you choose to use it, for a better tomorrow.

Thank you