

Innovation in schools results in healthier mouths and healthier kids.

By Carla Santorno and Diane Oakes

To learn well, children need to be healthy and free from pain. An innovative effort to provide dental care to students in Pierce County schools has significantly improved students' health, allowing them to focus on what's important – succeeding in school.

Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department launched its school based oral health program to link dental professionals with elementary and middle schools and some high schools. It could be a model for school districts across the state. The focus is on schools with high numbers of students who are eligible for free and reduced-priced meals, as students from lower-income families are often less likely to receive dental care.

The results are impressive – students experienced a nearly 50 percent decrease in untreated tooth decay and a huge increase in the use of sealants that protect teeth from cavities. Among students within the Tacoma School District alone, 1,244 students in 35 schools had 2,757 teeth sealed last year. These students will experience oral health benefits such as decreased cavities now, and in the years to come.

These public health interventions help students stay in school. Poor oral health is the most common chronic disease of childhood and a leading cause of school absenteeism. Pain from tooth decay makes it difficult for children to eat, sleep, learn and function effectively. Poor oral health is also linked to serious diseases such as diabetes.

The good news is that tooth decay is nearly 100 percent preventable, and preventive oral health services such as sealants can save significantly over the cost of treating decay. Delivering preventive oral health services in places where children spend their time, namely schools, is efficient, effective and saves money.

Health Department officials recognize schools are a prime place to reach children for preventive services like sealants because some families have difficulty leaving work to take their kids to a dentist's office. The Health Department's program, with help from school nurses, allows dental providers to deliver care in available classrooms, music rooms, libraries, stages, offices or other spaces at school where dental equipment can be set up temporarily.

Although it started in 2006, the program changed its model in 2010 to place community oral health providers in school buildings. This increased convenience for families led to expanding the program to all 15 Pierce County school districts and 145 of the county's 200 schools. The program follows Department of Health guidelines for dental sealants, while offering flexibility to individual schools for scheduling and delivering dental care.

Students receive dental screenings, sealants to protect molars from decay and oral health instruction. Kids with more serious dental issues are referred to dentists for treatment. The State of Washington allows providers to bill under Apple Health (Medicaid) for school-based preventive services.

The state's recently released Smile Survey reflects the program's success. The number of Pierce County children with untreated decay has decreased from 19 percent to 11 percent, compared to an average across the country of 23 percent of children with untreated decay. And the application of sealants, which the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has found can reduce decay by up to 80 percent, increased from 38 percent to nearly 84 percent in Pierce County children.

Beyond the data are the practical results: healthier kids, less interruption in learning because of dental pain, and more efficient delivery of care and prevention. That saves time and money for families.

The successful collaboration among school districts, participating dental care providers and Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department has led to better oral and overall health for young people in Pierce County. Local school boards, elected officials and other leaders should do what they can to support and expand school-based oral health programs.

When children are healthy, their learning improves. Good oral health for kids must be a priority.

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