

WATCH YOUR MOUTH

Putting Our Money Where Our Mouths Are

As a nurse practitioner in a school-based health center, I know first-hand how essential children's health is to successful learning. This is why we require all children entering school to be screened for vision and hearing problems that may interfere with their learning. There is another health problem that significantly derails our kids' educational progress: dental disease. Nationally, 51 million school hours are lost each year due to dental disease, and dental decay is now the most common, chronic childhood disease – five times more prevalent than asthma. It makes little sense to leave our children unprotected against dental disease, which is caused by bacterial infections in the mouth and is every bit as detrimental to their long-term success as any other form of disease.

We have the solutions, we just need to make them available to all kids. If we screen children for dental disease—and put in place referral systems that link them to good care, we could eradicate this serious impediment to learning. That conviction is why I joined the Watch Your Mouth campaign – to bring a public focus to children's unmet dental needs. Watch Your Mouth was launched by a coalition of health, business and civic groups with the goal of improving oral health care for children throughout Massachusetts. Our goal is to put the mouth back in the body—where it belongs.

One simple way to improve oral health is to offer services in the schools. Because so many of our communities lack practicing dentists, school-based services are particularly important in ensuring our children's health. When kids get services right way, they miss fewer days of school, and when they are in school, they can pay attention in class and keep up with their peers. Today, some schools hold dental screenings and sealant clinics, but there is no formal program or policy in place that would ensure that all children receive this important preventive care.

We can reverse the course of dental disease, but only if school and community leaders join with the medical and dental communities to advance the effective and economical solutions that will improve the health of our kids. The screenings, sealant, and fluoride treatments that school- and community-based clinics can offer are low-cost practices that can prevent up to 90% of dental decay.

Schools are the place where we level the playing field to get all kids off to a good start. We require immunizations as a prerequisite to school attendance and screen for eyesight and hearing problems. We provide school lunches to make sure children's bodies—and minds—are nourished. It's time we recognize the importance of children's oral health to their overall health, and make sure that dental disease is not allowed to derail learning. It's a no-brainer. In honor of Children's Dental Health Month, join me in speaking up for children's oral health.

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