

The Business Case for Improving State Dental Policies:

Smart Investments that Support Kids and a Growing Economy—and Save Money

Dental Policy Changes Are Urgently Needed.

Tooth decay is the most prevalent chronic disease in childhood, roughly five times more common than asthma. Indeed, more than 16 million low-income American children go without seeing a dentist each year.

The Pew Children’s Dental Campaign is partnering with state-based advocates to provide millions of those kids with access to quality dental care. The Campaign also encourages prevention strategies that improve the overall health of children—and save families and taxpayers money that would otherwise be wasted on costly dental treatments.



Poor Dental Health Takes a Toll on Learning, Health Care and the Workplace.

- **Missing School:** Missed school days mean missed opportunities to learn. One study found that California children missed 874,000 schools days in 2007 due to toothaches or other dental problems.
- **Driving Up Health Care Costs:** Unmet dental needs burden our health care system. In a one-year study of seven Minnesota hospitals, patients made over 10,000 trips to the emergency room because of dental health issues, costing more than \$4.7 million.
- **Reducing Worker Productivity:** Working adults are affected in three ways:
 - Adults who received inadequate dental care as kids often miss work time dealing with the consequences. An estimated 164 million hours of work are missed each year because of dental problems.
 - Adults who received inadequate dental care as kids have diminished job prospects. A 2008 study confirmed the hurdles faced by people who are missing front teeth—they are viewed as less intelligent, less trust-worthy and less desirable than people without a gap in their smile.
 - Adults who are parents miss work time taking their children to clinics or hospitals for costly, corrective treatments that, in many cases, could have been avoided with proper preventive care.

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Prevention is Inexpensive and the Benefits Are High.

There are sound, cost-effective ways to improve children's dental health:

- **Increase Availability of Fluoridated Water:** More than one out of four Americans (nearly 28 percent) whose homes are connected to a public water system does not receive fluoridated drinking water. Many of them assume wrongly that their water is fluoridated. Fluoridating water costs just \$1 per person, per year in a medium-sized community, and it saves \$24 per child, per year in Medicaid funds by reducing the need for fillings or more costly treatments.
- **Take Advantage of Dental Sealants:** Sealants are clear plastic coatings that protect teeth. They cost only one-third as much as fillings and can be applied by dental hygienists in schools—a less expensive alternative than dentists in private practices. Yet some states require a dentist's exam or other unnecessary steps before a hygienist can apply sealants. We should remove the barriers to this simple procedure.
- **Expand Use of Fluoride Varnish:** Fluoride varnish is a protective gel that is painted on teeth to help prevent cavities in young children and reduce the progression of cavities that have already started. The use of fluoride varnish yields significant savings by avoiding more expensive treatments later. Pediatricians and other medical providers should be reimbursed by Medicaid for this cost-effective, preventive treatment, but a number of states don't allow this. Changing these Medicaid policies will improve children's health and save money.
- **Improve Access to Dental Care:** The shortage of dentists in many areas of the country has led state policy makers to consider licensing new types of providers to serve children who aren't getting the care they need. In Alaska tribal areas and in Minnesota, dental therapists have been authorized to provide care to more low-income kids. Studies show these new practitioners not only improve access, but they also provide quality care at a lower cost.



With Tight Resources, We Need to Invest in Strategies that Save Us Money.

In this time of tight budgets and shrinking resources, states must invest in cost-effective strategies that support the development of a healthy, well-educated workforce. Pew's four evidence-based policy solutions can significantly reduce the childhood dental problems that impose major, long-term health and economic costs. Help us bring these sound policies to your state.



Learn more about the Pew Children's Dental Campaign
at www.pewcenteronthestates.org/dental