

Improving Children's Oral Health Through School Based Programs: Future Opportunities and Lessons Learned

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Maryland Dental Action Coalition (MDAC)



MDAC's mission is to improve the oral health of all Marylanders through increased prevention, education, advocacy, and access to oral health care.

- State's leading non-governmental oral health policy and advocacy organization
- Diverse partner network of dental and non-dental professionals and organizations
- Collaborates in 3 primary focus areas:
 - Oral health literacy and education
 - **Advocacy and legislation**
 - Interprofessional collaboration
- Develops programs and strategies to improve oral health equity
- Leads the development and monitors the progress of the Maryland Oral Health Plan



2026-2023 Maryland Oral Health Plan

- State's strategic roadmap for improving oral health, advancing health equity and guiding coordinated efforts across Maryland's oral health community.
- Sets goals, strategies and objectives to ensure every Marylander has access to affordable, high-quality oral health care.
- The 2026–2030 MOHP is Maryland's third statewide oral health plan, following the 2011 and 2018 versions.

2026-2023 Maryland Oral Health Plan



Key Achievements Since the 2018

- Comprehensive adult dental coverage under Medicaid
- Expanded dental benefits for postpartum and immigrant populations
- Creation of the Maryland Task Force on Oral Health
- Increased Medicaid reimbursement rates
- Expanded dental hygienist practice settings
- Continued high level of access to fluoridated community water sources
- Strong leadership, committed partnerships and innovative policy initiatives that continue to drive statewide progress in oral health.

Challenges in Oral Health

- Persistent disparities, workforce shortages and declining oral health outcomes among vulnerable populations remain barriers to achieving health equity.
- Rising rates of tooth decay among children and increased oral cancers highlight the need for renewed focus and collaboration.
- Changes in federal policies and practices based on misguided or misinformed interpretation.

The 2026–2030 MOHP outlines strategies in three focus areas:

- Access to Care: Expand equitable access to dental services statewide.
- Prevention: Strengthen evidence-based oral disease and injury prevention programs.
- Health Literacy: Promote understanding of oral health's connection to overall health.

Oral Health Integration

- MDAC participation in partnerships on integration, including:
 - Transforming Oral Health for Families
 - UMDSD/DH Postpartum Advisory Board
 - Community Health Worker Empowerment Coalition
 - Rural Health Transformation Program
 - School-based health care (Collaborative and MASBHC)
 - Baltimore Department of Social Services Make All the Children Healthy (MATCH) Health Advisory Committee

Common Terminology: Laying the Groundwork

There are two main categories of school-based services:

- School-health programs
 - Required by Maryland law
 - In every public school in Maryland
 - Always includes a school nurse for services such as medication administration.
 - Other services are an option – such as dental hygiene prevention services, behavioral health services.
- School-Based Health Centers
 - Are a community health center in a school.
 - Not required by law.
 - Found primarily in schools in underserved areas and with high rates of uninsured families.
 - There are 91 school-based health centers in Maryland.
 - Always includes primary care delivered by a nurse practitioner, PA, or physician.
 - Other services are an option – such as dental and behavioral health services

Concerning Data: It's Time to Recommit to Children's Oral Health

- Declining key children's oral health indicators in the state, after years of progress.
- More Maryland school-aged children have dental decay and urgent dental needs.
 - 21% of students had untreated tooth decay in a 2022/2023, up from 14% in the previous survey in 2015/2016. Alarming, 30% of students in the recent survey required early follow-up or urgent care due to pain or infection. (Source: [Oral Health Survey of Maryland School Children](#))
- Fewer Maryland children enrolled in Medicaid are receiving preventive dental care than a decade before.
 - The number of children accessing preventative services under Medicaid has dropped from 64% during the 2016-2019 period to 60% in 2024. (Source: Maryland Department of Health's [Annual Oral Health Legislative Reports](#))

Maryland's Next Step: Public Health Collaborative to Lead Innovation

- Delegate Bagnall and Senator Lam spearheaded legislation in 2025, along with the MDAC, to establish the *Maryland Collaborative to Improve Children's Oral Health through School-Based Programs*.
- The Collaborative, housed under the Maryland Department of Health, is focusing on recommendations to:
 - **Meet Families Where They Are:** By focusing on school-based settings, Maryland will bring oral health services, particularly preventative services, directly to students.
 - **Draw Down More Federal Funds into Schools through Medicaid:** The Collaborative will examine how to increase resources for oral health in school by drawing down more federal funds through Medicaid billing.
 - **Support Dental Hygienists and School Nurses in Working at the Top of their Licenses:** Dental hygienists and school nurses are underutilized in providing preventative dental services in schools. The Collaborative will examine how to remove unnecessary barriers to practice.



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