

## New Study Shows Schools' Impact on Children's Dental Health Influence Increases as Family Income Decreases

BY DR. D. SCOTT NAVARRO, DDS

It has been almost ten years since the Surgeon General's landmark Oral Health study alerted the nation to the need for improved dental and oral health in America's children. Among its findings: "More than 51 million school hours are lost each year to dental-related illness — and poor children suffer nearly 12 times more restricted-activity days than children from higher-income families" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services).

Now another national study (DDPA 2009) reminds us how important school programs are to the oral health of children, particularly those in low-income families and districts. The new study shows:

- Parents exhibit the greatest influence on their child's oral health habits. However, significantly fewer low-income respondents say parents are the greatest influence; one in ten say school has the greatest influence.
- Children from low-income families are twice as likely to miss school due to oral health problems.
- "Excellent" ratings for oral health decrease as income decreases.
- Only about one in ten of those who do not have insurance report that their child has received free dental care in the past year.
- Medium- and low-income Americans most often report that their child had four or more cavities.
- Lower-income Americans and those who are less educated report less often that they have fluoride in their tapwater at home.

The study was conducted by Morpace, Inc., an independent market research company,

for the not-for-profit Delta Dental Plans Association (DDPA), based in Oak Brook, Ill. It involved interviews with 914 primary care givers over a 3-week period in mid-2009. DDPA is the leading national network of 39 independent dental service corporations, specializing in providing dental benefits programs to 54 million Americans in more than 89,000 employee groups throughout the country.

More than 51 million school hours are lost each year to dental-related illness...

Commissioned to provide a better understanding of current perceptions and home practices regarding children's oral health, the study shows that Americans generally understand the need for good dental care: Nearly nine in ten Americans (87%) agree that good medical care and dental care are equally important. The study also provides evidence that schools and school nurses are extremely important to the dental health of children. One recurring theme runs through the results of the national study: school programs, whether administered by school nurses or others, have the opportunity to effect a positive change in children's oral health.

### How Schools Are Taking the Lead

Because of the effect of poor dental health on school attendance and a child's ability to learn, some schools are taking increasing roles in attending to their students' oral health needs. This includes providing infor-

mation and hands-on training, and creating more direct experiences with dental care providers either on site through classroom and assembly lectures or through field trips to local dentists. Some districts even have a full-service dental clinic for supporting the oral healthcare needs of their students.

In the Paterson, NJ School District, to give one example, dental health is a priority. Based in one of America's oldest industrial urban centers, the Paterson district provides public education to New Jersey's third-largest city. The proactive dental programs there include a dental clinic for students, a dental health careers track for high school students, and pilot elementary school programs for instilling positive preventive care habits at an early age.



The Paterson program includes a four-chair dental clinic that provides examinations, x-rays, cleaning, fluoride treatments, sealants, fillings and extraction of primary teeth. Its dental assistant classroom trains high school juniors and seniors interested in a future dental health career and, at lower grade levels, Paterson provides a weekly school-based fluoride rinse program and a dental health education program in some of its schools. The district is also running pilot programs for bringing oral health education

CONTINUED ON PAGE 12