In District of Columbia, Back to School Includes Oral Health

In a 2012 study of oral health and school performance, children who had tooth pain were four times more likely to have a low grade-point average compared to children who did not have dental pain. Across the U.S., school districts are weaving oral health into student wellness. The District of Columbia is collecting information that will help children today and also contribute to a better understanding of the prevalence of dental caries in children and the impact of preventive services.

If you are a parent, you know the drill - before your child starts school, you need to complete a packet of forms - contact information, food and other allergies, health records.

This year the District of Columbia is recommending that parents submit an oral health certificate for every student. There are good reasons for having this information - making sure children get the care they need, making sure children are connected with a dental home for ongoing care, and developing a comprehensive view of the oral health of the District of Columbia's youngest residents.

The form is required for every student at the start of the 2014-2015 school year. School nurses will verify that the form has been received and upload the date of examination into the HealthOffice Database. With over 83,000 students across the District in grades PK3-12, the goal is the availability of this information will enable longitudinal studies of the caries experience of children as well as the impact of preventive services. Of particular interest is whether dentists and primary care providers are applying fluoride varnish and what having that
A year ago, the District's pediatric oral health coalition won approval for dentists to be reimbursed for applying fluoride varnish treatments to the teeth of children covered by Medicaid. Following that, primary care providers were approved for reimbursement for fluoride varnish treatments starting in 2014 for patients under the age of three. Training for these providers (application of the varnish and how to be reimbursed) began in late 2013.

This is a significant win for oral health advocates. It took over two years of advocacy on the part of District of Columbia’s oral health coalition to get approval for reimbursement of fluoride varnish treatments as well as the revised oral health assessment form and submission requirements. The revised form was tested with focus groups of parents, dentists and school nurses to be sure it collected enough information without becoming a burden at the start of school. The final form was reviewed and approved by the District's Department of Health. Partnership with school nurses was key as they are responsible for entering student information into the HealthOffice Database.

What's next for the coalition? Oral health literacy. The coalition just received funding for a literacy campaign that will engage primary care providers to teach parents what they need to know about oral health and how to be advocates for their children.

Learn more about Oral Health 2020