

May 5th, 2025

Dear Members of the Health and Human Services Committee:

My name is Dr. Kristen Hoglund, and I am writing testimony in support of LD1746— An Act to Reduce Dental Disease and Ensure Access to Essential Preventive Dental Care Among Maine Children.

The Maine CDC School Oral Health Program provided 13,200 oral health screenings to students in over 229 Maine schools in the 2023-24 school year; 30% of the children screened had visible tooth decay. The number is likely higher because it doesn't take into account decay between teeth that may only be visible with imaging. As a dentist practicing in School-Based Health Centers, I bear witness to the positive impact these dental programs have on Maine youth and would like to explain how this model improves health outcomes and dental access for our children.

Our federally qualified health center, Greater Portland Health, serves 34 schools throughout Cumberland County. Our dental hygienists, with mobile equipment in tow, commute to each of these schools to provide students with screenings and cleanings onsite so that parents do not need to miss work or other commitments in order for their children to get high-quality dental services. Our hygienists can determine which children have urgent or chronic needs and then work with school staff and parents to coordinate exams and treatment with our dentists. We are often able to see children within a week if they have emergency needs or within a couple of months for non-urgent needs. This is particularly helpful for families who have struggled to find dental homes for their children since being seen by a hygienist at their school connects them directly to one of our dentists. Close partnerships with school nurses allow our hygienists to coordinate getting parental permission to address care needs for specific students' challenges as well; oftentimes, we hear of individual students' dental problems from school nurses because a child's pain or discomfort is affecting their ability to learn, play or eat.

Children are generally resilient and tough, but many of our youth are suffering greatly with chronic dental pain and don't realize that it doesn't have to be this way. Only once their dental disease is managed do they realize what it means to have the quality of life that comes with a healthy mouth void of chronic pain. I will not forget the many times I have had kids come to me sad and suffering because they have not slept and cannot eat. Our team can provide treatment and be rewarded with smiling, vibrant and healthy kids at future visits. I cannot tell you how many children have cried while thanking and hugging me after I have removed teeth because they are so relieved that the suffering is over. It is heartbreaking but fulfilling to be able to reach children who may never have found dental treatment if not for our hygienists being active in schools.

Since the school year began, our school-based hygienists have been able to help coordinate exams with our dentists for hundreds of children who didn't have dental homes and have seen many more for routine or initial care. I cannot tell you how many times parents were unaware they had options since many offices in Maine do not provide care to MaineCare patients. Providing the opportunity for all schools to partner with dental professionals to facilitate access and help address needs appropriately is an incredibly effective first step in addressing the dental needs of Maine children. Since it is difficult to incentivize private dental practices to participate in caring for those insured with Medicaid, I would argue that the expansion of school-based programs and of existing clinics whose missions already support this population is the best way to meet this need.

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