



Testimony of Melissa Hackett,  
Policy and Communications Associate, Maine Children's Alliance  
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services  
*LD 1501, An Act To Protect Oral Health for Children in Maine*  
April 26, 2021

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Melissa Hackett and I am offering testimony in support of LD 1501 on behalf of the Maine Children's Alliance, a state-wide nonpartisan, non-profit research and advocacy organization whose mission is to advocate for sound policies and promote best practices to improve the lives of Maine's children, youth and families.

Diseases such as tooth decay and cavities, when left untreated in children, can lead to constant pain and discomfort, malnourishment, and loss of teeth; in adulthood, an increased risk of cardiac disease and diabetes.<sup>1</sup> Poor oral health impedes school readiness and attendance for children,<sup>2</sup> and later in life can negatively impact employment opportunities and financial stability.<sup>3</sup> Poor oral health is a significant, preventable barrier to children in Maine growing up healthy and achieving their full potential.

Despite the impact poor oral health can have for children, Maine's ability to address and provide better oral health care services has been weakened in recent years by reduced funding for public health and loss of staff positions in DHHS. While approximately 175 of Maine's 600+ schools are currently participating in Maine CDC's School Oral Health Program, new schools have not been added to the program recently due to reduced funding. Clearly, we can do more to ensure more children across the state have this same access to dental care that is currently only being provided in a small portion of our schools.

Oral health services provided through schools have a great track record for providing low-barrier dental care to children, by bringing the service to the child.<sup>4</sup> LD 1501 would fund a modest expansion in Maine's school-based oral health improvement efforts, so that core oral health prevention and early intervention services are available for all participating schools statewide. This will ensure that children have better access to dental care regardless of their zip code or family income.

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<sup>1</sup> Harvard Health, Gum Disease and the Connection to Heart Disease, <https://www.health.harvard.edu/diseases-and-conditions/gum-disease-and-the-connection-to-heart-disease>

<sup>2</sup> Journal of Pediatrics, Children's Oral Health and Academic Performance: Evidence of a Persisting Relationship Over the Last Decade in the United States, [https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0022347619301350#:~:text=Specifically%2C%20children%20with%20poor%2Ffair,1.42%2D2.62\)%2C%20respectively](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0022347619301350#:~:text=Specifically%2C%20children%20with%20poor%2Ffair,1.42%2D2.62)%2C%20respectively)

<sup>3</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Disparities in Oral Health, [https://www.cdc.gov/oralhealth/oral\\_health\\_disparities/index.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/oralhealth/oral_health_disparities/index.htm)

<sup>4</sup> CDC Healthy Schools, <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/npao/oralhealth.htm>

It is critical for both short- and long-term success for Maine's children, that we give them a good chance for overall health early on. Parents have an important role to play in helping their children achieve good dental hygiene. But we must acknowledge and respond to the realities of systems around them – work schedules, financial ability, access to a reliable vehicle, etc. - that make it harder for families to help their children receive dental care services. Access to affordable oral health services readily available where families can find them, including in all schools, is one way to make it easier for children to receive critical dental care. This is a small, yet vital investment that will make our children, families, and communities stronger and healthier.

Thank you.