

School-Based Health Centers: Oral Health

Executive Summary

Oral health is a vital component of overall health and academic success, yet it remains one of the most common unmet healthcare needs among children and adolescents, especially in underserved communities. School-Based Health Centers (SBHCs) that incorporate dental services significantly improve access to preventive and restorative oral healthcare. These services reduce school absences due to dental issues, decrease emergency dental visits, and promote long-term oral hygiene habits. Research confirms that SBHCs with integrated dental care demonstrate improved oral health outcomes and reduced disparities among youth.

Key Findings

- **Increased Access to Preventive Dental Care:** SBHCs with dental services dramatically increase students' access to cleanings, sealants, fluoride treatments, and other preventive services, which are critical for preventing cavities and gum disease (Simmer-Beck et al., 2011).
- **Reduction in Emergency Dental Visits:** Studies show that students attending schools with dental SBHCs are less likely to visit emergency departments for preventable dental issues, which saves families and the healthcare system considerable costs (Pourat & Finocchio, 2010).
- **Improved Academic Performance and Attendance:** Oral health problems can cause significant pain and missed school days. SBHC dental services reduce dental-related absenteeism, allowing students to focus better and remain in class (Jackson et al., 2011).
- **Addressing Health Disparities:** Children from low-income families and communities of color are disproportionately affected by poor oral health. SBHCs help close the gap by providing equitable access to dental services where children already are (Gooch et al., 2009).
- **Promotion of Lifelong Healthy Habits:** SBHCs often incorporate oral health education, improving students' knowledge and fostering behaviors like daily brushing, flossing, and regular dental visits (Mouradian et al., 2003).

Context

Why It Matters

Tooth decay is the most common chronic disease of childhood in the United States, yet it is highly preventable. Poor oral health can lead to pain, infection, poor nutrition, low self-esteem, and academic disruption. Children living in poverty are twice as likely to suffer from dental

complications and less likely to receive treatment. By embedding dental services in schools, SBHCs reach children who would otherwise go without care.

Implications

SBHCs with integrated oral health services represent a cost-effective and impactful strategy for improving youth health. These centers not only address urgent dental needs but also provide continuity of care and education, which leads to healthier outcomes and better school participation. Expanding dental services through SBHCs is essential for reducing systemic inequities in oral health access and outcomes.

Next Steps

- **Expand Comprehensive Dental Services:** Fund and support the integration of full-time dental clinics or mobile dental units within existing SBHCs, particularly in high-need areas.
- **Enhance Oral Health Education:** Incorporate structured oral health education into school curricula and SBHC outreach to encourage lifelong hygiene practices.
- **Monitor Oral Health Outcomes:** Develop standardized tracking systems to evaluate the long-term impact of SBHC dental programs on oral health, school attendance, and healthcare costs.

Key References

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