

The Honorable Joanne Comerford, Chair
The Honorable John Mahoney, Chair
Joint Committee on Public Health
State House Room 130
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Chairwoman Comerford and Chairman Mahoney:

The Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS) represents approximately 80% of dentists in the Commonwealth through initiatives in education, advocacy, and promotion of the highest professional standards. As the leading authority on oral health care in the Commonwealth, we take great pride in championing oral health and lending the voice of dentistry to worthy initiatives that can make a difference in the lives of Bay State residents.

The MDS encourages the Committee to support and report out favorably House Bill 1891, *An Act Relative to Pupil Dental Health*.

Students receive physical examinations, required vaccinations, and vision and hearing tests. Children should also have a dental screening or exam before entering the classroom to ensure a lifetime of good oral health. Dental caries (tooth decay) is the most common chronic disease in children—it is about five times as common as asthma and seven times as common as hay fever.¹ Children with poor oral health are nearly three times more likely to miss school due to dental pain and more likely to have lower school performance. In the U.S., more than 34 million school hours are lost each year due to dental problems.²

According to the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry's *The State of Little Teeth* report, early childhood caries not only exacts a toll on children, but it can also affect the financial well-being of families, communities, and public insurance programs. Because untreated dental disease increases in severity over time, it often necessitates more extensive and costly treatment delivered in ambulatory or hospital settings. Treatment of severe early childhood caries can cost \$10,000 per child and can go up to \$25,000 in severe cases, especially if the child needs to be hospitalized and treated under general anesthesia.³ Preventive dental visits before the age of five significantly reduce non-preventive dental visits and expenses associated with non-preventive services.⁴

If passed, *An Act Relative to Pupil Dental Health* would require every child in Massachusetts to receive a dental screening up to 12 months before entering kindergarten or within 30 days of the start of the school year. A dental screening is generally a quick, non-invasive check of the mouth to determine if the patient may need further treatment. This screening would allow parents and guardians to determine the status of their child's oral health and encourage them to pursue follow-up care. Parents would have the option of signing a waiver to opt out of the exam for reasons including lack of access to a dentist or financial constraints.

¹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2821841/>

² Naavaal, S. and Kelekar, U. School Hours Lost Due to Acute/ Unplanned Dental Care. *Health Behav Policy Rev* 2018;5(2):66-73.

<https://www.ingentaconnect.com/contentone/psp/hbpr/2018/00000005/00000002/art00007?crawler=true&mimetype=application/pdf>

³ <http://mouthmonsters.mychildrensteeth.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/StateofLittleTeeth.2ndEdition.pdf?dt=636928360326879452>

⁴ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4167088/>

School districts would receive a standardized form for each student signed by their dental provider stating that he/she received a dental screening. Furthermore, this legislation would enable the use of information collected from the screening and waiver forms to create a statewide database designed to monitor and evaluate oral health trends of school-age children in Massachusetts. The database could highlight areas of the state where access to a provider is a challenge and help measure the impact of public health initiatives, such as community water fluoridation.

The MDS urges the Committee to take favorable action on this legislation and help families and schools understand that oral health is a critical component of overall health by ensuring that every student has received a dental exam prior to enrolling in kindergarten.

Sincerely,

Dr. Howard M. Zolot
President
Massachusetts Dental Society