

Children's Health Alliance of Wisconsin's Seal-A-Smile program brings oral health care to schools

Tooth decay is one of the most common chronic diseases experienced by kids. In Wisconsin, 3 in 5 students in third grade have had a cavity. Tooth pain and cavities cause discomfort, making eating and focusing in class hard, impacting a child's nutrition and education. Good oral health is key to a child's overall care.

Children's Health Alliance of Wisconsin, part of Children's Wisconsin, implements the Wisconsin Seal-A-Smile (SAS) program in collaboration with the Wisconsin Department of Health Services and Delta Dental of Wisconsin. Wisconsin SAS provides school-based, preventive oral health care at no cost to families in more than 1,000 schools statewide. While government funding supports much of the clinical services, Children's Wisconsin invests funds to keep this work going.

Wisconsin SAS is a nationally recognized, gold-standard program bringing high quality, preventive dental care to students with a completed parent or guardian consent form. Wisconsin SAS supports children in getting oral health care while reducing common barriers to care like time off school, parent or guardian time off work and issues with transportation.

Wisconsin SAS provides funding to local programs to implement school-based oral health services. A licensed dental professional comes to each school with mobile dental tools. They examine the child's mouth and teeth, and provide education on brushing, flossing and healthy eating. If needed, children will get fluoride varnish and sealants applied. Fluoride is a paint-on coating to prevent cavities and strengthen teeth. Dental sealants are thin, plastic coatings placed on the back teeth to help fill deep grooves that are hard to brush. Dental sealants can prevent 8 out of 10 cavities in back teeth where most cavities happen.

During the 2024-25 school year, in Brown County, 25.2% of children served by Wisconsin SAS received a sealant and 99.5% of children received fluoride treatment. In Winnebago County, 34.5% of children served by Wisconsin SAS received a sealant and 99.7% of children received fluoride treatment.

One of the Wisconsin SAS partners is the Brown County Oral Health Partnership, which promotes school-based services to help children receive preventive dental care they would not have received otherwise. One of the children served was a preschooler who had never been to a dentist before. The child has limited speech abilities, yet they were indicating pain in their lower teeth. Several teeth had deep decay with the innermost core of the tooth, blood vessels and nerves exposed. There were limited tooth structures with only roots remaining in some cases. As part of Wisconsin SAS services, their teeth were cleaned, fluoride was applied, and a dentist was consulted to evaluate their further care needs. Through the Brown County Oral Health Partnership, the child was later scheduled for hospital care where more than 10 teeth were extracted and several crowns were placed under general sedation. The child was seen again by Wisconsin SAS staff and is without pain, attending school regularly and has a second chance at a healthy smile.

Wisconsin SAS helps improve the oral health of Wisconsin students.