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PUBLIC HEALTH

## Mass. gets a 'C' for children's oral health

Posted by Elizabeth Cooney February 23, 2010 04:53 PM

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Massachusetts earned a "C" for the oral health of its children from a national [report](#) released today on state dental policies intended to reach low-income children.

The Pew Center on the States said 1 in 5 children in the United States go without dental care every year, despite relatively low-cost solutions that could avoid much more costly care later in life. Massachusetts was one of 36 states performing poorly when measured against eight policies for improving oral health.

The state scored below national benchmarks on fluoridated water, sealant programs (in high-risk schools or delivered by hygienists without dentists' prior exam), and authorizing new primary care providers, such as medical personnel, hygienists, and other providers to give care when dentists are unavailable.

Massachusetts met or exceeded the report's standards for the proportion of Medicaid-eligible children getting dental care (45 percent compared with 38 percent), the share of dentists' fees being reimbursed by Medicaid (72 percent versus 61 percent), paying medical providers for preventive dental care, and keeping data on children's oral health.

While praising the Pew effort, the head of the Massachusetts Dental Society said it's only a start. "The bar we set is much higher than the few benchmarks they set here," Dr. David Samuels, a periodontist in Andover, said in an interview.

The dentists' group recommends mandating oral exams for every child entering third grade, just as physical exams are required before entering elementary school. The society is also pushing to get 65 percent of dentists to accept MassHealth, the state's version of Medicaid, which is unpopular because of its low reimbursement rates and high administrative burdens. The group urges schools to remove vending machines that sell sugary or fatty foods as a way to improve children's overall health. To improve access to dental care, the society backs a loan forgiveness program for new dental school graduates that would encourage them to practice in community health centers or other settings where the need is greatest.

"There's really no pride in mediocrity," Samuels said about the state's C. "There's no reason why every child can't be protected against [tooth] decay. Between sealants and fluoridation and a better diet in schools and early exams, we can eliminate what has become a huge public health problem."

The Pew report was funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and

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### Contributors

#### blogger



**Elizabeth Cooney** is a former health reporter for the Worcester Telegram & Gazette, where she also was a business

the DentaQuest Foundation, which is the philanthropic arm of the Boston-based dental benefits provider DentaQuest.

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reporter and an editor. Earlier in her career, she edited medical books and journals at Little, Brown, and worked for Boston magazine.

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