

By Ayana Jones  
Tribune Staff Writer

## Initiative to Fill Dental Coverage Gap

A new program geared towards providing underserved children with comprehensive dental care is being rolled out to over 100 Philadelphia public schools. The Oral Health Impact Project has partnered with the School District of Philadelphia to provide services such as preventative cleanings, X-rays, fillings, and sealants to elementary, middle and high school students.

The program comes to the district at a time when a large proportion of children in Pennsylvania lack adequate access to dental care. A recent report by the Philadelphia Health Management Corporation estimated that about 89,000 children in southeastern Pennsylvania were not examined or treated by a dentist. There is an estimated one million children on Medicaid in Pennsylvania, yet, only 18 percent of the dentists in the state accept Medicaid. “We have a huge disparity in the number of children who need the service, versus the number of places for them to get the care,” said OHIP Founder Dr. Lawrence Caplin. “The parents of these same populations are not educated towards oral health care and as a result, they are not looking to take their children to the dentist,” he added. “The problem itself is availability to access to care problem, as well as an availability of service problem and it’s all being driven by economics.”

According to the 2000 report “Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General,” uninsured children are 2.5 times less likely to receive dental insurance are three times as likely to have dental needs as compared to their insured peers. Caplin notes that a lack of finances, education and transportation has led to dental crisis resulting in 51 million hours of lost hours per year in the United States. Caplin believes OHIP will be instrumental in addressing all facets of this critical problem—the lack of access to care and the lack of oral health education. “The idea is get the education into place and get the care to the children and make a generational change of what the perceptions are for general oral care for these families across the board,” Caplin said. OHIP’s team of dental health providers will set up portable equipment at participating schools and provide the treatment onsite.

The initiative is designed to ensure that all participating children will receive care regardless of their dental coverage. Caplin said they are willing to work out payment plans for parents whose children are not on any type of Medicaid or Children’s Health Insurance Program. Parents must sign and return consent forms to ensure that their children will receive treatment through OHIP. Caplin plans to take it a step further than just providing dental care. Through OHIP, he wants to work with the school district to provide internships and externships to encourage the youth to pursue dental careers such as dentists dental hygienists and laboratory technicians. “We’re excited to partner with OHIP to provide comprehensive quality dental care in our district schools, as they have done in other districts across the country. Offering in school dental services will have a major impact on our student’s greatest health issues,” said Brenda Taylor, School District’s associate superintendent of specialized service in a release. “Because dental visits can be scary for kids, getting care in a familiar place eases that anxiety,” she said. “Students also miss less class time when their treatments are being coordinated through their school.”

By working with over 150 schools OHIP will be considered the largest provider of dental care in the school district. OHIP joins providers such as St. Christopher’s Hospital for Children, University of Pennsylvania School of Dental Medicine and KidSmiles in serving area students. For information about the program, call 1(866) 916-6447.