

New law is first step in advocating for children's dental exams

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By George Basler

A child can't learn when he, or she, has a toothache.

That's the belief of Amy Paulin, a Democratic state Assemblywoman from Westchester County, who has turned this belief into action.

The legislator successfully pushed passage of a new state law requiring school districts in the Southern Tier and across New York state to ask parents or guardians to have their children receive a dental examination before entering school.

Under the law, effective for the 2008-09 school year, families will be asked to voluntarily present a dental health certificate when a child enters pre-kindergarten, kindergarten or first grade in public school. The certificate must contain a report of a comprehensive dental examination performed on a child.

Voluntary dental certificates would also be requested at the same intervals as mandatory health certificates -- twice in elementary school, and twice in the secondary grades, officials said.

"We understand children can't learn if they are not feeling well," Paulin said. "We want children in school to be healthy, and the same is true of dental health."

A dental examination assesses tooth decay, untreated dental disease, good oral health and other conditions, all of which can affect a child's performance in school, said Lucy Bianco, program manager for Lourdes Hospital's Dental Services, who supports the intent of New York's new law.

The new law will require school districts to send dental health forms to parents or guardians at the same time as they send medical health forms, Paulin said.

However, the new law will only require schools to request parents take their children for a dental check-up, Paulin said. There is no requirement that families do so. School districts also face no requirement that they follow up with families that do not turn in dental health certificates, she said.

Paulin said she would have liked dental check-ups to be a requirement but had to compromise in the legislative process. Still, she hopes the new law will raise awareness about the issue of dental health and encourage examinations.

The new law is a good first step, said Roy Lasky, executive director of the New York State Dental Association, which strongly backed the legislation. "The most prevalent diseases among children are dental diseases, and in some cases they are detrimental to learning," he said.

However, going for dental checks can be a financial hardships for some families that fail to meet income requirements to qualify for Medicaid, Lasky acknowledged.

One requirement of the new law is that the state Health Department develop a list of free or reduced-price dental services to which parents can be referred, he said. And the association is going to encourage its members statewide to make the check-ups as accessible as possible by volunteering their time, or reducing their fees, Lasky added.

School districts are still waiting for more information and guidance on the new law, said Joyce DeRitis, a consultant in health services for the Binghamton City School District. Binghamton is going to have to develop a letter to send to parents, she said.

Paulin does not foresee much additional work for school districts. "The school district basically just has to send out a mailing," she said. Medicaid or the Child Health Plus programs could cover check-ups for low-income children, she added.

Children entering public school in New York must be vaccinated for a range of diseases, and school districts are required to follow up if parents don't return medical forms.



