

**By Josh Ball, Kyle Howard and Thomas Farley
Harlan Independent High School, Harlan KY**

Good dental health needs be a priority for our state policymakers. In Kentucky we have the highest rate of toothlessness in the nation and Kentucky's youngest children have rates of cavities that are too high.

Kentucky's problem is related to a lack of dental education, as well as poor access to dental care. There are many in our state who still view good dental health as an option that is not available to them. Good dental health is important to overall health. As the U.S. Surgeon General has stated, "you can't be healthy without good dental health."

A smile is a vital part of a person's appearance and self esteem, but can easily be destroyed when your mouth has dental disease. In Kentucky, children's poor dental health can lead to school absences, and could have long-term impacts on affected children's self confidence. Youth who fall behind academically due to missed classes or whose insecurities impede them from pursuing higher education or professional careers are less likely to become self-sufficient adults. The reality is that individuals with severe tooth loss are at a serious disadvantage to secure gainful employment and support themselves and their families. Consequently, good dental health is vital to the economic development of our state.

How can we improve the dental health of our citizens? The most important place to start is with our children. By improving the dental health of our children, we can have a positive impact on current and future generations.

As currently introduced in the Kentucky Legislature SB 122 and HB 186 both require a dental health check up prior to entering school. This legislation will give each child in Kentucky an assessment of their dental health and recommendations on how to improve their dental health now and in the future. Accessing dental care encourages each child to have a “dental home” where they can seek dental education and care. This opportunity will lead to a better and brighter future for all Kentuckians.

Unfortunately, for many Kentuckians, accessing dental care is easier said than done. In fact, as of 2004, only fifty to sixty pediatric dentists were reported to work in the entire state. That is one dentist for every 16,580 children in Kentucky! This reality, in addition to a lack of public awareness about dental care, resulted in a mere 38 percent of Medicaid-eligible youth to receive dental services in 2005. We know the negative repercussions of poor dental health, yet too many low-income children continue to face these barriers everyday.

In addition to requiring all school children receive a dental health check up, we must also pass legislation to help more dentists see low-income patients. Of the previously mentioned fifty to sixty pediatric dentists, currently only half regularly bill for Medicaid services. One solution is to implement a loan forgiveness program for dental providers serving Kentucky’s underserved communities. After all, in order for more Kentucky children to visit the dentist, there has to be a dentist available for them to see.

If Kentucky is serious about improving the dental health of its citizens, then now is the time to ensure that all of our kids are receiving good dental care.

Please ask your legislator to support these important bills that will give Kentucky's kids something to smile about.