

Something to Smile About: The Family Health Centers Expands Its Dental School Health Program



"Our dental staff go to the classroom, pick up the children, and escort them down the hall to our site, which looks just like they're walking into a dentist's office. They have a visit, then they're brought back to class," says Lynn Gargano, DDS, clinical director of the Dental School Health Program with the Family Health Centers (FHC) at NYU Langone. "And it happens regardless of their family's ability to pay or health insurance status."

The program, which offers students high-quality, comprehensive dental care regardless of their ability to pay, has grown from 48 schools to 61 schools in just two years.

For nearly 15 years, the [Family Health Centers \(FHC\) at NYU Langone](#) has offered underserved elementary and middle school students in all five boroughs high-

quality primary and preventive dental care in the halls of their own public schools—including exams, x-rays, cleanings, fluoride treatment, oral hygiene instructions, nutritional counseling, fillings, dental sealants, crowns, extractions, and emergency dental care—regardless of their ability to pay.

This year, more families than ever will be taking advantage of the option. The school-based [Dental Health Program](#) has grown more than 20 percent in just the past year, from 24,000 visits in the 2022-2023 academic year to more than 28,000 in the 2023-2024 school year. Since 2022, the FHC program has increased the number of schools it serves, growing from 48 schools to 61 schools.

Expanding comprehensive dental services fills an important need in these communities, where parents often face multiple barriers to accessing dental care. Many can't easily afford to take time off to bring a child to the dentist, for instance, or may not know how to find qualified dentists.

"With our services, dental care is right there in the school," says [Lynn Gargano, DDS](#), clinical director of the Dental School Health Program. "Our dental staff go to the classroom, pick up the children, and escort them down the hall to our site, which looks just like they're walking into a dentist's office. They have a visit, then they're brought back to class. And it happens regardless of their family's ability to pay or health insurance status. The parents only need to give consent."

While seeing students, Dr. Gargano and her team of 14 dentists and three hygienists take the time to provide oral health education. "The decay rate in New York City public schools is higher than most areas, about 30 percent," says Dr. Gargano. "By enrolling children at a young age in our program, we help educate them on healthy eating, taking care of their teeth, brushing, flossing, and making other healthy choices." In addition, FHC dentists and hygienists place sealants on the permanent molars of more than 80 percent of the students, which is more than twice the national average. "Sealants are an important measure, especially for children, as most cavities are preventable and appear in the permanent molars," she says.

The program will continue to grow from here, as the FHC works with the New York City Department of Education to find schools in underserved communities, leveraging data such as average neighborhood income. FHC staffers expect to pass 30,000 visits in the 2024-2025 academic year. They'll also expand services, which will serve the needs of hundreds of new children.

The school-based Dental Health Program is one aspect of the FHC's Dental Medicine

program, which also provides [dental services for underserved teenagers and adults](#) at seven outpatient dental clinics in Brooklyn. Complex cases that require surgery or anesthesia are treated at NYU Langone Hospital—Brooklyn.

"We have been so proud to see our school-based Dental Health Program grow," says [Larry McReynolds](#), executive director of the FHC. "It's just one successful area of our School Health Program, a wide-ranging resource for families in low-income communities, providing health education, referrals, and access."

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