



The Pathway Effect: A Guide to Strengthening the Oral Health Workforce Through Early Exposure Programs

The case for a stronger oral health workforce

Oral health is integral to overall health and wellness. Yet for millions of Americans, routine preventive dental care is out of reach.



Workforce shortages have left entire regions, including many rural and low-income areas in particular, without adequate access to preventive oral health services.¹ Today, more than 24 million Americans live in federally designated Dental Health Professional Shortage Areas, and nearly 1.7 million lack a dental clinic within 30 minutes.² As baby-boomer dentists retire through the late 2020s, these shortages are expected to intensify. By 2037, the U.S. may face deficits of nearly 12,000 general dentists and 30,000 hygienists.³

Beyond a topline shortage of oral health care workers, the workforce does not reflect the cultural differences of the nation or the specific communities where dentists practice. Only 3.8% of dentists are Black and 6.0% are Hispanic, leaving many communities without providers who share or understand their lived experience.⁴

The implications extend far beyond the dental chair. Poor oral health contributes to chronic disease, drives roughly 92 million missed school and work hours each year due to unplanned care,⁵ and costs the U.S. an estimated \$45 billion annually in lost productivity.⁶ The evidence is clear: Patients and communities are better off when there is reliable access to preventive dental care.

Growing and strengthening the oral health workforce is a priority, and one that no single organization or program can solve alone. Progress requires the entire oral health field, including funders, educators, practitioners, and community leaders, to work together to build stronger, more inclusive pathways to the profession.

Early insights from the Delta Dental Future Workforce Fund

Recognizing the urgency of these challenges and the importance of an industry-wide approach, in 2023, Delta Dental launched the Future Workforce Fund,⁷ an initiative to invest in the next generation of oral health professionals. The Fund invests up to \$1 million annually in programs that inspire school-aged children from a variety of experiences and backgrounds to pursue a career in oral health. Since its launch, eight organizations have received support to scale their programs.⁸

Two years into this work, the Fund has impacted tens of thousands of students nationwide, and initial results are promising, showing that exposure to oral health careers during formative years elevates students' interest in pursuing careers in oral health later on. But to sustain and expand this interest and refine the approach, more assessment is needed.

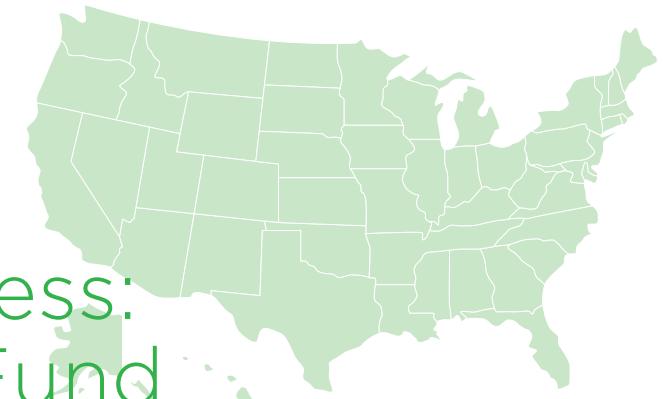
Tracking early success: Future Workforce Fund reach and outcomes to date

Recent program data demonstrates measurable impact across geographies and student populations. Based on the latest reports, Future Workforce Fund awardees have reached more than 71,000 students, educators, and community members in over 40 states through hands-on programming, mentorship initiatives, and curriculum development.

These programs vary widely in structure, from single-day immersive events to multi-year mentorship models. Programs funded to date include:

✓ **American Dental Education Association (ADEA):** The *Bridging Pathways to Oral Health Careers Program* inspires future oral health professionals through an interactive, hands-on curriculum in partnership with Area Health Education Centers throughout the country. The program engages students by highlighting oral health's connection to overall health and providing a clear understanding of the academic pathway to the oral health professions. Awarded 2024-2025.

✓ **American Dental Hygienists' Association (ADHA):** The *Hygienist Inspired* program expands awareness of the dental hygiene profession through chairside recruitment and community outreach. The program leverages the expertise of dental hygienists and the strength of their patient relationships to inspire new career opportunities — particularly within communities currently underrepresented in the profession. Awarded 2025.



✓ **Hispanic Dental Association (HDA):** The *Building our Leaders in Dentistry (BOLD)* is a pre-dental school mentorship program designed to introduce dentistry as a career option and to help influence more underrepresented minorities to enter the profession. The program engages schools in underserved areas by targeting Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)-focused curricula, teachers, and counselors to help identify students interested in a health-related career. Awarded 2023 and 2025.

✓ **NAF:** The *Promoting Oral Health Pathways* program within their Academies of Health Sciences curriculum introduces oral health as an exciting, viable career path for school-aged children. Through NAF's KnoPro platform, students work with experts in the field to build their oral health skills and awareness of career opportunities. Awarded 2023-2024.

✓ **National Dental Association (NDA):** *S.M.I.L.E. (Student Mentoring with Immersive Learning and Enrichment) Healthcare Pathway* program connects a diverse group of high school students with an oral health mentor and provides an immersive week-long camp at Historically Black Colleges and Universities to introduce students to careers in oral health. Awarded 2024.

✓ **Mentorships in Dentistry, Inc. (MIND):** The *MIND Youth Summit* program advances the oral health profession through intentional mentorship and early exposure. The program inspires school-aged and pre-dental students to pursue careers in oral health, while also engaging dental professionals in mentorship and leadership opportunities that reaffirm their passion for dentistry and service. Awarded 2023-2025.

✓ **Planet Smilez, Inc.:** The *Discovering Dentistry Symposium* aims to inspire students from educationally and economically disadvantaged backgrounds to pursue careers in oral health and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields through an immersive event focused on the connection between oral and systemic health, career paths in oral healthcare, and the daily routines of dental professionals. Awarded 2024.

✓ **Society of American Indian Dentists (SAID):** The *Telling the Story of a Path to Dentistry* program connects American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) dentists with AI/AN youth to increase awareness of dentistry as a career path. Through mentorship and resources, the program supports students on their journey while working toward greater AI/AN representation in the dental profession. Awarded 2023-2025.

Early indicators of program success:

Early program experience reveals shifts in how students relate to oral health careers, from increased confidence and reduced intimidation to moments of personal connection that signal the potential for lasting influence.

Impact by the numbers

71,000+
lives reached

36,500+
students engaged

2,800+
students expressing interest in
oral health careers

160+
events, summits, and
camps hosted

These early results indicate growing awareness and interest in oral health careers among participating students, signaling how early exposure efforts can influence career exploration.

“

From a student perspective, we're getting a lot of feedback about how it removes fear—these careers aren't as scary as I thought they were. Demystifying a lot of that is the very first step.”

Blueprint for growth: Insights into building a successful program

As the health care industry collectively addresses workforce shortages, clear insights are emerging on how best to introduce young people to oral health careers. Together, these learnings provide a blueprint for scaling effective approaches across the oral health field.

Tracking long-term outcomes in oral health workforce programs

Measuring long-term impact is one of the most persistent challenges facing workforce development programs. Because many of these initiatives are only a few years old, organizations cannot yet track whether today's school-age participants ultimately enter the oral health workforce.



✓ **Data collection constraints:** Most programs operate with lean teams and limited evaluation capacity. Schools' privacy rules under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) make follow-up surveys optional, and many students change email addresses or move between schools, making longitudinal tracking difficult.

✓ **Inconsistent external benchmarks:** Organizations may experience difficulty in identifying clear and representative benchmarks to contextualize their work. As an example, many organizations rely on older workforce representation statistics, or on data that, due to data collection methodology, may not fully reflect the profession's diversity. This challenge underscores a broader industry need for more comprehensive, accessible workforce metrics, as well as the potential for programs closest to specific communities to help strengthen these datasets with more accurate data points.

✓ **Defining success beyond numbers:** Impact is not always about scale. Even small programs can meaningfully influence students' interest and confidence when the experience is strong and well designed.

✓ **Inconsistent evaluation tools:** As early exposure initiatives continue to mature, there is value in exploring more consistent evaluation frameworks or shared indicators to strengthen measurement across different models and support field-wide learning.

Despite these challenges, programs are experimenting with creative ways to measure progress. Some have introduced pre- and post-program surveys to capture changes in awareness or confidence; others track near-term indicators such as mentorship participation, declared majors, or ongoing alumni engagement. Assessing meaningful early shifts, such as reduced intimidation around oral health careers or a clearer understanding of educational and professional pathways, can serve as initial indicators of student engagement well before long-term outcomes can be measured.

Building financial sustainability for oral health workforce programs

It is vital for programs to plan for longevity beyond initial grant periods. Most organizations report that short-term funding cycles make it difficult to maintain staff, invest in evaluation, or scale successful models.

Considerations for frameworks that support financial sustainability:

- ✓ Multi-year funding and gradual transitions: Funders should consider multi-year grants that allow time to refine models and develop other funding streams, with a gradual ramp-down of support to avoid disruption.
- ✓ Covering the true cost of program delivery: Funders should consider accounting for the full scope of program needs in grant coverage, including staff time, data collection and evaluation, and travel, to ensure programs can operate consistently and sustainably. Investment in evaluation infrastructure also helps programs demonstrate impact and attract future funding.

These insights reflect a growing understanding that sustainability is not just about dollars. It is about creating stable structures, leadership continuity, and networks of support that will outlast any single grant cycle.

A collective call to action

Two years in, the Delta Dental Future Workforce Fund has established an emerging model for oral health workforce development. Building and sustaining the oral health workforce requires a collective, industry-wide effort. No single funder or program can meet the magnitude of this challenge alone. The oral health community must align around shared measures of success, strengthen data collection and evaluation, and invest in scalable models that reflect the diversity and needs of the communities we serve.

Delta Dental's role in funding, convening, and amplifying these efforts is one example of how philanthropy and partnership can drive results. By sharing best practices, Delta Dental hopes to support others, such as foundations, schools, dental associations, and practitioners, in launching and scaling their own effective initiatives to build an accessible oral health workforce of the future. We welcome inquiries from organizations interested in partnering with us.

Methodology

Insights in this white paper draw from three sources: interviews with 16 experts from the 2025 Future Workforce Fund; program reports and data; and discussions with oral health workforce leaders on shared challenges and emerging best practices in early exposure models.

Acknowledgments

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1. <https://www.ruralhealth.us/getmedia/757e074a-a8f1-4ca4-9d4b-cd52c4cbffd4/NROHI-Workforce-Topic-Paper-Jan-2022.pdf>
2. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2828397>
3. <https://bhw.hrsa.gov/data-research/projecting-health-workforce-supply-demand>
4. <https://www.ada.org/resources/research/health-policy-institute/us-dentist-demographics>
5. https://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2018/17_0225.htm
6. <https://www.cdc.gov/oral-health/data-research/facts-stats/index.html>
7. <https://www.deltadentalinstitute.com/fund/>
8. The Fund's eight awardees to date include: American Dental Education Association, American Dental Hygienists' Association, Hispanic Dental Association, NAF, National Dental Association, Mentorships in Dentistry, Inc., Planet Smilez, Inc., and Society of American Indian Dentists.



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