

An Evaluation of Determinants that Influence Decisions to Adopt School-Based Dental Sealant Programs by Principals in Elementary Schools in Georgia that Predominantly Serve Low-Income Children

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Abstract: About one in five children aged 5 to 11 years have at least one untreated, decayed tooth (Dye, Li, & Beltran-Aguilar, 2012) and tooth decay is the number one chronic disease in children (S. O. Griffin, Wei, Gooch, Weno, & Espinoza, 2016). More than 51 million school hours are lost each year due to dental health issues, making it the number one reason for missed school (Gift, Reisine, & Larach, 1992). Additionally, studies show that poor oral health is associated with lower school performance (Blumenshine, Vann, Gizlice, & Lee, 2008; National Maternal and Child Oral Health Resource Center/Georgetown University, 1996; Satcher, 2000). Conversely, school attendance and performance by children are positively affected by good oral health (S. O. Griffin, Shillpa, Scherrer, Patel, & Sajal, 2017; S. Griffin et al., 2016; Reisine & Reisine, 1985; Seirawan, Faust, & Mulligan, 2012; United States General Accounting Office, 2003).

The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry states that tooth decay is the most preventable disease in children (The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, 2014). Preventive oral health services such as sealants are a cost-effective intervention when compared to costs of treating caries (S. Griffin et al., 2016). Additionally, school-based sealant programs (SBSP) are cost-effective (S. Griffin et al., 2016; Zalos et al., 2002) and are a recommended delivery mechanism (The Guide to Community Preventive Services, 2017) for dental sealants. Despite these facts, most elementary schools in Georgia do not have school-based sealant programs.

This study identified factors that influence the SBSP adoption decision by elementary school principals in Georgia. Semi-structured key informant interviews were conducted with 18 elementary school principals, six of whom hosted SBSP, and 12 of whom did not. Principals were found to be very aware of the needs of and were concerned with the well-being of the children they serve. In those principals not currently hosting SBSP, there was a total lack of awareness of SBSP, which was a critical barrier to adoption. The processes and authorities for program adoption decision-making include principals, but generally reside at or at a minimum include the school district. Public health is a major contributing factor to the presence of SBSP in elementary schools in Georgia.

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