



Oral Health for All

Building a New Public Health Movement at the Grassroots, Grassmiddles, and Grasstops



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The mission of the DentaQuest Foundation is to improve the oral health of all.

The DentaQuest Foundation was founded in 1999 by one of the nation's largest insurers to meet the oral health needs of underserved populations in Massachusetts. In 2008, the Foundation adopted a systems change lens and proceeded to build a national network of change agents, inclusive of the grassroots, grassmiddles, and grasstops, all committed to closing the oral health equity gap.

The current campaign – **Oral Health 2020** – is mobilizing this national network to shape policy, broaden access to quality care and prevention, integrate oral health into community-based systems and primary care practice, and change public perceptions about the value of oral health to overall health.

This white paper follows the evolution of this public health movement and shares lessons learned about identifying areas for policy and systems change, cultivating a network, and catalyzing changes in social norms. This story also tracks the DentaQuest Foundation's shift, from a conventional, top-down philanthropist to an equal learning partner with a network mindset. The Foundation scaffolds the work of grantees and partners by supporting collaboration and by investing in network infrastructure, capacity-building, and leadership development.

Making the Case for Oral Healthcare: Closing the Equity Gap

Oral health affects everyone across the lifespan. Poor oral health contributes to preterm births, chronic disease, and premature death. The impact on individuals and families extends to the social fabric of communities since dental disease makes it harder to stay in school and maintain steady employment.

Without a health equity lens, good oral health may seem like an individual choice. However, current literature on health disparities is unequivocal about poverty and race as the main obstacles. Cost and inadequate health insurance present insurmountable obstacles to low-income populations. Language barriers and the lack of cross-cultural medical education negatively affect clinical decision-making. Moreover, because oral health has been misunderstood and detached from other health systems, an environment has been created in which millions of adults and children depend on volunteer-led Missions of Mercy or go without preventive care and basic interventions. Oral health is a social justice issue. While Missions of Mercy are noble efforts, charity is not the solution for a broken system.

In recent years, the passage and enactment of the Affordable Care Act has catalyzed a national conversation about the American healthcare system. The consensus is that healthcare needs to move from a provider-centric model to a team approach focused on patients. Oral health must be an integral part of this evolution.

The Philanthropic Shift: From Ribbon-Cutting to Systems Change

The DentaQuest Foundation began by supporting community-based organizations and interventions in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Starting in 2008, the DentaQuest Foundation began to analyze the root causes of oral health inequity and adopted a framework for systems change that would address the four systems of policy, finance, care, and community.

The DentaQuest Foundation's first campaign – **Oral Health 2014: Advancing Local Leaders for National Impact** – supported **grassmiddle organizations** in twenty-six states. These change agents built coalitions and projects aligned to the Four Systems. To complement their work, the Foundation cultivated national initiatives, including the U.S. Oral Health Alliance, National Inter-professional Initiative on Oral Health, and other efforts to strengthen the oral health safety net.

Effective networks require trusting relationships, robust communication, and leadership development. The DentaQuest Foundation engaged the **Interaction Institute for Social Change** to coach the diverse participants of Oral Health 2014 and build network capacity. For evaluating progress on systems change, the Foundation enlisted **Harder+Company Community Research**, whose methodology balances a learning orientation with accountability for tangible outcomes. To increase awareness of health equity and racial justice,

the DentaQuest Foundation partnered with the **Association of Black Foundation Executives – A Philanthropic Partnership for Black Communities** whose expertise in the skills and tools of equity-building would ensure that oral health would be perceived and pursued as a social justice issue.

Oral Health 2014 seeded many systems initiatives and put the scaffolding in place for a national network. The next campaign – **Oral Health 2020** – was designed to add the voices of **grassroots constituencies** and **grassstops leaders** and to strengthen the focus on racial and health equity in the oral health movement.

Oral Health is a multi-year campaign that envisions that **oral health is essential to lifelong health and wellbeing**. This initiative drives policy and action around six goals and related targets:

- 1. Eradicate dental disease in children** – With the closing of disparity gaps, 85 percent of children in the United States reach age five without a cavity.
- 2. Incorporate oral health into the primary education system** – The ten largest school districts incorporate oral health into their systems.
- 3. Include an adult dental benefit in publicly funded health coverage** – At least 30 states have an extensive Medicaid adult dental benefit, and Medicare includes an extensive dental benefit.
- 4. Build a comprehensive national oral health measurement system** – A national and state-based oral health measurement system is in place.

5. **Integrate oral health into person-centered healthcare** – Oral health is integrated into at least 50 percent of emerging person-centered care models.
6. **Improve the public perception of the value of oral health to overall health** – Oral health is increasingly included in public policy and dialogue around health.

As of 2015, emerging outcomes demonstrate the power of community voices, state champions, and national policy leaders to enact system change. Results include:

- In five of the nation’s ten largest school districts, oral health is being woven into the system, thus closing the gap between populations of children.
- Among health and social programs that support expecting, new, and young families, widespread work is underway to integrate oral health resources and care.
- Medicaid dental coverage for low-income adults has been expanded to eight states. In all fifty states, aging service directors endorse the addition of dental benefits to Medicare.
- Medical-dental integration is becoming a norm, with oral health woven into primary care education and practice for a wide range of clinicians.
- Oral health literacy campaigns have reached more than one million people.

Oral Health 2020 is uniting individuals, constituencies, and communities around a shared

vision and common values. Everyone deserves decent, affordable healthcare, and oral health is part of that system. The Foundation has acted as convenor, capacity-builder, and amplifier – elevating the issue, experimenting with solutions, and supporting collective action. As this social justice movement gathers momentum, the ultimate goal is that oral health will no longer be determined by race, ethnicity, socio-economics, or zip code.

Building a Movement: Lessons Learned

Through investments in the four systems and two campaigns, the DentaQuest Foundation has synthesized ten lessons for philanthropy and movement building:

1. **Engage systems problems with systems solutions.** The challenges of oral healthcare required a systems approach rather than superficial fixes. The DentaQuest Foundation identified the systems affecting oral healthcare and analyzed the inter-connected relationships. The resulting initiatives intervened simultaneously in four systems – policy, financing, care, and community.
2. **Build out from the middle.** The literature on movement building typically focuses on the grassroots and the grasstops. The DentaQuest Foundation first targeted grassmiddle change agents at the state and regional levels, where the infrastructure and relationships for coalition-building already existed.

3. **Prioritize equity and engage diverse stakeholders.** Health disparities are rooted in structural, racial, and economic inequities. The foundation took an intentional approach to closing these equity gaps, by partnering with diverse organizations and communities most affected by the current systems.
4. **Invest in authentic relationships and build capacity.** In the 21st century, when networks are the vehicles for social change, authentic relationships provide the dynamic fuel. Through partnership with IISC, the foundation invests in convenings, leadership development, and coaching to build trust among traditional and non-traditional stakeholders.
5. **Identify and manage the network type.** Network management differs depending on network type – connection, alignment, or action. IISC and the DentaQuest Foundation determined that an alignment network would be critical for success of *Oral Health 2020*. To enhance this network’s collaborative capacity, the foundation developed a communications mechanism to weave relationships across the grassroots, grassmiddles, and grasstops.
6. **Listen in.** Strategy and right action will emerge from the network and the system. The Foundation, IISC, and Harder+Company learned to listen, deeply, to what the system needed and where the network was ready to go.
7. **Harness the power of a campaign.** Campaigns intensify focus and generate excitement. *Oral Health 2014* created a shared vision and catalyzed successful initiatives. The *Oral Health 2020* network built upon the shared vision to identify and commit to a small number of big, but achievable wins that reflect its collective voice.
8. **Evaluate progress with a learning lens.** Systems change is complex and rarely linear. Working with Harder+Company, the network aspires to common goals and indicators, with members accountable to each other, as well as to the Foundation. For funder and grantees, the value of data is for learning about what works.
9. **As a funder, ride the “edge” of partnership.** The DentaQuest Foundation serves both as a hub and as a member of the national oral health network. This requires awareness and flexibility from the Foundation – to be responsive to the network’s needs at certain times while at other times advancing the strategy. Now, as the network shifts from hub-and-spoke to multi-hub, the Foundation is preparing to step back.
10. **Pace the change.** History suggests that social movements take twenty-five years or more. The Foundation has learned that, because movements are focused on changing people’s lives rather than changing any one policy, the process is the solution. The role of the funder or hub is to build expectations and sustain commitment and momentum, in order to exert impact and change social norms.