

# Smile maintenance

## Mobile dental unit makes its rounds at schools

By Lisa Chamoff  
STAFF WRITER

NORWALK — With a cautious smile, Danny Albarenga admitted he was a little nervous as he climbed into the blue chair set up in a corner of the tiny nurse's office at Rowayton Elementary School to get his teeth cleaned Thursday morning.

The 9-year-old had never seen a dentist before.

But Danny quickly relaxed as hygienist Mary Calka introduced him to her tools, Tommy the Tickler and Vicky the Vacuum, and asked him to choose from among several different flavors of toothpaste.

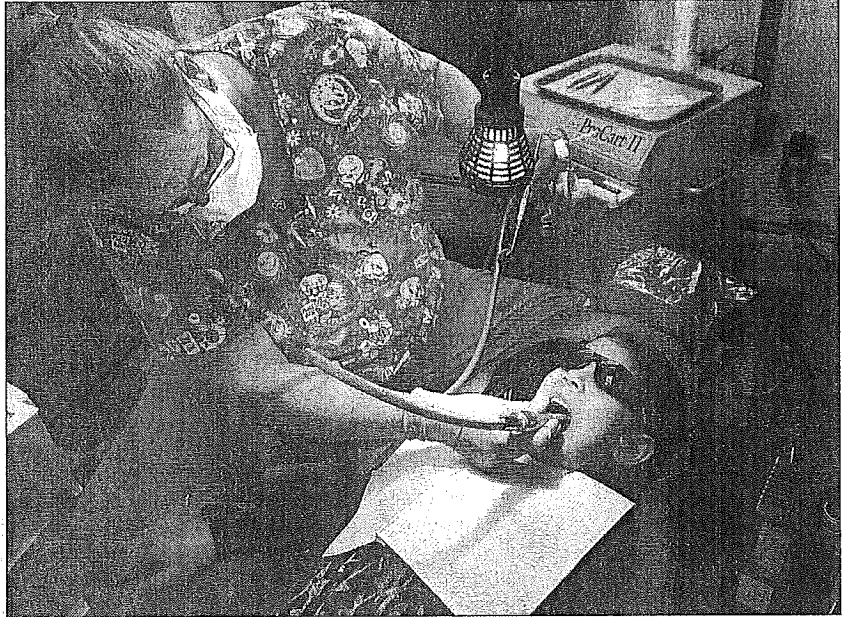
Rowayton was the latest stop for the Norwalk Smiles mobile dental program, piloted at Brien McMahon and Briggs high schools in May and expanded to all schools in September. More than 450 children have been seen at most of the district's 12 elementary schools, and the middle schools will be visited before the year's end.

Students covered by Medicaid and Husky, the state's insurance program for uninsured children, are seen for free, while children without insurance are charged a \$30 fee.

Because few dentists in the area accept Medicaid, many children in Norwalk have gone years without seeing one. As a result, Calka has found a lot of tooth decay. A few weeks ago, Calka saw a student at Kendall Elementary School with a toothache, which turned out to be a large cavity.

"The tooth was so decayed that it had to be extracted," Calka said.

While the mobile program only provides cleanings, fluoride treatments and sealants, a coating that protects teeth from decay-causing bacteria, children who need restorative work are referred to the Norwalk Smiles clinic on Day Street, which opened



Calka examines and cleans Fatima Murillo's teeth.

in 2007. Norwalk Smiles also runs a clinic at the Ben Franklin Community Center, which serves children in the Head Start early education program.

The goal is to eventually provide digital x-rays and restorative services at the schools, said Adele Gordon, executive director of Norwalk Smiles, which is operated by Community Health Center Inc.

Calka sees about 10 students a day in the schools for 30-minute appointments.

While sick students trooped in and out of the office to be attended to by school nurse Barbara Essig, Calka spoke to the kids in the chair in a sing-songy voice. She discovered that Danny had three cavities, and after his fluoride treatment, taught him how to properly brush and floss in front of a hand mirror. She sent him home with

a brochure in Spanish on sealants, which the program applies for a \$25 fee.

Danny's 5-year-old brother David had his teeth cleaned by Calka on Wednesday, but that didn't ease his fears.

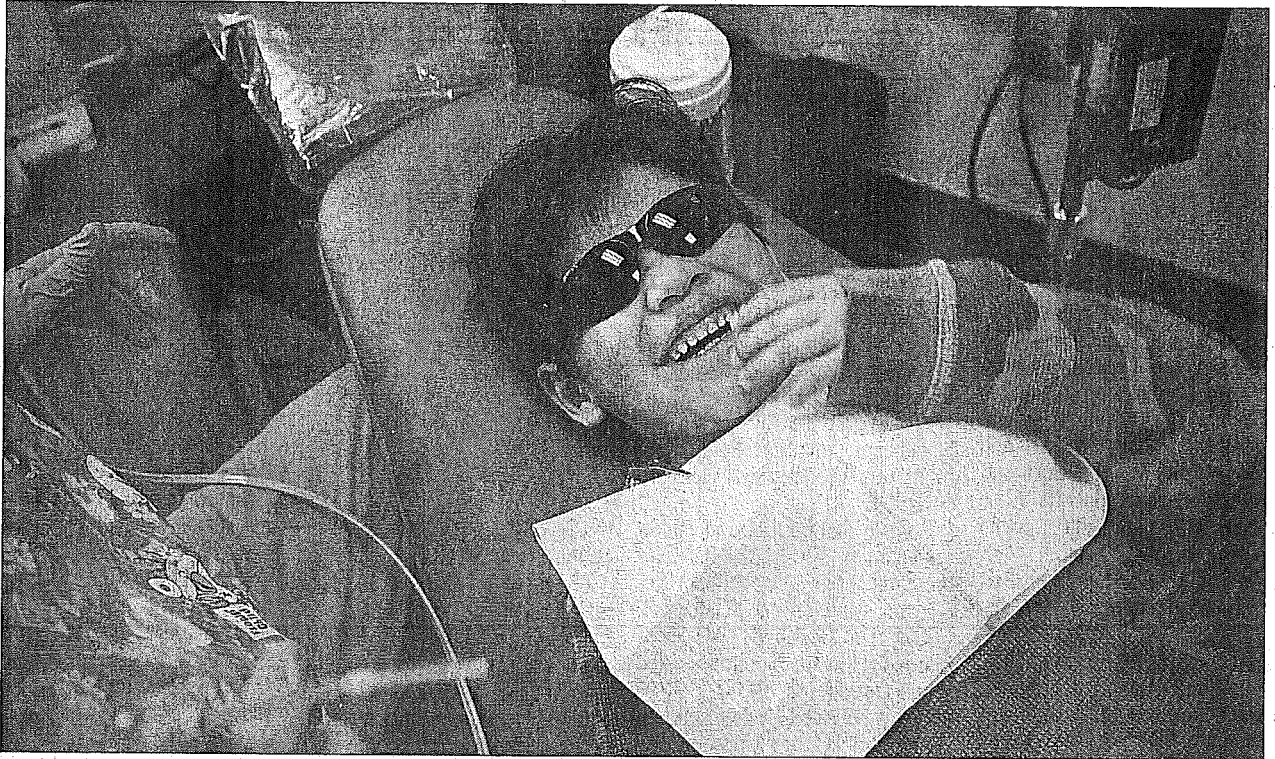
"He told me it didn't hurt, but sometimes he lies to me," said Danny, a fourth-grader.

Nine-year-old Megan Parker's mouth was given a clean bill of health by Calka. Megan, who moved to Norwalk from Australia a few months ago and saw a dentist there, said it felt strange getting her teeth checked in school, but she was happy to take a break from work.

"We were doing something pretty boring," Megan said.

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## TEETH ARE SO BRIGHT, HE'S GOTTA WEAR SHADES



**Alan Munive, 6, laughs in response to the suction as Mary Calka, a dental hygienist, examines and cleans his teeth Wednesday at Rowayton Elementary School. Sunglasses are provided so the bright spotlight doesn't bother the children's eyes. The service is sponsored by Norwalk Smiles and Community Health Centers, Inc.**

KATHLEEN O'ROURKE/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER