Delta Dental of Minnesota, in partnership with St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman and the Invest St. Paul initiative will expand its children’s oral health efforts, the company reported recently.

Delta Dental will leverage its recently formed “Smiles Across Minnesota” (SAM) coalition – which focuses on providing school-based dental care to low income and uninsured children – to offer a dental sealant program in designated Invest St. Paul areas.

“Sealants help prevent tooth decay, which remains the number one unmet childhood disease,” said Ann Johnson, director of community affairs at Delta Dental of Minnesota and co-chair of the SAM Coalition. “Untreated tooth decay can affect a child’s health, well-being, growth, and achievement.”

“Preschoolers may be susceptible to more decay because they are drinking more soda and fruit juice drinks and less milk and water with fluoride,” said Johnson. “The good news is that tooth decay is almost entirely preventable and therefore we must focus on effective solutions, such as sealants, to prevent the diseases.”

The sealant program will be offered through Children’s Dental Services, a nonprofit that provides dental care for children in need and a co-founder of the SAM Coalition.

“We’ve been working with Children’s Dental Services on several oral health initiatives including the ‘Smiles Across Minnesota’ program,” continued Johnson. “The Invest St. Paul partnership will help expand the program even further. We are working to spread this model throughout Minnesota. Discussions are underway for expansion in the Duluth and Rochester communities as well.”

The Delta Dental Foundation has given a $50,000 grant to the Detroit Oral Cancer Prevention Project, which is run by the University of Michigan School of Dentistry and provides free oral cancer screenings.

The Michigan Department of Community Health reports that nearly half of all deaths from oral cancer in the state occur in Detroit and Wayne County. In 2003, 1,097 state residents were diagnosed with oral cancer, and 257 died from it.

The University of Michigan School of Dentistry found in 2005 that the incidence of oral cancer among African-American men in Wayne County, Mich., was 31 per 100,000 people. Data from the National Cancer Institute shows that the U.S. overall has an oral cancer rate of only 10.4 per 100,000. Michigan has an oral cancer rate of 11.2 per 100,000, and Wayne County has a rate of 13.5 per 100,000.

The American Cancer Society notes that oral cancer rates are more than twice as high among men than women. Men are more likely to use alcohol and tobacco at levels that put them at risk.

Dr. Jed Jacobson, senior vice president of professional services and chief science officer at Delta Dental, warns that oral cancer is killing African-American men at extremely high rates. “We need to step up our efforts to get the word out to dentists and patients alike,” he said.