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**APPLE TREE DENTAL LAUNCHES A CAREER EQUITY PROJECT
AIMED AT DIVERSIFYING WORKFORCE**

(Mounds View, MN; May 26, 2022) - Apple Tree Dental, one of Minnesota’s leading critical access dental providers, announced today the launch of an innovative program designed to raise awareness and bring more oral healthcare career opportunities to high school students from diverse backgrounds. Apple Tree is piloting the **Career Equity Project** at Osseo High School in Osseo, Minnesota, and Kennedy Secondary School in Fergus Falls, Minnesota.



The Career Equity Project is a new, employer-based approach that proactively helps high school students launch lifelong careers in oral health care.

Apple Tree envisions building educational and career advancement systems that support aspiring oral healthcare professionals including dental assistants, dental hygienists, dental therapists, and dentists, and also administrative business professionals, such as care coordinators, managers, and researchers.

“Our challenge was clearly stated in a 2016 white paper written by Dr. Elizabeth Mertz, a professor at the University of California, San Francisco,” said Ashley Johnson, DMD, Apple Tree’s Equity and Compliance Director and lead for the Career Equity Project. “Mertz reported that if every seat in every dental school in the nation went to underrepresented population groups, it would take 10 years to achieve parity with the general population.”

“It’s evident that longstanding barriers to careers in dentistry have harmed underrepresented communities, impacting not only health outcomes, but also educational and career opportunities,” Johnson continued. “To address this challenge, our Career Equity Project will connect diverse high school students to comprehensive, career-long support and mentorship.”

One of the few dental career exploration programs designed specifically for high school students with the aim of increasing diversity, the Dental Career Equity Project is also the only one created and implemented by a nonprofit dental health organization. Two years in development, the Career Equity Project has included support from 3M, PYXERA Global, Hue-MAN Partnership, and Minnesota Oral Health Coalition.

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Osseo and Fergus Falls were selected for the pilot because of their racial, economic, and geographical diversity, and because the high schools are close to two of Apple Tree's largest and most state-of-the-art facilities -- the Mounds View Center and the Fergus Falls Center. The high schools have also been part of the development process. Dr. Ashley Johnson has been giving presentations in classrooms and bringing students into Apple Tree Centers this school year. In 2022-23, the project will also offer students the opportunity to job shadow or to have a one-on-one mentorship experience with a skilled dental professional.

"The purpose behind the Career Equity Project is to be a support system for kids who want to learn about dentistry and pursue a career – and to elevate students who might be at a disadvantage reaching their career goals," says Dr. Michael Helgeson, Apple Tree Dental's CEO and Co-Founder. "That might be students who live in a rural area, are in an underrepresented community, or who have economic hardship."

Educating future dental workforce members is critical to expanding access to dental care across all regions of Minnesota. Apple Tree Dental operates eight Centers for Dental Health in Minnesota and has a long history of outreach, both clinical and educational. For many years, it has provided post-secondary students with dental clinical experiences as they work towards their dental assistant, dental hygienist, and dental therapist licenses. Now, similar educational experiences will be available for interested high schoolers.

Elise Bengston, Curriculum Integration Coordinator at Osseo High School, feels that the project will help students discover a rewarding career that they may not have considered. "We are so excited to be a partner in this inaugural initiative. The kids will get a first-hand look at real career possibilities where they can make a big difference," she said.

"My grandfather was a dentist during the Great Depression," Dr. Helgeson added. "When I was going into dental school, he said, 'Mike, if you want to be a dentist, I'll back you.' He meant that he was going to stand behind me no matter what and help me get to where I wanted to go. Well, we want Apple Tree to be like a grandfather for these kids. What could all these kids achieve if they knew they had someone who said, 'I'll back you'?"

To learn more about the Career Equity Project, go to www.appletreedental.org/careers/career-equity-project/.

About Apple Tree Dental

Founded in 1985, Apple Tree Dental's mission is to overcome barriers to oral health. Apple Tree provides comprehensive preventive care and dental treatment services at eight Centers for Dental Health throughout Minnesota to individuals and families, and also operates on-site care programs at 150 community partner locations for vulnerable communities using the industry's latest technologies. With special expertise in pediatric, geriatric, and special needs populations, Apple Tree is nationally recognized for its pioneering approach to integrating dental care as part of overall health and wellbeing. For more information, visit appletreedental.org.