



Policy Brief: Alternative Pathways to Licensure for Internationally Trained Dentists in the United States

Unlocking Talent to Strengthen Dental Health

In 2024, approximately 57 million Americans lived in dental health professional shortage areas (HPSAs), [according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), with 67 percent of these shortages concentrated in rural communities. Residents of dental HPSAs experience higher rates of untreated cavities, periodontal disease, detections of oral cancers at a later stage, and broader health consequences compared with those in more adequately served communities. In addition to an insufficient supply of dental health professionals, the National Institutes of Health has identified other underlying factors that contribute to these disparities, including insurance coverage status, health literacy, language barriers, travel, and affordability.

Expanding licensure pathways for internationally trained dentists (ITDs) is a practical, cost-effective means of beginning to comprehensively address the poor health outcomes in HPSAs. Experienced professionals are ready to work in underserved areas, improve health equity, and strengthen culturally competent care without compromising U.S. standards. Proactive states will reduce barriers to care while enabling ITDs to practice at their full skill level, creating inclusive and economically competitive health systems.

The opportunity

Many ITDs bring years of professional experience, yet they are often limited to low-wage, unlicensed roles, such as dental assistant or administrative positions. As a result, some ITDs leave the profession entirely. According to the Utah Division of Professional Licensure, over 175 ITDs are seeking licensure in Utah, and at least 700 nationwide. ITDs are well-positioned to advance states' efforts to improve dental health outcomes, offering distinct advantages, particularly in underserved communities. On average, they speak more languages than U.S.-trained dentists, and their cultural and linguistic expertise can strengthen health literacy and deepen patient-provider trust.

Current barriers

Many states require experienced ITDs to repeat schooling, despite their having practiced for years in other countries before immigrating to the U.S. Most states require a dental degree accredited by the American Dental Association's Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA) to become licensed. This forces ITDs to apply for limited seats in a costly two- to three-year CODA-accredited Advanced Standing Program (ASP); these programs largely repeat the last years of dental school. For some dentists, particularly recent graduates who don't have experience, completing an ASP is essential to fill knowledge gaps and obtain additional supervised clinical experience. For many experienced ITDs, completing an ASP is an inefficient use of time, money, and talent that could instead be directed toward meeting urgent needs in communities across the country.

State action and policy recommendations

Some states have established alternative licensure pathways for experienced ITDs that uphold U.S. standards while expanding access to quality care. However, as currently implemented, most pathways still present unnecessary barriers or demand more than is required of U.S.-trained dentists. Additional policy reforms would enable qualified dentists to work at their full skill level, reduce wait times and costs for residents, and address dental health shortages in underserved communities.

States introduce new legislation each year to establish new pathways for ITDs. Partner with WES to learn more about these and other professional licensure pathways that can unlock talent where it's needed most.

Licensure Pathways for Internationally Trained Dentists

Advanced Education Pathway

Many ITDs would prefer to further their education rather than repeat it in an ASP. Many states have chosen to waive the requirement for a U.S.-based dental education if the applicant successfully completes a CODA-accredited post-doctoral education program such as an AEGD, GPR, or residency. Please note that the states that have this pathway vary widely in which post-doctoral programs they will accept.

[AK, CT, FL, IA, KY, LA, MI, MN, MS, NJ, NY, OH, OR, TN, TX, UT, VT, VA, WA, WV](#)

Credential Review and Exam Authorization

Some state dental boards use credential evaluations, course descriptions, patient records, or a combination to determine if a non-CODA-accredited program is substantially similar to the state's requirements. If the evaluation is successful, they allow ITDs to take the clinical exam and become licensed. States should strive to make the evaluation fair and avoid imposing standards above those required of U.S.-educated licensees.

[MN, MA](#)

Educator License Pathway

ITDs may be hired as faculty by CODA-accredited dental programs through a limited license that authorizes practice that is typically restricted to university or hospital settings. Requirements vary but commonly include an international dental degree, an examination, CODA-accredited postgraduate training, and a full-time faculty job offer. Some of these states also provide a pathway to convert the limited license to a full, unrestricted license.

[AL, CO, CT, IA, IL, KY, LA, MA, MN, MS, NC, NE, NJ, NV, NY, OK, SC, TN, UT, WA](#)

Supervision and Limited Licenses

Many states have passed legislation to allow internationally trained physicians who have completed an international residency to work in a period of evaluation before becoming fully licensed. Similar models are being pursued to support ITDs. This pathway also requires verification of education and experience but may be a less in-depth credential review.

Hygienist Pathway

The ideal alternative licensure pathway will allow ITDs to practice to the full extent of their skills. However, pursuing licensure as a dental hygienist is preferable to working as a dental assistant because of the higher pay and professional autonomy dental hygienists enjoy. This pathway recognizes international dental programs as equivalent to a CODA-accredited hygienist program if applicants pass required exams and submit certain credential documents. In regions with acute hygienist shortages that exceed dentist shortages, this pathway enables quicker entry into stable, well-compensated practice.

[CT, FL, IN, VA](#)