DentalUnlock

APRIL 2026 EDITION · FOR DENTISTS

The Dental Loan Playbook.

For dentists who already have federal student loans. PSLF, IDR, refinance, and the 2026 tax bomb — what to actually do, with the math behind every answer.

$200K–$700K debt range covered · **April 2026** rate snapshot · **Cohort A** (loans before July 1, 2026)

Built by a practicing dentist. General information, not legal or tax advice. Re-pulled quarterly. Last updated April 2026.

1 The 60-second verdict

You're reading this because dental school cost more than a starter home and the federal repayment menu changes every six months.

Three answers cover most dentists.

P **If you work at a 501(c)(3), FQHC, government clinic, IHS, VA, or as qualifying university faculty**

PSLF is almost always your move. Ten years of capped IDR payments, then tax-free forgiveness under a permanent statute. About **14% of dentists** qualify. Not most.

R **If you work at a DSO, private practice, or corporate group, earning above $150K**

Refinance is almost always your move. Federal IDR caps your monthly at the standard 10-year amount once your income clears the threshold, so you pay the same monthly but stretch it to 20–25 years and absorb six figures of extra interest. A **4–6% private refi** beats that.

? **If you're somewhere in between, in residency, or in a 2-dentist household**

The right answer depends on your AGI, your spouse's AGI, your filing status, and whether you can sit on a sinking fund for 20 years. Sections 6–8 are for you.

The rest of this document is the math behind those answers.

2 The three cohorts

This playbook covers **Cohort A**. The others get their own editions.

COHORT A · THIS EDITION

You already have federal student loans, taken out before July 1, 2026.

You keep the existing IDR menu: IBR-new (10% / 20-year), IBR-old (15% / 25-year), PAYE if you were grandfathered in, REPAYE-style for any graduate loans, ICR. The new Repayment Assistance Plan does not pull you in unless you take out new federal loans.

COHORT B · SEPARATE EDITION

You're starting dental school in the 2026–2027 cycle or later.

Different rules entirely. The One Big Beautiful Bill Act (signed July 2025) eliminated Grad PLUS for new borrowers, capped graduate borrowing, and replaced the old IDR menu with a single new plan called the Repayment Assistance Plan, or RAP. RAP is mandatory for anyone borrowing federal loans after July 1, 2026.

COHORT C · SEE SECTION 4

You qualify for PSLF.

Your math is mostly settled: stay on the cheapest IDR plan that lets you accumulate qualifying payments, certify employment annually, and ride the 10-year clock to tax-free forgiveness. The only 2026 wrinkle is a narrow employer-eligibility rule change in Section 4. It does not affect typical dental PSLF candidates.

If you're Cohort A, keep reading.

3 The math at three real debt levels

Three debt levels cover roughly 80% of dental graduates. The numbers below assume a **6.8% blended rate** on the federal side, which is what a typical Grad PLUS / Direct Unsubsidized mix has looked like for the past several cycles. Run your own numbers in the calculator at **dentalunlock.com/student-loans**. Drop your `MyStudentData.txt` file in and it pre-fills your real balance and weighted-average rate.

Scenario 1. State-school grad — $200,000 at 6.8%, $180K associate income

Path	Monthly	Years	Total paid	Tax bomb	True cost
Standard 10-year	$2,302	10	$276,224	—	$276,224
IBR-new (capped)	$2,302	10	$276,224	$0	$276,224
Refinance @ 5.0%, 7-year	$2,827	7	$237,453	—	**$237,453**
Refinance @ 5.0%, 10-year	$2,121	10	$254,540	—	$254,540

For state-school debt at high-earner income, the IBR cap kicks in immediately. You pay the same monthly as standard. There is no IDR savings to capture here. Refinance saves about **$39K** over 7 years.

Scenario 2. National-average grad — $293,900 at 6.8%, $180K associate income

Path	Monthly	Years	Total paid	Tax bomb @ 35%	True cost
Standard 10-year	$3,381	10	$405,712	—	$405,712
IBR-new (capped)	$1,304	20	$313,050	$165,897	**$478,947**
Refinance @ 5.0%, 7-year	$4,154	7	$348,924	—	$348,924
Refinance @ 5.0%, 10-year	$3,116	10	$373,995	—	**$373,995**
PSLF (10 yrs on IBR-new, if eligible)	$1,304	10	$156,525	$0	**$156,525**

This is the scenario where the IDR trap shows up clearest. IBR cuts your monthly payment in half. It also stretches your timeline to 20 years and exposes the forgiven balance to tax. The tax bomb at 35% combined federal-and-state is bigger than the principal you'd save monthly. **PSLF dominates for the eligible 14%. Refinance dominates for everyone else.**

Scenario 3. NYU/USC/Tufts grad — $600,000 at 6.8%, $180K associate income

Path	Monthly	Years	Total paid	Tax bomb @ 35%	True cost
Standard 10-year	$6,902	10	$828,253	—	$828,253
IBR-new (capped)	$1,304	20	$313,050	~$164,500	**$477,550**
Refinance @ 5.0%, 10-year	$6,361	10	$763,338	—	$763,338
Refinance @ 5.0%, 15-year	$4,744	15	$853,936	—	$853,936
PSLF (10 yrs on IBR-new, if eligible)	$1,304	10	$156,525	$0	**$156,525**

At $600K and a $180K income, IBR-new actually beats refinance on total cost. The forgiven balance is enormous and the tax bomb, while painful, is smaller than the interest you'd otherwise pay over 15 years of refinance. This is the one scenario where IBR can win for non-PSLF dentists. Only if you can stomach 20 years of payments and a six-figure tax bill at the end. **PSLF, when available, beats everything.**

These are illustrative numbers

Yours depend on your AGI, family size, filing status, and rate. Run them in the calculator before making decisions on what you read here. Tables in PDFs are easy to misread.

4 PSLF, and whether you actually qualify

PSLF is the most consequential single decision in dental finance. If you qualify, it's almost always the right path. If you don't, no amount of optimization gets you there. The hard part isn't the strategy. It's the qualifying.

Who qualifies

FQHCs. Indian Health Service. VA dental clinics. County, state, and federal government clinics. True 501(c)(3) nonprofit dental clinics — where "true" means you've seen the IRS determination letter, not just the brand. Qualifying university faculty positions. Some hospital-based dental departments, depending on the hospital's nonprofit status.

Who does not

Every DSO. That includes Aspen, Heartland, Pacific Dental, Smile Brands, Western Dental, MB2, Dental Care Alliance, all of them. Every private practice. Every for-profit corporate group. Most temp and per-diem agencies. **The brand on the door doesn't matter, the tax status does.**

The 2026 employer rule change

Effective July 1, 2026, the Department of Education can revoke PSLF eligibility for employers found to have a "substantial illegal purpose" — a category aimed at organizations supporting terrorism or aiding illegal immigration. ED estimates fewer than 10 employers per year will be disqualified. Multiple lawsuits are pending. For typical dental PSLF candidates (FQHC, IHS, VA, government, university), this is a non-issue. Verify your specific employer with the PSLF Help Tool annually anyway.

The buyback rule

PSLF buyback lets you pay for otherwise-ineligible months at a qualifying employer, but only for months after your Direct Consolidation Loan's first disbursement date if you consolidated. As of March 2026, ED calculates buyback amounts using the IBR, PAYE, or ICR formulas. Not SAVE. SAVE is enjoined.

! Don't consolidate if your PSLF clock is already running

If your loans are already Direct loans and your PSLF clock is running, do not consolidate. Consolidation typically resets your qualifying-payment count to zero on the new consolidation loan. The one-time IDR account adjustment (the thing that credited prior payments toward IDR forgiveness) was largely wrapped up in 2024. Consolidating now does not pull retroactive credit forward.

✓ Do consolidate if you have FFEL or Perkins loans

Direct Consolidation unlocks IDR-plan and PSLF eligibility that those older loan types don't have. This is rare in younger dentists but common if you went back to school after working.

5 Refinance lenders, as of April 2026

Rates change weekly. Verify on the lender's site before applying. No affiliate links here. Quote ranges below come from the lenders' published medical-and-dental rate sheets as of early April 2026.

Lender	Fixed APR range	Notes
Laurel Road / KeyBank	**5.44% – 9.99%**	Joined the KeyBank brand March 16, 2026. **Exclusive 0.30% rate reduction for ADA members**, stackable with 0.25% AutoPay. Most-used refi lender among dentists in past surveys.
SoFi (Medical Professional)	**4.12% – 9.99%**	0.125% doctor/dentist discount + 0.25% AutoPay. Member benefits include career coaching and unemployment forbearance.
Earnest	**4.45% – 9.99%**	Customizable terms. Biweekly payment option. Skip-a-payment once per year.
Splash Financial	**varies**	Marketplace. Submit one application, compare quotes from multiple lenders without separate hard pulls. Best starting point if you want to comparison-shop without burning your credit.
ELFI (Education Loan Finance)	**not published**	Competitive fixed rates, strong customer-service ratings, quote required.

Refinance when all five are true

1. You're not pursuing PSLF.
2. You've had stable W-2 income for at least 12 months and your FICO is above 700.
3. The quoted rate is meaningfully below your weighted-average federal rate. "Meaningfully" usually means **1.0%+ for a 10-year term, 1.5%+ for a 7-year term**.
4. You don't anticipate needing federal protections like IDR availability, federal forbearance, or death/disability discharge.
5. You have an emergency fund covering 3–6 months of the refinance payment. Private lenders offer fewer hardship options than the federal system.

If all five are true, refinance. If you're shaky on any of them, wait six months and re-check.

Term selection

Term	Rate	Monthly (on $293K)	Best for
5-year	lowest	highest	High-income specialists with no other debt.
7-year	~5.5%	~$4,200	**Sweet spot** for most associate dentists.
10-year	~6.0%	~$3,200	When cash flow is tight (new practice owners, new home buyers).

The 7-year saves about **$50K** in interest over the life of the loan vs. the 10-year, on a $293K balance.

6 Why IDR usually doesn't help dentists

This is the part that trips up almost every dentist I talk to. The numbers feel like they should work. They don't.

The capped IDR plans (PAYE, IBR-new, IBR-old) cap your monthly payment at the standard 10-year amount. Once your income gets high enough — which happens fast as a dentist — your monthly IDR payment hits that cap. You're now paying the same monthly as standard repayment, but stretched to 20 years (PAYE, IBR-new) or 25 years (IBR-old, REPAYE-style with grad loans, ICR). You accrue more interest. You pay for more years. You owe more total.

A concrete walkthrough at $180K AGI, family of 1, $293K balance, 6.8% rate:

- 10% of discretionary income (IBR-new formula): **$1,360/month**
- Standard 10-year payment cap: **$3,381/month**
- Your IBR-new monthly: $1,360 (you're below the cap, so the formula applies)
- After 20 years: $313K paid, $474K forgiven, taxable at 35% combined for a **$166K tax bomb**
- True total cost: **$479K**. Standard 10-year would've cost $406K.

You paid more, for longer, and ended with a six-figure tax bill.

Where IDR genuinely helps

During residency or fellowship, when income is $50K–$70K. Use IBR-new while you're poor; switch out when you're not. During the first year or two of practice, before peak earnings. While pursuing PSLF — IDR keeps your monthly low through the 120-payment clock. The forgiven balance after 10 years is tax-free. For 2-dentist households filing MFS during PSLF years (Section 8).

Where IDR does not help

Stable mid-career associate income above $150K with no PSLF path. High-debt graduates earning $250K+, where the cap kicks in immediately. Anyone who can comfortably afford the standard 10-year payment.

> **! Avoid REPAYE-style for any non-PSLF path**
>
> For graduate-loan borrowers, REPAYE-style is the worst variant. It has **no payment cap**. Your monthly can exceed standard repayment as your income grows.

7 The tax bomb is back, and the 2025 buffer is gone

From 2021 through 2025, the American Rescue Plan Act (`IRC §108(f)(5)`) made all federal student loan forgiveness federally tax-free. **That provision expired December 31, 2025 and Congress did not extend it.**

> **! No replacement legislation has been enacted as of April 2026**
>
> Plan against current law, not against a fix that may never come.

What that means by program:

Program	Tax treatment in 2026	Why
PSLF	**Permanently tax-free**	Runs under `§108(f)(1)`, a separate statute the ARPA expiration does not touch.
IDR (PAYE, IBR, REPAYE-style, ICR)	**Federally taxable**	Forgiven balance is ordinary income in the year forgiven, starting 2026.
State tax	Varies — usually follows federal	Three exceptions to verify: **North Carolina, Indiana, Mississippi.**

Math for a typical IDR-forgiveness scenario:

- Forgiven balance after 20 years: **$470,000** (typical for $293K original on IBR-new)
- Combined federal + state marginal rate: **35%** (typical for high earners in moderate-tax states)
- Lump-sum tax bill in the year of forgiveness: **~$164,500**

That's a real bill, due in cash, in a single year. You can't finance it. You can't deduct it.

> **$ Build a sinking fund**
>
> If you're committed to an IDR-forgiveness path (typically because PSLF isn't available and your debt-to-income ratio is so extreme that refinance doesn't pencil), set aside **$400/month from year 1 of repayment**. At a 5% real return, that compounds to roughly $164K by year 20. Treat it as a fixed cost on day one. People who don't end up writing checks they can't write.

8 Filing strategy for 2-dentist households

The student loan interest deduction is mostly unavailable to working dentists. Source: **IRS Publication 970 (2025)**.

- Caps at **$2,500/year**, regardless of how much interest you pay.
- Phases out from $85,000 to $100,000 MAGI for single filers (zero deduction at $100K+).
- Phases out from $170,000 to $200,000 MAGI for MFJ (zero at $200K+).
- **Married-filing-separately is disqualified entirely**, regardless of income.

The result: a working dentist earning $180K+ as an associate gets $0. Two-dentist couples filing jointly hit $200K MAGI almost immediately and get $0. Anyone using MFS for IDR purposes also gets $0. Almost nobody we work with claims it outside of residency.

MFS during a PSLF clock

For 2-dentist households where one spouse is pursuing PSLF and the other isn't, MFS during the PSLF clock can dramatically lower the PSLF spouse's IDR monthly payment by removing the non-PSLF spouse's income from the calculation. The tradeoffs:

- You lose the student loan interest deduction (already $0 for most dentists, so no real cost)
- You lose the Child and Dependent Care Credit
- You lose the Earned Income Credit (rarely relevant at dentist income levels)
- You can't contribute to a Roth IRA above $10,000 combined MAGI (effectively zero for a working dentist)
- You sometimes pay slightly higher total federal tax than MFJ

When MFS wins

When the IDR-payment savings over the 10-year PSLF clock exceed the lost credits and the slightly higher tax. For high-debt PSLF candidates in 2-dentist households, the math usually favors MFS by **tens of thousands of dollars over 10 years**.

When MFJ wins

When neither spouse is on PSLF, or when the lower-earning spouse's income is below $50K (the IDR formula barely touches it).

This is the one section where I'd actually pay a CPA

Run both scenarios with someone who's done dental households before. The numbers are big enough that it's worth a real opinion.

9 What to do this month

Pick the one that matches you.

If you might qualify for PSLF

Pull your `MyStudentData.txt` from studentaid.gov first (the export tool is buried under "Aid Summary" and the site is slow on weekday evenings — try a Saturday morning). Verify all your loans are Direct loans, not FFEL or Perkins. Run your specific employer through the PSLF Help Tool. If your employer qualifies, certify employment for every year you've already worked there. Backdate certifications as far as records allow. Confirm you're on IBR-new or another qualifying IDR plan. If not, switch. Set a calendar reminder to re-certify every 12 months. That's it. Most of the work is paperwork, not strategy.

If you're not pursuing PSLF and earning above $150K

You already pulled `MyStudentData.txt` above, so you have your weighted-average rate. Get a quote from **Splash Financial** first (single hard pull, multiple lender quotes back). Then **KeyBank** if you're an ADA member (the 0.30% reduction is real and stackable, but only if your ADA membership is current). Then **SoFi medical-professional** (0.125% discount + 0.25% AutoPay stack). Compare 7-year and 10-year fixed quotes against your federal blended rate. If the best quote beats your federal rate by 1.0%+ on the 10-year or 1.5%+ on the 7-year, refinance. If it's closer than that, the federal protections aren't worth giving up for the difference.

If you're in residency, fellowship, or your first year of practice

Switch to IBR-new for now (lowest monthly during low-income years). Don't refinance yet — federal protections matter more than rate while income is unstable. Set a reminder to re-evaluate at the start of your first full W-2 associate year.

If you're in a 2-dentist household

Read Section 8. Run an MFJ-vs-MFS comparison with a CPA before April 15. If one spouse is pursuing PSLF, MFS is often the right filing strategy during the PSLF clock.

10 Why this lives on a contract-review site

A dentist-built site has a student-loan playbook because **your contract is the other half of this math.**

A $20K signing bonus is roughly six months of IBR-new payments at the average dental debt level. A non-compete radius determines whether you can take a higher-paying job in your city, which determines your AGI, which determines your IDR formula. A daily guarantee that's averaged over the pay period instead of paid per-day means a slow week eliminates the floor that would otherwise keep your loan payment manageable. A recoverable-draw clause means a slow month creates a deficit that's repaid out of next month's pay, and it survives termination.

Two things on the site solve adjacent problems:

FREE

Grade My Contract

Drop your offer letter or employment agreement at **dentalunlock.com** and get an A–F grade plus the top red flag in 60 seconds. Paid tiers ($149 / $249) add the full clause-by-clause breakdown, market comparison against 800+ recent dental listings in your state, and a ready-to-send negotiation email.

FREE

Salary Explorer

At **dentalunlock.com/compensation**. Real listing data from 814+ dental jobs across 39 states. Filter by state, employer, or practice type. Useful when you want to know whether the AGI assumption in your loan plan is conservative or optimistic.

Neither is required to use this playbook. Both are free to start.

11 Sources and methodology

Rate data	Lender medical-and-dental rate pages as of April 2026. Verify before applying.
Debt averages	2024 ADA Survey of Dental School Seniors; individual school cost-of-attendance pages.
PSLF rule changes	U.S. Department of Education press releases on Executive Order 14235 (March 2025) and the final rule effective July 1, 2026.
OBBBA loan provisions	Public Law 119-21 (One Big Beautiful Bill Act, July 2025); Congressional Research Service brief IF13075 on the Repayment Assistance Plan; NASFAA OBBBA summary.
Tax-bomb status	`§108(f)(5)` ARPA window expired December 31, 2025; PSLF continues under `§108(f)(1)`. NASFAA, "Welcome to 2026: Some Student Loan Forgiveness Is Now Taxable."
Interest deduction phaseout	IRS Publication 970 (2025).
Calculator math	2025 HHS poverty guidelines drive 2026 IDR calculations. Standard amortization for refinance and standard plans. IDR negative amortization modeled month-by-month.

*Re-pulled quarterly. If you're reading this after July 2026, check **dentalunlock.com/student-loans** for the current edition.*

12 Disclaimer

This document is general financial information about federal student loan repayment programs and the private refinance market. It isn't legal advice. It isn't tax advice. It isn't individualized financial advice. Your actual outcome depends on your specific loans, income, family situation, and employer.

Before making a material change to your repayment plan, consolidating loans, or refinancing, verify the current rules at **studentaid.gov**, run your own numbers, and consider talking to a CFP or tax professional who specializes in dental student loans.

DentalUnlock

Built by a practicing dentist. No name, no photo, on purpose.

The rest of the work is at **dentalunlock.com**

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