



March 3, 2020

The Honorable Delegate Anne R. Kaiser  
Chair  
Ways and Means Committee  
House Office Building  
Annapolis, MD 21401

The Honorable Delegate Alonzo T. Washington  
Vice-Chair  
Ways and Means Committee  
House Office Building  
Annapolis, MD 21401

**RE: Support for Public School Students – Vision Services and the Vision for Maryland Program, House Bill 1375**

Dear Honorable Members of the Ways and Means Committee:

On behalf of the [Vision Impact Institute](#) and the [Kids See Success Initiative](#), we are writing to provide testimony regarding HB 1375 Public School Students – Vision Services and the Vision for Maryland Program.

The Vision Impact Institute is a global non-profit organization whose mission is to raise awareness about the importance of vision correction and protection to make good vision a global priority. Experts agree that up to **80 percent** of learning occurs through the eyes, yet **more than 12 million children in the U.S. suffer from vision problems** that may contribute to poor grades, lower test scores, and educational successes.

While we agree that school vision screenings are important, their effectiveness in detecting most vision problems have proven to be lacking, with children falling through the cracks. Screenings are meant to identify obvious visual problems, most often measuring distance vision. Many children develop refractive errors as their eyes are growing and cannot see clearly. Young children often accommodate their focus because the lens of the eye is flexible; therefore, they are able to pass a school vision screening, yet their vision problems **go undetected with correctable vision disorders that could hinder their learning and put them at a severe disadvantage among their peers.**

Comprehensive eye exams help ensure our children have a successful, productive and healthy future. Beyond the benefits of a school vision screening, **a comprehensive eye examination detects more than vision problems, including serious health conditions**, from diabetes to cardiovascular diseases and even cancer. Therefore, additional vision screenings in Maryland schools, as proposed in the current House Bill 1375 will prove insufficient to ensure healthy vision and can still **miss up to 75 percent of children with vision problems**, according to a study by the American Optometric Association. Failing to detect and treat these issues early through a comprehensive eye examination could put children's overall health at risk. This failure can also result in significant vision abnormalities that could lead to visual impairment and even blindness, thereby having a tremendous impact on quality of life for school age children.

**It is also common for a correctable vision problem to be mistaken as a learning disability.** Children with vision disorders usually struggle with reading, have poor attention span and may have behavior problems, which mimics attention deficit disorders. This often leads to higher numbers of children in special education programs. These programs are expensive to the education system, and a school vision screening would not be sufficient to evaluate for functional vision problems that otherwise could be identified and treated by a qualified eye care professional.

Comprehensive eye exams are important to monitor children's vision throughout their academic career. The American Optometric Association recommends children have an eye exam in their early years (at 6 months, at 3 years of age, before first grade and every two years afterwards). However, only 1 in 3 children in the United States has received any eye care before the age of 6 years old. A recent survey conducted in the U.S. found that **81%** of eye care professionals agree **myopia (nearsightedness) is one of the biggest problems affecting children's eyesight today**. Health experts found that the costs of no intervention is even greater than treating the problem, due to long-term associated risks with myopia progression.

We agree that this legislation could strengthen the current vision-screening program in schools in the state of Maryland; however:

- Vision screenings are no substitute for comprehensive eye exams. And, If not addressed, vision issues can have serious long-term ramifications for a child's future
- Vision screenings alone do not provide the quality eye care children need from a trained provider such as an Optometrist or Ophthalmologist.
- More school vision screenings will add significant cost to the state of Maryland and the economy. Many children up to the age 19 yrs. are covered either under private insurance or under the Affordable Care Act SCHIP program. There are also many philanthropic organizations that are currently providing free or low cost eye exams and eyeglasses to children.
- Further screenings in public schools will put additional burden on school nurses, who are already assuming a variety of roles daily and are managing a wider range of chronic health illnesses and socio-emotional health problems than ever before.
- At minimum, a comprehensive eye exam should be required as part of the evaluation and prior to students being assigned an Individualized Education Program or Behavior Intervention Plan.

We urge Maryland legislators to prioritize vision exams by including these considerations to the current bill and to address the numerous concerns that could lead to long-term eye health issues such as vision loss and emotional and social development in young children.

We thank you for your leadership and for the chance to share our perspective. Please note that we remain available to provide any additional information you may need. We welcome the opportunity to work with the Maryland legislature and other advocates on this very important topic.

Sincerely,



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