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March 5, 2020

The Honorable Anne R. Kaiser  
Chairman, House Ways & Means Committee  
House Office Building, Room 131  
6 Bladen St., Annapolis, MD 21401

**Re: Testimony in Support of House Bill 1375 – “Public School Students - Vision Services and the Vision for Maryland Program”**

Dear Madame Chair & Members of the Committee:

The Maryland Optometric Association (MOA), submits this testimony in support of House Bill 1375 entitled, “Public School Students - Vision Services and the Vision for Maryland Program” (HB 1375). This legislation will serve as a critical first step to help underserved, at-risk students receive needed vision care to achieve their full academic potential.

MOA is a 501 (c) (6) not-for-profit organization that aims to promote the highest quality vision and eye care to the citizens and diverse communities of the state of Maryland. MOA serves as a resource for State licensed optometrists and their patients, and provides public health services as an integral part of the health care system.

At a recent MOA public health outreach event (*Beyond 20/20*) held at Howard High School in Howard County, our organization provided free eye exams and glasses to low-income, public school families whose children had either failed their school screening OR were referred by a teacher, reading specialist or school nurse. Approximately 50% of the students referred by school staff were identified as having a vision problem or disorder that required them to wear glasses. The current school vision screening system and follow up protocols in place had failed these children who already face significant barriers that prevent them from accessing quality eye care.

There are many visual conditions which impact a child’s ability to read, write, spell or perform math computations. Approximately 80% of learning comes through the visual system. For this reason, when a child is assessed for a learning/developmental disability or a behavior problem, a comprehensive visual evaluation for common visual conditions that affect learning should be provided. This is extremely important because we know that many learning-related visual deficiencies are treatable. Imagine how many children’s lives we could improve if we make the proper diagnosis the first time, or earlier in the child’s academic career. Early detection of vision impairment (and other conditions) would prevent many of these children from heading into special education unnecessarily when a pair of eyeglasses to see clearly is all they really needed.

Despite best intentions, the current system is flawed. Too often children with treatable vision conditions are missed, and those identified as having a vision impairment or condition do not get the care they need and deserve. Here’s why...

The majority of the public is confused by the array of visual screeners provided by the public health system in the schools and at the pediatrician office. There are no standards across each county for school vision screenings, and testing protocols vary widely between pediatrician offices. Only certain grades receive a vision screening each year by State mandate (Kindergarten, 1<sup>st</sup> grade and 8<sup>th</sup> grade), which leaves a huge gap during pivotal adolescent years when a child's vision can change the most. These problems are further exacerbated by a complete lack of eye health education in the school system and by parents who mistake a vision screening with a comprehensive eye exam. Ultimately, these failures result in undiagnosed and misdiagnosed children who are not being given the tools they need to succeed.

The establishment of a "Vision for Maryland Program" under House Bill 1375 will help identify and quantify many of the aforementioned problems with school vision screenings to help effectuate solutions that will improve the vision health of all Maryland students. As a result of the Affordable Care Act, all state Exchange and Medicaid plans must include pediatric eye care as an "essential benefit" for dependents under 18 years of age, which means that almost every public school aged child in Maryland should have access to quality eye care, including a comprehensive eye exam and eye glasses if needed. It is our job to educate both children and parents about the importance of vision health and find ways to break down barriers that prevent families from getting children needed vision care services.

HB 1375 recognizes the need to improve upon the current system to ensure that all children with vision impairments and learning difficulties receive an appropriate visual evaluation to detect common conditions which can impact their learning. By referring at-risk children for a comprehensive vision evaluation, HB 1375 will help find children presently being misdiagnosed, children with other language/reading based conditions, children simply being missed and those who have fallen through the cracks of our present system. For these reasons, MOA urges this Committee to vote favorably on HB 1375.