

Testimony of Catherine Carter
before the Innovation and Excellence Commission
August 8, 2018

- My name is Catherine Carter from Let Them See Clearly, a grassroots vision and concussion advocacy group that works on policy and legislative changes to improve the identifications, raise awareness, access to treatment, and I was able to get schools nationwide to provide school accommodations for non-acuity vision disorders. Members of the Innovation and Excellence Commission, thank you for the opportunity to speak today about the importance of ensuring a student's vision is looked when they are struggling and ensuring access to vision care.
- 25% of students have a vision disorder; however, Maryland schools vision screenings are finding only 14%, missing half of vision disorders. Many parents and educators think that a school or pediatrician screening is an eye exam. Even when a student fails a screening, state reporting show that only 30% students receive a follow up. I worked on getting two Maryland bills passed this session, the Atticus Act and Screening Reporting bills for parent education and to improve follow up.
- I have been meeting with Howard county school staff, superintendent, and Department of Health on implementation of these bills to improve identification of students with vision disorders. There is a real coordinated effort between the health department and schools on improving the number of students identified and getting access to eye exams. We are working on parent info in the new student packet and yearly on vision.
- I also met with the special education team on ways to improve eye exam referrals in the remediation and special process. Currently MSDE only requires staff to look at if they passed our limited school screenings in K, 1st, 8th /9th grade to check for vision disorders.
- However, they major problem according the school and health department is access to school eye exams programs. They have vouchers for eye exams and glasses, resources to provide dental exams, but no grants for school eye exams for parents to fail to follow up.
- I am asking that this commission support two recommendations:
 - Struggling students receiving schools services via Response to Intervention RTI, 504, or IEP are referred for an eye exam at initial referral, any pertinent change in academic or medical history, and 3 year evaluation if there is no current eye exam (within the last 12 months) in the student file.
 - Maryland Healthy Eyes Vision Program, establish a vision health department in the Department of Health (similar to the Oral Health established in 1996) and vision grant program for schools to provide onsite eye exams for students who lack access to vision care. I am looking at copying the effective 2007 dental legislation for vision to address this issue.
- "During the first year of the HealthChoice program in 1997, the percentage of children receiving dental services was 19.9 percent. In 1999, HealthChoice utilization increased dramatically to 25.9 percent. However, performance was still 10 percentage points below the HEDIS® national Medicaid average. After Medicaid adopted the 2007 Dental Action Committee (DAC) recommendations, access to care for children enrolled in HealthChoice increased from 51.5 percent (CY 2007) to 60.9 percent (CY 2009). Maryland's performance in 2009 was more than 15 percentage points above the 2009 HEDIS® national Medicaid average. In CY 2015, 69 percent of children received dental services."

http://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2007RS/chapters_noln/Ch_527_sb0181T.pdf

<https://mmcp.health.maryland.gov/Documents/JCRs/2016/dentalJCRfinal11-16.pdf>

<https://mmcp.health.maryland.gov/Pages/maryland-healthy-smiles-dental-program.aspx>

- If a student is struggling, vision should be the first thing checked. If a student who fails a screening or is referred to an eye exam but doesn't have vision care access, we can provide schools resources for vision awareness education programs and vision care in the school health programs.
- Dr. Wen, health commissioner at the Baltimore City Department of Health, helped usher in a new program called Vision for Baltimore. It provides eye exams, two pairs of glasses to every student who needs them right in their own school, and it's all totally free of charge. "About 25 percent of our schoolchildren needed glasses, but were not getting them. That's estimated to be 15,000 to 20,000 of our kids who'll end up having to look at the blackboard, and it's blurry, and they don't know why, and think that it's normal."
- Dr. Megan Collins at Johns Hopkins Hospital is one of those tracking the students' progress. Her past research makes her optimistic. In 2014, she studied 321 elementary students in Baltimore who were given eye exams and glasses. "Kids who we gave glasses to did better on their reading assessments than kids who didn't need glasses, showing that there was a potential that giving them glasses was improving their reading scores."
- Ohio State University study "[found] out of the 179 that required treatment, 124 (**69%**) of the children with IEPs ... were identified with treatable vision problems and yet would pass the vision screening because their vision problem did not affect their distant eye sight."
- Continuing to fail to screen for, identify, accommodate, and ensure access to vision care can have significant consequences. "The population of juvenile delinquents tested at the Charles H. Hickey, Jr. School in Baltimore County, Maryland demonstrates that visual conditions are prevalent in slightly over **98 percent of the population**" Only 6% of those were acuity disorders.
- "A recent study published in the Journal of School Health found that while students from poor urban schools have twice the vision problems of other children, an aggressive on-site program providing children with in-school vision screening and two pairs of glasses (one kept by the teacher) increased eyeglass use from 19 percent to 47 percent."
- "Ophthalmologist Mark W. Preslan and Audrey Novak, executive director of the Maryland Society for Sight, at Baltimore's Steuart Hill Elementary School (which taught pre-K through second grade at the time) provided intensive screening of every child, plus free follow-up eye care. Their study concluded: "Amblyopia, strabismus, and refractive errors were found in relatively high frequencies for this population sample of inner-city children. These findings underscore the necessity of comprehensive vision screening programs that integrate follow-up care. Children with limited access to specialized eye care must be provided with a mechanism for obtaining these services."
- 4 out of 5 visual impairments are correctable or treatable. Studies and common sense tell us that kids who can see their classwork will do better in education. Continuing to ignore our students' vision needs will mean more students will fall further behind, putting them needlessly at risk. Too many Maryland students are sitting in classrooms unable to see what we are trying to teach them due to lack of access to vision care through a comprehensive eye exam, and schools are lacking the policy and resources to help them.