



March 4, 2022

The Honorable Terri L. Hill, M.D.
Member, Maryland House of Delegates
SUBMITTED BY E-MAIL

Re: House Bill 1233

Dear Delegate Hill,

Thank you for your continued advocacy for policies and programs that would improve access to vision care for children and young people in Maryland. At Vision To Learn, a non-profit organization working to help students across the country get the glasses they need to succeed in school, our mission aligns closely with this goal. Since 2012, Vision To Learn has provided no-cost vision screenings, eye exams and glasses directly to K-12 students in 14 states and the District of Columbia. Our program utilizes mobile vision clinics that travel to school sites and community organizations, bringing help directly to kids who need it. As the program continues to grow, we are committed to utilizing best practices and evidence-based research to inform our protocols for vision screenings, eye exams, prescribing glasses, and connecting children to local eye care providers for further evaluation, when needed.

Since 2016, Vision To Learn has partnered with Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore City Health Department, Baltimore City Public Schools, and Warby Parker to provide services at City Schools as “Vision for Baltimore.” To-date the program has provided over 64,000 vision screenings, 14,000 eye exams and 9,900 glasses to K-8 students in Baltimore. This work has been supported by many generous local and national sponsors, including the Abell Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and The Aaron and Lillie Straus Foundation. Recognizing the importance of building a sustainable funding stream, beyond philanthropy, to sustain the program, we also bill Medicaid for covered services and receive claims reimbursement, when available.

Vision To Learn supports House Bill 1233 with amendments. House Bill 1233 would expand data collection, vision screenings, and follow-up eye care for students in need. Seeing clearly at school is critical to student achievement – an estimated 80% of learning is visual. Approximately 1 in 4 students need glasses to clearly see the board or read a book, but in underserved communities a large majority of students in need go without.

Free Glasses for Kids

12100 Wilshire Blvd. Suite 1275, Los Angeles, CA 90025 (800) 485-9196 VisionToLearn.org

Vision To Learn is a nonprofit, tax-exempt public charity under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code.

School-based vision screenings are an important tool for identifying students in need of glasses or more serious vision care, but without additional assistance many families are unable to provide the recommended eye exams and glasses for their children. In the past seven years, Vision for Baltimore has provided a national model for how school-based providers can partner with schools in serving students who have failed vision screenings, ensuring students get the eye exams and glasses they need.

The benefits are clear: a study of the Vision for Baltimore program published recently in the JAMA Ophthalmology journal found that students provided glasses made greater improvements in English Language Arts and mathematics standardized tests, equivalent to adding two to four months of additional learning during the school year. School-based vision programs not only provide health access, but also help to address gaps in academic achievement. A pair of glasses is the most cost-effective educational tool we can provide to our students.

HB 1233 would bring Maryland closer to a comprehensive school vision health policy where no student is left behind. It would add a year of mandated student vision screening in the 3rd or 4th grade, filling in a 7-year gap in vision screening between the currently mandated 1st and 8th grade screenings. The bill would gather data to assess whether referred students are receiving necessary eye exams and glasses, and share information with parents about accessible optometrists and ophthalmologists in their community.

HB 1233 would establish a Pediatric Vision Program in the Department of Health, charged with compiling and making accessible data regarding student vision care. It further would establish a Vision for Maryland program, which would expand vision support services for students going without eye care in the state. And, it would allocate funding to support this expansion in annual phases.

Vision To Learn is named in HB 1233 as the proposed administrator of the Vision for Maryland program. We believe that for such a program to succeed, it will take the combined efforts and input of a wide range of stakeholders, including county boards of education, local health departments, the Maryland Optometric Association, the Maryland Society of Eye Physicians and Surgeons, and our partner organizations at Vision for Baltimore. Recognizing that there are different needs, capacity, and resources in the 24 school districts across Maryland, we recommend convening these stakeholders and others to conduct a needs analysis and feasibility study before formally launching a state-wide Vision for Maryland program. The recommendations of this effort could then be used to guide the structure, timing and strategy of expanding vision service access to students across the state.

Vision To Learn recommends that funding and a plan for such a needs analysis be added to HB 1233. This needs analysis should include an understanding of 1) state and local vision screening requirements and practices, 2) local organizations and providers that currently offer screenings, eye exams, or eyeglasses, both in the community and school setting, 3) current efforts by health departments and boards of education to connect students with vision care after a failed vision screening, including data on rates of

successfully receiving an eye exam, 4) barriers that children and their families currently encounter when connecting with eye care, and 5) data on the number of uninsured or underinsured children in the community.

We share your urgency for expanding vision care access in Maryland. Every year that passes with a student unable to see at school holds back their academic progress. Nevertheless, Vision To Learn believes that a statewide planning process is a necessary next step to establish an effective, comprehensive, and sustainable student vision care network in the state. We look forward to working with Maryland stakeholders to help bring the goals in HB 1233 to fruition.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Ann Hollister". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Ann Hollister
President, Vision To Learn