

March 4, 2022

The Honorable Vanessa E. Atterbeary, Chairman
House Ways & Means Committee
131 House Office Building
6 Bladen Street
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Re: Testimony in Support with Amendments for House Bill 1233 “Public Schools - Health and Vision Services - Required Screenings and Eye Examinations”

Dear Chairman & Members of the Committee:

The Maryland Optometric Association (MOA) submits this testimony in support of House Bill 1233 entitled, “Public Schools - Health and Vision Services - Required Screenings and Eye Examinations” (HB 1233) with amendments. Specifically, MOA recommends amendments to 1) require that ALL students being assessed for, or receiving services under an IEP receive an eye examination, and 2) strike the proposed new addition of Education Article Section 7-404.2 in its entirety (p 8, line 11 through p 9 line 15)

MOA is a 501 (c) 6 non-profit trade association representing hundreds of member optometrists practicing in almost every jurisdiction in the State. As Maryland’s family eye doctors, doctors of optometry know the importance of ensuring all children receive proper eye and vision care. Children are at risk for a wide range of eye and vision disorders, but regular comprehensive eye examinations conducted by an eye care provider (optometrist or ophthalmologist) both annually and at key developmental milestones in a child’s life can improve detection, diagnosis, and early prevention or treatment of eye conditions. Failure to address significant eye and vision conditions early may have long-term consequences not only on eye health but also on educational attainment, professional opportunities and quality of life.

A growing number of states have enacted laws in recent years that require children to have a comprehensive eye exam before entering the school system. The MOA strongly supports these efforts, which not only ensure children begin their academic experience with healthy eyes and good vision, but also save the State considerable human and financial resources. Although HB 1233 does not include this mandate, it does contain several provisions that would help identify children living and learning with an undetected vision condition to connect them with an eye care provider to receive needed eye health services.

There are many visual conditions that can impact a child’s ability to read, write, spell or perform math computations. Approximately 80% of learning comes through the visual system. When assessing a child’s overall health for learning difficulties, it is critical that the student receive a comprehensive eye exam by an eye care provider (optometrist or ophthalmologist) to accurately determine whether the child has a vision disorder or refractive error. For this reason, MOA supports HB 1233 with the amendments referenced above. The reason for the recommended amendments is as follows:

Amendment 1: **Require that ALL students being assessed for, or receiving services under an IEP receive an eye examination** Vision screenings performed by school nurses regularly miss vision conditions. Requiring this student population at high risk for vision problems to fail a screening as a condition of the County ensuring

the student receive an eye exam is a disservice to the child and further burdens the State's already overwhelmed school-based health system. Vision screenings (vs. an eye exam) for this student population are insufficient and come at great cost to the State and individual County school systems.

Amendment 2: **Strike the proposed new addition of Education Article Section 7-404.2 in its entirety** (p 8, line 11 through p 9 line 15). While MOA strongly supports the creation of the Maryland Pediatric Vision Program under the proposed new section to the Education Article 7404.1, we do not support Section 7-404.2, which creates the Vision for Maryland Program, designating \$2 million annually to the expansion of one specific existing program, Vision to Learn. The section, which serves only one of many NGOs that are capable and willing to provide vision care services, greatly compromises continuity of care for student patients that will require a lifetime vision care. MOA recognizes the need for programs like Vision to learn and those provided by other NGO entities and charities for uninsured children without the means to obtain needed vision and eye health services. However, insured students with private or State insurance must be encouraged to find a primary eye care provider (optometrist or ophthalmologist) who take care of their vision health needs not only at the initial visit, but annually as they grow, undergoing additional vision changes throughout their adolescence into adulthood. Vision to Learn, and likeminded programs, provide a valuable service to children in need, but they cannot not address follow up issues that arise for most patients, leaving them without a provider to care for them in the future.

MOA commends the bill sponsor for bringing together a well-rounded stakeholder group of healthcare professionals, educators, administrators and child advocates to improve both the identification and assessment process for children with vision conditions impacting their ability to learn to ensure these children receive needed vision care. For the reasons stated herein, the Maryland Optometric Association urges this Committee to vote favorably on House Bill 1233 with the aforementioned amendments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Whitney Fahrman, O.D." The signature is written in black ink and is positioned to the left of a vertical line.

Whitney Fahrman, O.D.
MOA President