

The Florida Heiken Children's Vision Program

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Many schoolchildren in America are required to undergo a vision check of some sort before entering classes – and with good reason. Formal studies have long shown that vision problems in children and teenagers may contribute to poor school performance, behavior issues, and even delinquency. “Undetected and untreated

An ambitious Florida program is offering comprehensive eye examinations and eyewear for low-income, uninsured schoolchildren who fail school vision screenings.

vision problems can lead to poor academic performance in school, self-esteem issues with attendant emotional components, and, when triggered by other factors, antisocial behavior,” notes researcher Joel N. Zaba, O.D.¹

However, programs to ensure students have the eyewear and eye care necessary for good vision in the classroom appear to be far less common. Relatively few schools or states require students who fail school vision screenings to undergo follow-up eye examinations or obtain necessary vision correction. Fewer still actively offer a program to ensure students receive necessary eyewear or care. As a result, many students, particularly those from low-income, uninsured families, may go without (*see Box 1*).

To address this issue, the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired, Inc., and members of the Miami Dade Optometric Physicians Association joined forces to develop the Florida Heiken Children's Vision Program – a first-of-its-kind, statewide initiative to provide comprehensive eye examinations and eyewear for uninsured, low-income children in the state who fail school vision screenings.

Inspired by the work of Miami-area optometrist Bruce Heiken, O.D., the Florida Heiken Children's Vision Program has over the past 2 decades provided examinations and eyewear, when prescribed, to more than 65,000

children of low-income families. Following a merger of the program 4 years ago with the operations of the Miami Lighthouse – which agreed to take on the program as its first-ever non-low-vision-related project – the Florida Heiken Children's Vision Program was expanded to serve more than 10,000 children annually throughout the state of Florida. The launch of the program statewide last year came as the result of the efforts of Miami Lighthouse to forge a unique coalition of public agencies, private companies, not-for-profit organizations, and health care providers around the initiative. Program participants include the Florida Department of Health, the Florida Optometric Association (FOA) and some of its affiliated local optometric associations, Nova Southeastern University College of Optometry, and a host of civic organizations and foundations. Services are provided around the state through the generosity of Sidney Stern, O.D., founding member of the Dr. Bruce Heiken Memorial Fund, Inc., via the Florida Optometric Physicians Network (FOPN), 1 of the state's largest optometric managed care organizations and the Florida Eyecare Corporation (FECC), the FOPN's optometric network. Optilab, the FOPN's optical laboratory, partly underwrites and assists with the fabrication of the glasses, which are delivered to the child within 1 week. Through the Public Health Trust, the University of Miami Bascom Palmer Eye Institute provides medical intervention. Organizers believe the program could provide a model for similar initiatives around the nation.

The Florida Heiken Program

Under the Florida Heiken Children's Vision Program – the mobile units of which are identified to students and parents as the “Instant Vision Program” – school officials provide information on the availability of no-cost eye examinations to low-income students with vision screening results. (A Healthy Eyes Healthy People® grant enables the Heiken Program to distribute information on eye health in 3 languages. Almost 70% of the population of Miami-Dade County speaks a language other than English at home.)

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Box 1

State preventive vision care requirements

CARE REQUIREMENTS

No requirement:

Arizona, Idaho, Iowa, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Dakota, South Carolina, South Dakota, Wisconsin
Vision Screening

No follow-up care:

Alabama, Alaska, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, Wyoming

Eye exam by doctor after failed vision screening:

Arkansas, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Utah

Required eye exam before entering public school system:

Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri

Children are required to provide signed parental permission forms as well as proof that they qualify for the program. Generally students qualify for the program if they:

- Qualify for free or reduced-cost school meals
- Do not have private insurance that covers eye exams
- Do not have Medicaid or a State Children's Health Insurance Program (in Florida, Kid Care) coverage for eye exams

Financially disadvantaged children who do not meet the 3 eligibility criteria are referred to their community optometrist.

An extensive network of FOPN and FECC member optometrists provides examinations in their offices. The Heiken Program uses 1 of 4 mobile eye care units to deliver eye care onsite at local schools (see Figure 1). Both FOA and non-FOA members contribute to help make this program successful.

Participating optometrists are led by Miami Lighthouse consulting optometrist Bryan Wolynski, O.D. Policies and procedures for the Florida Heiken Program are set down in Quality Assurance Manuals. The program carefully adheres



Figure 1 One of the Florida Heiken Children's Vision Program's mobile units.

to all state-established standards of practice, as well as the requirements of external agencies, including the Florida Department of Health, Florida Board of Optometry, and National Accreditation Council for Blind and Low Vision Services.

An FOPN-designated quality assurance optometrist supervises operations, confirming that all participating doctors and opticians are licensed and insured, have been fully vetted, and follow proper procedures.

Using insurance screening software, program staff verify students referred from public schools are neither Medicaid-eligible nor have coverage under any other personal/private insurance. Students found to have such coverage receive appropriate referrals to community optometrists who accept their insurance.

Organizers say the Heiken Program's mobile units have been important to the success of the program. "The Miami Lighthouse Florida Heiken Children's Vision Program works by taking vision care to the children where they need to receive it—at school," said Dr. Wolynski, the program's president. However, he believes the statewide expansion of the program utilizing mobile units will be even more important in making comprehensive eye examinations and eyewear available to low-income schoolchildren. "Our experience has indicated that many low-income parents do not take their children to a community optometrist even though they have a voucher."

History

The effort initially took shape more than 2 decades ago when Miami-Dade County Florida practitioner Bruce Heiken, O.D., began providing free eye examinations and eyewear for disadvantaged schoolchildren who failed school vision screenings, a practice for which he became well-known. Following his death, the Miami Dade Optometric Physicians Association established the Dr. Bruce Heiken Memorial Fund in 1993 to continue his work on a more formal, county-wide basis. Members of the Miami

Dade Optometric Physicians Association were concerned about the number of children failing school vision screenings but not receiving follow-up eye care because of financial need. Over the next 19 years, the program would provide comprehensive eye examinations and eyeglasses, when prescribed, “to more than 65,000 financially disadvantaged schoolchildren who had no other source for vision care,” the program Web site notes.²

In 2007, with demand for the examinations and eyewear growing, the association turned administration of the initiative over to the Miami Lighthouse, which renamed it the Heiken Children’s Vision Program. Although the Heiken Program represented the Miami Lighthouse’s first foray outside the field of low vision, administrators were able to quickly expand the initiative across the entire Miami-Dade County area. The program’s first 2 mobile units were placed in service. The merger was proposed by a regional funder of both organizations, the Health Foundation of South Florida, with Steven E. Marcus, the foundation president and chief executive officer, leading the negotiations.

The year it merged with the Miami Lighthouse, the Heiken Program provided comprehensive eye examinations for 2,500 Miami-Dade County area schoolchildren. By 2009, that had doubled to nearly 5,000 children served in the Miami-Dade County alone. A third mobile eye care unit was purchased in 2008 with funding from a private foundation. Over its first 4 years under the management of Miami Lighthouse, the Heiken Children’s Vision Program would help nearly 20,000 schoolchildren from low-income families with optometric exams, with 73% requiring prescriptions for free eyeglasses. During the 2010-11 academic year, the Heiken Program conducted 7,096 comprehensive eye exams for students attending Miami-Dade County public schools; 73% of those children (5,158) required prescription glasses that were provided at no cost to the child (see Figure 2).

The program drew notice from civic and business leaders. In April 2010, the Miami-Dade County Public School

Board honored Miami Lighthouse with a proclamation recognizing its distinguished services to Miami-Dade County schoolchildren through the Heiken Program. The Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce Not-for-Profit Taskforce had already presented the Heiken Program its NOVO Award on April 6, 2005.

In early 2010, the Miami Lighthouse launched an ambitious effort to expand the Heiken Program statewide. Later that year, the Florida Heiken Children’s Vision Program, LLC was registered with the State of Florida as a division of the Miami Lighthouse, and the Florida Department of Health issued a contract to subsidize expansion to 62 of Florida’s 67 counties, in addition to Miami-Dade.

At the same time the mobile outreach was expanded beyond the Miami-Dade County area into neighboring Broward and Hillsborough Counties. However, in most areas of the state, examinations are being performed in the practices of participating optometrists. The statewide expansion of the program during the 2011-2012 academic year is expected to increase the number of children served to more than 10,000 annually. By leveraging funds from foundations, along with a new contract from the Florida Department of Health, the Heiken Program will focus on mobile eye care in 40 counties in 2011-2012.

Major contributors to the expanded program include: the Florida Optometric Association Charities, American Optometric Association (AOA), the National Eye Institute Community Awards Program, the Florida Department of Health, the Children’s Trust of Greater Miami, the Batchelor Foundation, the Dunsbaugh-Dalton Foundation, the Dr. John T. Macdonald Foundation, the Miami Foundation, and the program’s funding partner, the Health Foundation of South Florida.

Overall, the program has been well-received by parents, students, and educators, Dr. Wolynski reports. “One of the greatest challenges the program faces is obtaining signed parental permission forms that allow a child who has failed an initial vision screening to have a comprehensive dilated

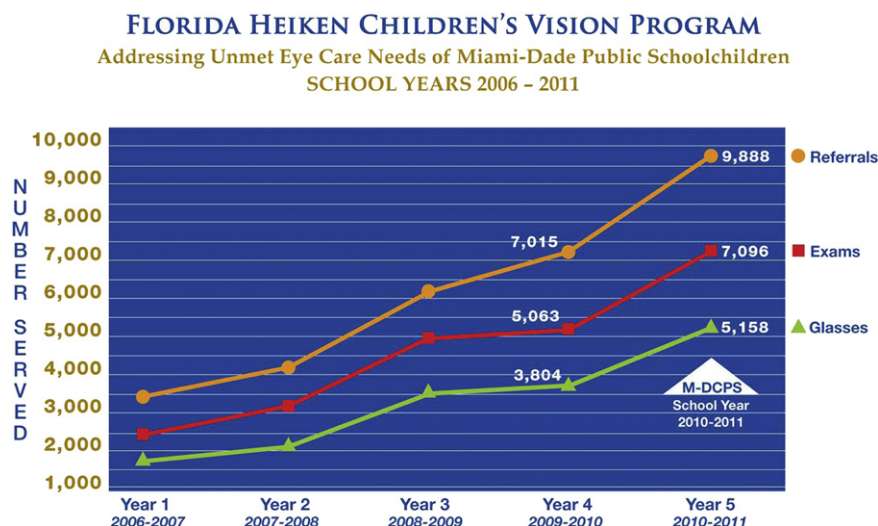


Figure 2 Florida Heiken Children’s Vision Program, 2006-2011.

eye exam. Ongoing education by Miami Lighthouse to parents and teachers about the importance of regular comprehensive eye exams has been the most successful solution to securing parental permission," she said.

"One of the most rewarding aspects of the Florida Heiken Children's Vision Program is the letters of thanks that Miami Lighthouse receives almost weekly from parents and children whose lives have been touched by it. Children formerly frustrated in class are proud of their ability to achieve academic success and know that their lives and futures have been changed for the better," Dr. Wolynski added.

Although it has represented a substantial departure from the organization's traditional work in care for the legally blind, "the Miami Lighthouse has welcomed the expanded opportunities that merging with the Heiken Fund has created," Dr. Wolynski said. "It was actually a natural fit, given that Miami Lighthouse and the Heiken Fund shared similar missions. With a national reputation and 80 years of service in Miami-Dade County, along with its strong infrastructure and fiscal soundness as evidenced by 4 consecutive 4-star (exceptional) ratings by Charity Navigator, Miami Lighthouse ensured that the original intent of the creators of the Heiken Fund would continue."

In fact, he adds, "The Heiken Children's Vision Program has become an integral part of the Miami Lighthouse's Center of Excellence initiative," under which the organization plans to expand increasingly into community health.

A prototype program

Despite decades of education reform efforts, academic performance among school-age American children continues to be a major source of concern. According to Pascal D. Forgione, Jr., Ph.D., U.S. Commissioner of Education Statistics, American fourth-graders now rank 12th in the world in standardized mathematics test scores. U.S. eighth-graders rank 28th; the nation's high school seniors rank 19th.³

Optometrists have long contended that academic underperformance, in many cases, may be the result of undiagnosed developmental vision problems that render schoolchildren unable to adequately focus or target their eyes.

The delivery of eye health care is recognized nationally as an integral part of the delivery of primary health care. The 2011 School Readiness Summit recently announced that "Undiagnosed and untreated vision problems among school-aged children in the U.S. is an urgent national public health challenge."⁴

According to the AOA, "The longer a vision problem goes undiagnosed and untreated, the more a child's brain has to overcompensate to live with the vision problem, instead of developing and learning normally."⁵

Research estimates that 85% of classroom learning comes through visual stimuli. As a result, the need for vision-related services is suddenly pushed to the forefront of

priority issues directly affecting the health and quality of life of our youngest citizens. In reality, vision correction is 1 of the most cost-effective interventions in human and economic development, considered equal to immunizations by the World Health Organization in both importance and impact.⁶

School vision screening programs are not designed to diagnose learning problems. Generally, such problems can only be diagnosed through binocular or development vision tests, administered in the course of a comprehensive eye examination. However, only a handful of states require comprehensive eye examinations for schoolchildren, even when they fail school vision screenings. In some states, children from low-income families may not be able to obtain necessary eye examinations or eyewear, when school screenings indicate a need for simple refractive correction.

With its April 2011 School Readiness Summit: Focus on Vision, the AOA placed new priority on the providing of comprehensive eye examinations for schoolchildren. To date, 26 leading national health care and education groups have signed on to the groundbreaking joint statement endorsing comprehensive eye examinations for schoolchildren. A School Readiness Summit working group continues to actively seek support for the vision embodied in the statement.

Organizers of the Heiken Children's Vision Program believe their initiative offers a practical model that can be replicated to make comprehensive eye examinations available to low-income students across the nation.

"We hope that many other communities and states will emulate our efforts to improve the vision and eye health of our most precious citizens, our children," the Miami Lighthouse Web site emphasizes.²

For additional information, see the Miami Lighthouse Web site's Heiken Children's Vision Program page at: www.miamilighthouse.org/HeikenFund.asp.

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