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AMERICAN OPTOMETRIC ASSOCIATION-LED SCHOOL READINESS SUMMIT ISSUES BOLD HEALTHY VISION AND LEARNING PLAN

WASHINGTON, DC – April 12, 2011 – With about one-in-four school-aged children suffering from an undetected or untreated vision problem, the American Optometric Association (AOA), with support from HOYA Vision Care, gathered together doctors, nurses, educators and other children's health advocates for the first-ever School Readiness Summit: Focus on Vision.

The two-day session, convened by the AOA in Washington, D.C., examined alarmingly high-rates of learning-related vision issues now plaguing America's children and produced a bold healthy vision and learning blueprint to replace a broken system that is leaving millions of children to endure the effects of diseases that are treatable and vision loss that is preventable.

Responding to President Obama's call to ensure that no child is left behind in the classroom due to an undetected or untreated eye or vision disorder, the summit's interdisciplinary workgroup recognized the established link between healthy vision and classroom learning.

The workgroup also produced a joint statement backing "comprehensive eye exams for school-aged children as a foundation for a coordinated and improved approach to addressing children's vision and eye health issues and as a key element of ensuring school readiness in American children."

"Thanks to the School Readiness Summit, we're an important step closer to eliminating undiagnosed and untreated vision problems from America's schools, said AOA president-elect Dori Carlson, O.D. "As a mom, family eye doctor and the incoming president of AOA, I'm proud of this gathering and its determination to lead the way toward doing more to ensure that our children reach their full potential, including recognizing the urgent need for regular comprehensive eye exams," Dr. Carlson added.

Studies show that much of what children learn comes through vision, and undetected and untreated eye and vision disorders in children, such as amblyopia and strabismus, can result in vision loss, additional costly treatments, delayed reading and poorer outcomes in school. In fact, a number of studies even indicate that visual factors are better predictors of academic success than race or socio-economic status.

"Too many American children still go through years of school before a learning-related vision problem is ultimately detected; typically after many other more costly interventions," said Dr. Carlson.

"Knowing what is at stake for our kids, I am grateful to HOYA and all of the participating organizations as well as the nearly 50 doctors, nurses, public officials and children's health advocates who joined with AOA to make our School Readiness Summit the success that it needed to be," Dr. Carlson added.



Summit organizers also welcomed participation by the U.S. Department of Education, knowing that educators are also on the frontlines of child wellness and development.

A 2010 survey of teachers by the AOA found that 81 percent believe vision and learning are interdependent. The survey also found 64 percent of teachers witnessed a direct improvement in a child's academic performance and/or classroom behavior after an eye or vision problem was diagnosed and treated.

"We know if we are to improve school success, we must make sure children can see," said Dr. Alexa Posny, assistant secretary of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services at the U.S. Department of Education and keynote speaker at the summit. "If America is to produce world class students, we must make sure they have all the tools they need for success. Eye exams should be a part of efforts to improve America's educational outcomes," Dr. Posny added.

"The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) is proud to join with the American Optometric Association and other groups in a commitment to ensure that America's schoolchildren have access to diagnosis and treatment for vision problems," said Randi Weingarten, president of the AFT. "A tremendous amount of learning happens visually, so proper vision care is crucial to helping students reach their full potential."

While some school-aged children may receive a vision screening intended to help identify potential problems, a vast majority of children's vision screenings have high rates of false negatives, failing to adequately detect signs of significant vision problems in children chronically burdened by these difficulties.

Instead, healthy vision experts believe that comprehensive eye exams are necessary to detect problems that a simple vision screening can miss, such as eye coordination, near or farsightedness and astigmatism. Comprehensive eye exams can also detect conditions such as lazy eye or color blindness.

The School Readiness Summit joint principles statement was signed by:

American Association of Diabetes Educators
American Federation of Teachers
American Optometric Association
American Public Health Association
Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry
Council for Exceptional Children
Foundation for Eye Health Awareness
HOYA Vision Care
National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners
National Association of School Nurses
National Commission on Vision and Health
National Education Association's Health Information Network
National Head Start Association
National Rural Health Association
Prevent Blindness America
Vision Council

"This is the first time we've seen such a broad and comprehensive group of educators and health care providers agree that the lack of eye exams for children is a problem and that we need to finally move toward fixing it," said Barry Barresi, O.D., Ph.D., executive director of the AOA.

"I'm hopeful that we are finally moving away from a failed and broken system and toward an era where every child begins school with all of the tools – including healthy eyes and vision – needed to succeed in school and later in life," said Dr. Barresi.

About the 2011 School Readiness Summit:

The summit is organized by the American Optometric Association and HOYA Vision Care North America and is intended to develop a broad coalition to improve the readiness and success of children in school. Modeled after the White House Conference on Aging and similar national policy meetings, the Summit focuses largely on examining learning-related vision issues plaguing America's children and to produce an eye health and learning blueprint to replace a broken children's vision system.

The planning committee for the summit consists of the AOA, Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs, National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners, the Vision Council, National Commission on Vision and Health, U.S. Department of Education, National Association of School Nurses, American Speech Language and Hearing Association, and the National Head Start Association.

About the American Optometric Association (AOA):

The American Optometric Association represents approximately 36,000 doctors of optometry, optometry students and paraoptometric assistants and technicians. Optometrists serve patients in nearly 6,500 communities across the country, and in 3,500 of those communities are the only eye doctors. Doctors of optometry provide two-thirds of all primary eye care in the United States.

American Optometric Association doctors of optometry are highly qualified, trained doctors on the frontline of eye and vision care who examine, diagnose, treat and manage diseases and disorders of the eye. In addition to providing eye and vision care, optometrists play a major role in a patient's overall health and well-being by detecting systemic diseases such as diabetes and hypertension.

Prior to optometry school, optometrists typically complete four years of undergraduate study, culminating in a bachelor's degree. Required undergraduate coursework for pre-optometry students is extensive and covers a wide variety of advanced health, science and mathematics. Optometry school consists of four years of post-graduate, doctoral study concentrating on both the eye and systemic health. In addition to their formal training, doctors of optometry must undergo annual continuing education to stay current on the latest standards of care. For more information, visit www.aoa.org.

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