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For Further Information, Contact:
Amanda Soelle, WOA Director of Communications
Email: amanda@woa-eyes.org
Phone: 608.824.2200

CHILDREN'S VISION PROBLEMS CAN HINDER SUCCESS IN SCHOOL

WOA recommends children have yearly comprehensive eye exams prior to the start of each school year

MADISON, Wis. – Studies have consistently shown that vision and eye health have a direct impact on a child's ability to learn, as 80 percent of a child's early learning comes from vision. As the 2021-2022 school year approaches, parents are encouraged to take their children to a doctor of optometry for a comprehensive vision and eye health exam.

"Healthy vision is a critical part of a child's overall learning experience, whether in-person or virtual," advises Dr. Christine Renner, Mauston optometrist and current President of the Wisconsin Optometric Association (WOA). "A comprehensive vision and eye health exam performed by a licensed optometrist can detect problems such as astigmatism (blurred vision), poor eye-hand coordination, and eye health diseases, all of which can restrict a child's ability to learn in school and participate in activities beyond the classroom."

According to the Vision Council of America, 1 in every 4 children has a vision problem that can interfere with learning and behavior. Some children with vision-related learning difficulties may exhibit specific behaviors of hyperactivity and distractibility in school. Unfortunately, due to the similarities in signs and symptoms between undetected vision problems and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), such children may be misdiagnosed with ADHD when an undetected vision problem is the actual cause of learning and behavioral issues.

"Children have a hard time recognizing that a vision problem exists because they do not know the difference between normal vision and their particular ability to see," explains Dr. Renner. "A child who displays disruptive or inattentive behavior may actually be reacting to their inability to participate fully in the classroom, as undiagnosed vision problems can affect their ability to see the board or complete reading and writing assignments."

Common signs of a vision problem in children may include: a dislike or avoidance of reading; short attention span; poor coordination when throwing or catching a ball; placing their head close to their books or sitting close to the TV; excessive blinking or eye rubbing; using their finger or pencil to guide their eyes; and an overall decrease in performance at school.

If detected and treated early, several vision and eye health conditions can be improved or even corrected, allowing the child to see clearly in class, at home, and at play. The WOA recommends a child's first eye assessment take place as early as 6 months of age. Comprehensive eye exams should be conducted before a child enters school and every one to two years afterward, unless otherwise advised by an eye doctor. In between exams, parents and teachers should monitor children for the more prevalent signs listed above, indicating that a student's vision may be impaired.

While some vision screenings can and have caught problems with a child's visual acuity, they can miss a substantial number of children with a learning-related vision problem. "It is important to keep in mind that although a school vision screening may be helpful, it is not a substitute for a comprehensive eye examination by a licensed optometrist," said Dr. Renner. "Vision screenings usually only test a child's ability to see from a distance and cannot detect eye diseases or other more complicated vision problems."

For parents of low-income families who do not have the means to vision and eye health care, the Wisconsin Optometric Association's **VISION USA – The Wisconsin Project** is a year-round, benevolent program which offers no cost, comprehensive eye exams to children from uninsured, low-income families through its network of volunteer optometrists. Parents, nurses, and teachers can visit the WOA website, <http://www.woa-eyes.org/vision-usa-public>, to access program eligibility requirements and/or fill out a VISION USA application. Applications are available in both English and Spanish. Further questions about the program should be directed to 1-877-435-2020.

About the Wisconsin Optometric Association

The Wisconsin Optometric Association (WOA) is a nonprofit affiliation of licensed doctors of optometry and associated businesses dedicated to the preservation and enhancement of the vision welfare of the people of Wisconsin. The WOA accomplishes its goals through: education and dissemination of information, organized governmental activity, legislation and regulation, mediation with consumer and public interest groups, and provision of collective benefits to its members. Approximately 640 doctors of optometry are currently members of the WOA, located in nearly every county in the state. All members must be licensed to practice optometry by the State of Wisconsin. For more information, visit WOA's website at www.woa-eyes.org.