



BRIGHT SPOTS

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

Can something as simple as providing glasses improve a young child's academic performance? Yes, according to research underpinning an effort started by California philanthropist Austin Beutner that has provided thousands of elementary-school students in low-income communities with free eye exams and glasses.

"He insisted on the research piece to make sure it was having an impact," says Gaye Williams, executive director of Vision To Learn, which was launched by the Beutner Family Foundation to address a problem affecting as many as 1.5 million children nationwide, especially those who are minorities and live in low-income families.

Independent evaluation by UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) researchers found improved grades for children served and an improved learning environment for all children. "Kids who were trending downward academically, started trending upward after they got glasses — especially for boys and for math," says Williams, adding that "the ability to read and understand what you're reading is crucial for math."

Since 2012, the program has screened more than 125,000 elementary-school children in Los Angeles, Oakland and Sacramento, and provided over 22,000 with eye exams and more than 17,000 free glasses. The program is expanding within California and into Delaware, Michigan and Virginia.

"Because of Vision To Learn, the prospects for these children, like the words they now see on the page, are clearer and brighter," Ralph Smith, managing director of the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, told a recent national gathering. Honoring Vision To Learn as a GLR Campaign Pacesetter Program, Smith added: "The Beutner Family Foundation has offered a model that can inspire funders and communities across the nation to tackle and solve an eminently solvable problem."

In the Vision To Learn mobile eye clinic that travels to schools, optometrists and opticians provide services to children identified through preliminary screening. Children choose from a kid-friendly selection of glasses. "The critical piece is to make sure they wear them," says Williams. "Having the kids pick out their frames and then all of them getting glasses on the same day helps."

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Bright Spots showcase the work that Grade-Level Reading communities are doing to make progress on school readiness, school attendance and summer learning by 2016. They are written and produced by the Campaign. You can nominate a Bright Spot in your community by emailing Betsy Rubiner at brubiner@gradelevelreading.net.

Providing the services in bulk, only to schools demonstrating a critical mass of need, keeps the cost below \$100 per child. “The more we can get through in a day, the more the cost goes down. We have to be efficient and effective,” says Williams.

California and Delaware plan to soon address another issue — state government health insurance programs for low-income people that do not cover mobile health clinic services. A broad group of philanthropic supporters fund Vision To Learn but “our long-term sustainability plan is that it would be a mixture of say, 70-75 percent Medicaid, 20-25 percent philanthropy,” says Williams.

Recent Vision To Learn evaluations involved focus groups with students, parents and teachers plus an analysis of students’ grades. Findings include:

- Glasses improved reading grades but had a significant impact on math grades.
- Before getting glasses, students struggled to participate in class and complete work. After glasses, they could pay better attention, were more engaged and willing to finish work, contributing to better performance.
- Serving students in school increased access to and use of glasses because glasses were easier to obtain and school culture changed, decreasing the stigma of wearing glasses. Ninety-two percent of teachers and 90 percent of parents reported that the children would not otherwise have access to glasses.
- Teachers could better control their classrooms because they learned which children do and do not have legitimate vision issues. “This helped them place the kids in the classroom, keep everyone in their seats and have less distractions,” says Williams.
- The eye exams detected additional health issues such as glaucoma, cataracts and strabismus (crossed eyes) for children who were then referred for other services.
- Children’s classroom behavior, self-esteem and family quality of life improved. Parents reported arguing less with their children to finish their homework.

“Kids talked about the ability to see and what a difference that makes in their lives,” says Williams.

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