

For Immediate Release

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**GE Grant Allows Vision Coalition Massachusetts
to Help Lynn Students**

Lynn, MA
By Dan Baer/The Daily Item



Oneudy Figueresandov taking an acuity test at the Ford School Tuesday. A cup is placed over one eye and the second eye is used to read shapes off a wall chart some 10 or 12 feet away.
ITEM PHOTO / OWEN O'ROURKE
not even know it.

(LYNN) For kindergarten students at the Ford School, it was just another test in what promises to be a long line of aptitude and skill evaluations over a 13-year school career. But for their parents and teachers, the common eye tests conducted this week by the Vision Coalition Massachusetts can be an essential piece to providing students with the best learning environment possible.

Imagine attempting to read or identify shapes with limited or blurry vision in one eye. Think of having to read a chalkboard with a lazy eye, or pick something up with limited to no depth perception. For too many students, this is a reality that can make learning a struggle, and many of their parents do

These are the disorders that the Vision Coalition Massachusetts has set out to identify. The organization conducts basic eye tests in elementary schools and adult education centers throughout the area, and the results of the tests have been life changing for some.

Funded through the General Electric Good Neighbor Fund for several years, the Vision Coalition Massachusetts has set up screenings in many Lynn elementary schools in the coming weeks, including the Ford, Callahan and Connery.

Executive Director Alan Cregg, who conducts most of the eye exams himself, says that identifying problems in small children can completely change the spectrum of their learning experience. He has even had students who were thought to have special needs turn out to have minor vision problems that are preventing them from keeping up in class.

The tests seem almost too simple to be effective. A student covers one eye and attempts to identify shapes on an eye examination board. This visual acuity test determines how well the child can see out of each eye, and whether or not it is consistent.

The second test involves 3-D glasses, which a student wears while identifying which accompanying card has a letter "E" printed on it. If the student can see the letter in three dimensions, their depth perception is fine. If they cannot identify the letter, they are suffering from eye problems.

If there is vision problems detected, Cregg gives the school nurse a form to send home with the child, and it is the parent's responsibility to seek additional eye exams.

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“The screening isn’t really important, what is important is that they can see better,” said Cregg. “We have a great cooperation with the schools, but we can’t make the kids go to the doctor. Sometimes it is frustrating to me to have 25 kids that need eye exams, and only three go to the doctor, it’s like ‘what are we accomplishing?’”

The Vision Coalition Massachusetts does have a program set up to purchase glasses for students in need, but parents still need to see an optometrist for a full eye exam first. There are other challenges in testing students that young, as some students have a difficult time identifying the shapes on the eye chart. One of the most common mistakes, Cregg says, is a child identifying the square as a triangle, or coming up with shapes that aren’t on the chart at all.

In Lynn, Cregg says the numbers of students who do get glasses are much higher than some other communities. Last year, the Vision Coalition Massachusetts screened 373 kindergarteners and referred 74 for follow-up care, 27 of whom received glasses.

This year, Cregg has increased the number of students screened to 540 in an effort to get the most out of GE’s support.

“We have upped the amount of kids. The point is that we are trying to justify the support from GE as much as possible,” he said. “If we can all raise the bar and commit to do more, then we are really here for these kids.”

Cregg was a full time attorney when he began working for the Vision Coalition Massachusetts, then known as Prevent Blindness, eight years ago. Having lost partial vision in his right eye while playing hockey in college, Cregg decided to become a permanent part of the cause, and help people deal with vision disorders full time.

The GE Good Neighbor Fund, the charitable arm of GE-Lynn employees, is set up so that employees contribute continuously from their paycheck throughout the year. The elected board then allocates the funds to area charities that give back to the Lynn community.

“We have recently seen a significant reduction in both state and federal allocations to nonprofits and increased competition for private foundation grants,” said GEEGNF Secretary Frank Palladino. “This year, more than ever, we are encouraging our employees to contribute to important causes such as the Vision Coalition Massachusetts.”

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