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Vision To Learn launches free glasses program at Riverside County schools

By Diane A. Rhodes

Vision to Learn, a nonprofit based in Los Angeles, expanded into Riverside County and will provide prescription glasses to students in 22 districts free of charge. With its tagline of “Focus on the Future” the organization provides vision screenings, eye exams and prescription glasses to all students who need them. Using its mobile vision clinic, known as an optometric office on wheels, services are available directly at the school sites.

The countywide program was launched at Hemet Elementary School and of the 795 students screened in early October, 155 were referred to the mobile clinic for additional eye exams and 128 were prescribed glasses. Ten of those students were invited to a “Glasses Day” ceremony Wednesday, Oct. 20, at the school where they received their new glasses after several dignitaries spoke about the program.

Christi Barrett, superintendent of HUSD, said the Vision To Learn program’s goal of improving vision aligns perfectly with the district’s vision “to embrace, educate and empower every student, every day.”

“We want to thank RCOE and Vision To Learn for their unwavering dedication in helping us meet a need in our community. Today’s event, though only a snapshot, stands to represent the work of the 14 elementary schools throughout Hemet Unified School District who will benefit from vision screenings and free glasses,” Barrett said. “I want to say to all students receiving spectacles, we think you are spectacular.”

Damian Carroll, national director of Vision To Learn, said it has been a pleasure working with Hemet Unified School District.

“Having these partnerships makes all the difference; we are so proud to be launching the program here,” he said.

Hemet Elementary Principal Joseph Romero, who was joined by the school’s Eagle mascot, welcomed everyone from the stage set up next to one of the nonprofit’s eight mobile clinics used throughout Southern California. Balloons in the school colors of blue and gold, decorated the courtyard.

“With our focus on Literacy for All, we know the gift of sight is essential to the ability to read,” Romero said. “On behalf of our students, we are grateful for the commitment Vision To Learn has dedicated to our scholars and their future academic success.”

Romero went on to read a sampling of letters from appreciative parents who were happy to have the financial help to purchase needed glasses for their Hemet Elementary students.

“Our daughter was fortunate to be included and we hope to see this program grow,” according to a letter from the mother of Layla Velasquez, 6, who picked out a pair of pink frames.

Vision To Learn President Ann Hollister said, “These are just our first 10 but we expect to help 27,000 in the next two years. Since it was founded in 2012, VTL has helped 150,000 throughout Southern California. This is our first district in the Inland Empire and we feel so lucky to be working with all the people we have met here in Riverside County. It takes special community partners to make it work over time.”

Edwin Gomez, superintendent of Riverside County Office of Education, said, “Bringing Vision To Learn into Riverside County is a key element of our Literacy by 5th Grade Initiative. If kids can’t see, they can’t read and reading is fundamental to student success.”

He said this program helps them continue to do what is best for students throughout Riverside County.

“One in five will naturally need glasses during their youth and unfortunately, in underserved communities, 95% usually don’t get them,” he said.

Perez said she was familiar with VTL from when she served as a superintendent at a Los Angeles County school district that participated in the program.

“This is a powerful program that is a catalyst to open a world of possibilities for our youngsters who will then have the opportunity to change our world for the better,” Perez said.

The process begins with vision screenings for all students, utilizing medically appropriate tools; however, these initial screening tools do not need to be administered by medical personnel and volunteers can easily be taught how to use them.

Nora MacLellan is VTL’s volunteer outreach coordinator and is also a Rotarian. She said she has been pleased that in all the communities they have served, she has found willing volunteers among local Rotary International members.

“Volunteers use a Welch Allyn Spot Vision Screener that reads eyes in seconds and can tell if a child requires further testing,” MacLellan said.

The handheld, portable device screens both eyes at once from a 3-foot distance, and results are quickly and easily registered.

Once students are referred to the mobile unit, a converted Sprinter van, for further screening a licensed optometrist will provide eye exams. Students who are prescribed glasses will then choose their frames with the guidance of VTL's optician.

"Every face is different and kids all have their favorite colors so we give them lots of options," MacLellan said. "We want kids to know they look good in their glasses so they are comfortable wearing them."

Approximately two weeks following exam day, VTL's optician will return to the school to provide the students their glasses and fit each child individually as well as instruct them on the proper care and cleaning of their new lenses.

The program expects to provide more than 27,000 Riverside County students in need with eye exams and glasses during the next two school years. Warby Parker, an American online retailer of prescription glasses, provided the glasses through an in-kind donation as an expansion of its Pupils Project.

A three-year controlled study of the Vision To Learn program with Warby Parker by researchers at Johns Hopkins University Wilmer Eye Institute found that students who were provided glasses gained the equivalent of an additional two to three months of learning compared to their peers who failed a vision screening but did not get glasses. Students in the lowest performing 25%, as well as those with IEPs and enrolled in Special Education courses, gained the equivalent of four to six months of additional learning, which was a higher impact than all other common educational interventions studied.

VTL said that vision is critical to students' education as 80% of learning is processed visually. With about one in four students needing glasses, they have found that it is often difficult for families in low-income and rural communities to access quality vision care.

"An estimated 50,000 children in Riverside County go to school every day without the glasses they need to see the board, read a book or participate in class," according to a VTL news release.

VTL is partnering with school districts through an umbrella Memorandum of Understanding for the entire county that outlines the responsibilities of each party. VTL's program model makes it easy for students to access eye care and easy for schools to bring VTL to campuses. Typical district responsibilities include coordinating consent forms for exams and escorting students from the classroom to the mobile clinic, as needed.

Vision To Learn was founded in 2012 by Los Angeles philanthropists Austin and Virginia Beutner to help children in underserved communities get the glasses they need to see clearly,

which studies have shown will help them at school. To date, it has helped kids in more than 500 underserved communities in 14 states. More than 1.2 million children have received vision screenings through the program.



Ten Hemet Elementary School students attend the Vision to Learn “Glasses Day” ceremony, Wednesday, Oct. 20. They are among the 128 students at the school who will receive free glasses through the nonprofit program that has branched out to Riverside County. Valley News/Diane A. Rhodes photo



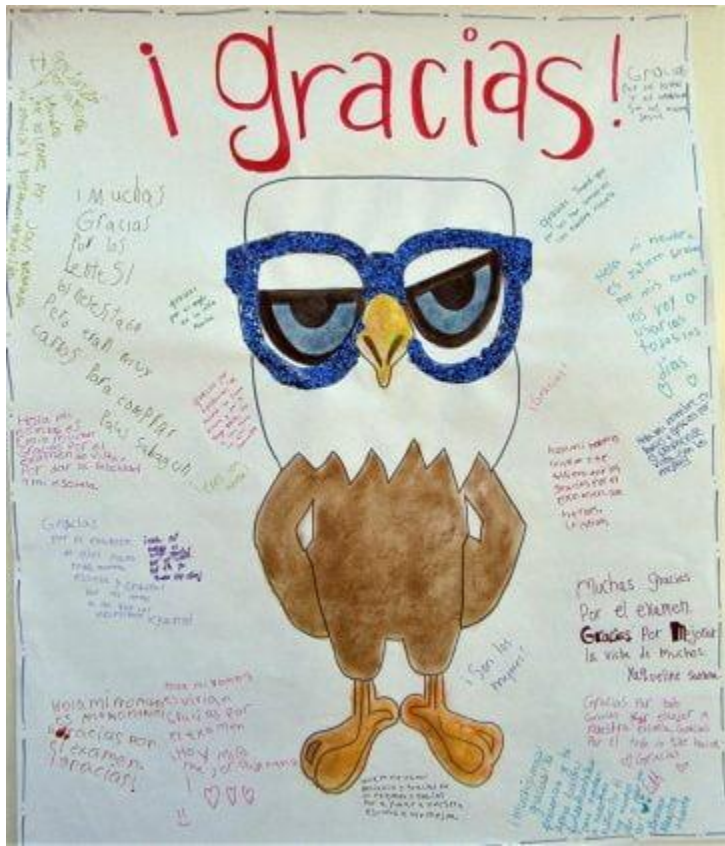
Ruth Perez, deputy superintendent of Riverside County Office of Education, presents Mason Perez, 10, with his new glasses at Hemet Elementary. Valley News/Diane A. Rhodes photo



Vision To Learn partners with Warby Parker to provide a wide selection of colors and styles from which students can choose. Valley News/Diane A. Rhodes photo



Vision To Learn optician Deborah Yasuhara fits Alejandra Castillo, 10, with her new glasses at Hemet Elementary School. Valley News/Diane A. Rhodes photo



A thank-you note on a poster shows Hemet Elementary School's Eagle mascot sporting a new pair of glasses, following the Vision To Learn event. Valley News/Diane A. Rhodes photo



The Vision To Learn mobile unit is fully equipped with everything an optometrist needs to give thorough vision tests to students throughout Riverside County. Valley News/Diane A. Rhodes photo



Vision To Learn optician Deborah Yasuhara shows a Hemet Elementary student the instructions on how to care for her new glasses, while cases filled with prescription glasses await the next students to be fitted. Valley News/Diane A. Rhodes photo