

# GUEST EDITORIAL

## THE ORIGINS OF THE HARVARD CONFERENCE ON VISION & LEARNING

Gary Orfield, Ph.D.

It all started in a discussion back in 1993 with friends from the Graduate School of Education and Kim Marshall, the highly successful principal of the Mather school in Boston. The idea that vision problems could interfere with learning and that reading glasses and vision therapy might help was new to Kim, but he was willing to have a clinic in his school. An initial screening convinced Kim and my wife, Dr. Antonia Orfield, a behavioral optometrist at the New England College of Optometry (NEWENCO), that many children in trouble academically had significant functional vision problems. Antonia said these could be treated. She had been a teacher and thought about how these problems affected learning. With the support of Dr. Larry Clausen, then president of NEWENCO, who also has a doctorate from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, a clinic was created. By spring of 1994, the clinic began vision therapy with eight children. The results were so good that more services were provided. Because very few of the many students who were prescribed glasses obtained them on their own, the clinic soon dispensed glasses in the school.

When I heard about how frequently children in poverty confronted learning-related vision problems, I thought it was important for educators to know this and to respond. Poor children in high poverty schools usually have very weak academic achievement. To a researcher in educational policy, the possible implications for school and health policy were obvious. Antonia was finding that vi-

sion therapy or glasses seemed to be improving student progress, so I suggested that she collect data for research. She was able to find funding and some good statisticians to work on her project. The data from the clinic were entered on a statistical analysis program and provided the basis for her Mather study.

In the years she was working on her study, the educators we knew were surprised to learn of the impact visual skills have on the ability of children to stay focused, read and write efficiently, sit still, and do mathematics. None had realized the high incidence of far-sightedness she found. Dottie Engler, Director of Forums at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, who has an eye for all the possible topics with which educators need to concern themselves, continually suggested that when the study was done it should be presented in public. By the time Antonia's six-year study was done, several other studies of vision problems of children in poverty had been initiated or completed in other parts of the country. Antonia believed we needed to bring all that information and those researchers together to present it to educators and ask the relevant policy questions.

A small grant from the Massachusetts Society of Optometrists, and support from NEWENCO and the Harvard Graduate School of Education made it possible to plan a conference. Drs. Irwin Suchoff, Carl Gruning, and Bruce Moore served with Antonia on a planning committee. Drs. Allan Lewis, President of NEWENCO and David Heath, Vice President for Academic Affairs lent

their support, as well. The conference included a free day-long program in which four panels presenting papers on new research and an evening program which was part of the Harvard Askwith Education Forum Series. Three of the panelists spoke on the Forum and the others fielded questions as well. The discussions all day long were intense between the optometric researchers and other participants, and among the researchers themselves. It was a significant step in stimulating more studies in this area as well as getting the researchers to systematically analyze their data. We invited educators, community members, and people from all areas of health care. The discussion has sparked a great deal of thought in the Boston area on how to see that children falling behind in school can develop the proper visual skills and receive reading glasses if needed for learning. We hope to see a significant initiative in the city. I hope that with the publication of the research papers in the *Journal of Behavioral Optometry* and the *Journal of Vision Development*, there will be more discussion nation-wide, and that education journals and media will also be interested.

It was a great pleasure to moderate the panels at this symposium. The conference was an important breakthrough for bringing the attention of those who make policy to a focus on these critical visual needs of children. Antonia always points out to me that the schools have speech teachers, nurses, social workers, psychologists, occupational therapists,

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low vision teachers, and reading specialists, but no one in the schools is addressing the very complicated development of the visual system of children for learning. There are very large numbers of these visual problems, especially in poverty schools, that affect the child's ability to learn. We know now that they correlate with low tests scores and grades, and we know that they are not being treated outside the school by other agencies. We also know that they can be effectively treated in the schools. We have some significant research showing links between treatment and learning gains, though larger studies are still needed. It is time for the policy goal of "leaving no child behind" to be implemented by educators and eye care professionals as well as researchers and policy makers in each field to work together to provide children the treatment they need to have a fair chance to learn.

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