

AAO POSITION STATEMENT

on

IN-SCHOOL EYE EXAMS

Alberta
Association
of Optometrists 

#100, 8407 Argyll Road, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6C 4B2

P 780.451.6824 F 780.452.9918 TF 1.800.272.8843

optometrists.ab.ca

POLICY ISSUE

The Alberta Association of Optometrists (AAO) believes all children in Alberta should have access to routine comprehensive eye care from an optometrist. The ideal situation is having a local optometrist as a primary eye care provider to provide the best access to comprehensive eye care services with continuity of care.

The AAO recognizes that some children in Alberta experience barriers in terms of their access to comprehensive eye care. These barriers may include limited access to an eye care clinic, perceived or actual financial limitations, access to predictable transportation, or lack of family understanding of comprehensive eye care needs.

ACRONYMS AND DEFINITIONS

- AAO - Alberta Association of Optometrists
- ACO - Alberta College of Optometrists
- AOA - American Optometric Association
- CAO - Canadian Association of Optometrists
- Comprehensive eye examination - An examination of the ocular structures and vision systems including patient history, visual acuity, refraction, binocular vision, ocular health, supplemental testing, diagnosis, treatment, follow-up recommendations, and confidential storage of records.
- Consent - The permission a patient or their legal guardian gives a health care practitioner to perform an examination or procedure after the provider has fully explained the purpose.
- Vision screening - A program intended to identify children with unidentified vision problems. Those children identified as having vision problems are referred for further testing.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Alberta Health covers the cost of a yearly comprehensive eye exam by an optometrist for children under the age of 19. There is also coverage for follow-up care and emergent care for medically necessary visits.

The AAO runs an awareness program for kindergarten students across Alberta called “Eye See... Eye Learn™”. This program targets teachers, parents, and health care providers through an education and awareness program regarding the importance of annual eye exams for children. To date, 43% of kindergarten-age students (age 5 cohort) received an eye exam.

The AAO funded a pilot project called the In-School Eye Evaluation (ISEE) in 2017/18. The purpose of the project was to provide in-school eye evaluations for grade-two children who had not had a comprehensive eye examination in the previous twelve months. The eye evaluation followed a modified clinical technique which was more robust than a traditional vision screening but was not equivalent to a comprehensive eye exam. The eye evaluation included case history, visual acuity, colour vision, accommodative and binocular vision assessment, basic refraction assessment, and an eye health exam. This collaboration between Alberta optometrists and Edmonton’s two school boards indicated that there are undiagnosed vision problems in up to 18% of grade-two students. This pilot project also provided valuable insight into best practices for providing eye care in schools.

“Vision screening” programs can take many forms. However, a vision screening cannot be relied upon to provide the same results as a comprehensive eye exam. Limitations include inadequate testing, untrained personnel, and inadequate testing equipment. As per the AOA website, “Current vision screening methods cannot be relied on to effectively identify individuals who need vision care. In some cases, vision screening may actually inhibit the early diagnosis of vision problems. Screenings can create a false sense of security for those individuals who “pass” the screening but who actually have a vision problem. These people are then less likely to receive treatment for their vision problem-and it could become worse.”

POLICY POSITION

- a) The AAO supports optometric services provided to underserved children in Alberta schools. In-school eye examinations should be equivalent in scope to an in-office comprehensive eye exam and meet the ACO’s current standards of practice, consent, record keeping, billing, follow up care, referrals, confidentiality, and access to files.
- b) The AAO recommends optometrists providing in-school eye examinations follow the ACO’s guidelines for parental or legal guardian consent including direct *written* consent. Consent forms should be approved by the Superintendent (or designate) of the school board prior to working with individual schools.
- c) The AAO recognizes the authority of the *School Act*. Optometrists providing in-school eye examinations must follow the policies of the individual school, the school board, and the *School Act*. Optometrists may be required to complete a criminal record check, a vulnerable sector check, or complete other documentation required by the school jurisdiction.
- d) The AAO recommends optometrists providing in-school eye examinations follow current Alberta Health billing rules.
- e) The AAO does not support “vision screenings” of any description. Optometrists providing in-school eye examinations should not communicate or promote their services as a “vision screening” nor conduct “vision screenings” and call them an eye exam.
- f) The AAO recommends that children with an existing ongoing relationship with a local optometrist should be encouraged to opt-out of an in-school eye examination and return to their local community optometrist. This recommendation should be clearly stated on the consent form.

GUIDELINES

The ACO has regulatory authority through the *Health Professions Act* when establishing standards for optometric care in Alberta. The AAO also recommends the following guidelines when an optometrist is considering providing in-school eye examinations:

- a) Prior to the provision of any in-school eye examinations, the optometrist must contact the local school board to determine the protocol and establish proper points of contact for such examinations.
- b) Optometrists must ensure that schools are informed of the name of the optometrist and any support staff and their office address and phone number.
- c) Arrangements should be made in advance with the principal and teachers for student availability and an adequate space with proper lighting control to complete the examination.
- d) Custodianship of patient records is the responsibility of the optometrist that delivers the care. Optometrists are required to collect, use and disclose health information in accordance with the *Health Information Act* and *Regulations* as well as the ACO's Standards of Practice and Guidelines that call for the creating, maintaining and protecting all patient records in their custody or control.
- e) Optometrists providing in-school eye examinations should enquire about any students with special needs and be prepared to adapt or alter examination techniques to accommodate for those special needs.
- f) Optometrists should not perform dilated fundus or cycloplegic examinations in which topical diagnostic eye drops are administered at in-school eye examinations. The provision of this testing should be performed at a follow-up appointment at the optometrist's office with appropriate parental or legal guardian consent.
- g) Should a referral be required, the mechanism for referral must be established and remains the sole responsibility of the optometrist.
- h) Optometrists should not engage in direct marketing to students, parents, or teachers, nor should they 'steer' patients to their own clinics as this would be in violation of Section 27 of the *School Act*. If vision correction with glasses or contact lenses is recommended the student should be allowed to obtain this vision correction from any licensed source.
- i) The optometrist should provide the child's optical prescription to the parent immediately following the examination and at a later date if requested.
- j) Optometrists must provide a healthy, safe, and positive experience in accordance with the ACO Standards of Practice and the Province of Alberta *School Act*.

CONCLUSION

The AAO recognizes that many children in Alberta do not receive a yearly comprehensive eye examination. The CAO reports that 1 in 4 children have an undetected vision issue. The AAO believes all Albertans should have access to a comprehensive eye exam by a qualified optometrist. The AAO supports the provision of in-school eye exams for children who may not have access to a local optometrist. The AAO recommends optometrists providing in-school eye examinations follow the guidelines above to ensure the best possible standard of care.

REFERENCES

Alberta College of Optometrists Standards of Practice Guidelines

<http://www.collegeofoptometrists.ab.ca/PDF/Guidelines-Standards-of-Practice.pdf>

American Optometric Association website

<https://www.aoa.org/patients-and-public/caring-for-your-vision/comprehensive-eye-and-vision-examination/limitations-of-vision-screening-programs>

Canadian Association of Optometrists position statement on Mobile Eye Care

https://opto.ca/sites/default/files/resources/documents/cao_position_statement_on_mobile_eyecare_oct_2016_english_final.pdf

Province of Alberta School Act

<http://www.qp.alberta.ca/documents/Acts/s03.pdf>

Saskatchewan Association of Optometrists Guideline on In-School Eye Examinations

Canadian Association of Optometrists Eye Health Statistics

https://opto.ca/sites/default/files/resources/documents/eye_health_statistics_with_references.pdf