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Subject: Partnership Provides Eye Screening for Kids
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Included below is a press release regarding the partnership between the Michigan College of Optometry and College of Education and Human Services at Ferris State University. Further information is available by contacting Leah Nixon, assistant director of News Services.

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Ferris ensures young readers' eyes have it

BIG RAPIDS – Why does Johnny struggle with reading? Maybe it's because of eye problems – or maybe not. A new initiative involving Ferris State University's Michigan College of Optometry and College of Education and Human Services is helping students and parents in West Michigan answer that question.

The collaboration began in 2007. Dr. Mark Swan of the MCO discovered that many of the elementary-age students getting eye exams also had reading problems.

“Optometry is unique in that so much of learning and academics is dependent upon vision,” Swan said. “Optometrists work to optimize the visual system and teachers work to inform and teach children to learn, but in the past we have not worked together to help make sure the different systems are being effectively integrated.”

To help make these systems work more closely together, Swan contacted COEHS Dean Michelle Johnston and Interim Associate Dean Paul Blake, which has resulted in students receiving both eye examinations and evaluations of slow progress in learning to read. Whether or not the problem requires corrective eye care, finding out what is hindering the learning process is often a great relief.

“What we're getting is a bunch of bright kids and a lot of scared parents who don't need to be scared, necessarily,” Blake said. “Some of the kids are doing all the right things and they just need validation of that. A lot of it has been teaching parents what they need to do at home.”

Such problems as misalignment of the eyes, which can make a patient's peripheral vision dominant, or eyes that don't properly “track” a line of text can cause reading ability to lag. One particular student that Blake has worked with has benefitted by having both the cause of his eye problem addressed, and being taught new reading strategies.

“As Optometry continues to work with his tracking problem, this student is learning to read in bigger and bigger chunks,” Blake said. “His problem is directly related to short-term memory, because if he comes across a sight word he doesn't know by the time he gets that word sounded out, he's forgotten everything he had read up to that point. So, reading

becomes really slow, laborious and frustrating.”

For the inaugural year of the program, Blake has worked directly with these young learners. Starting this fall, however, students from Ferris’ Elementary Education program will act as tutors under the supervision of Blake and Marlene Braunius, assistant professor School of Education.

In addition to helping young readers, Blake sees Ferris Education students preparing to head their own classrooms gaining a broader understanding of some of the barriers to reading. Like Blake, Swan also believes there is a value to his students.

“The College of Optometry has taught about this integration between vision and learning for years. This is an opportunity to develop a deeper relationship with the School of Education and expand the level of care that we can provide, while at the same time demonstrating to our students how to successfully integrate optometric care with other professions,” he said.

Information about the MCO’s clinics is available at www.ferris.edu/mco.

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