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## A VISION IMPAIRED

### MONEY WOES REDUCE NUMBER OF KIDS GETTING FREE GLASSES



BY MATTHEW I. PINZUR  
mpinzur@miamiherald.com

They have started school seeing B's that look like D's, 8's that look like 6's and chalkboards that look like clouds. They have squinted while reading silently and stammered while reading aloud.

During their crucial first years of education — years that often predict their future success and define their attitude toward school — they have learned more slowly than their classmates or, at least, more slowly than they could have.

"Sometimes I can't see when the teacher uses the overhead," said Adianez Centeno, a third-grader at Avocado Elementary in Homestead. "Sometimes I can't see my morning math."

At Avocado and across the district, countless students struggle with basic reading and math because they cannot clearly see the front of the classroom or the textbooks in front of them.

The solution for more than 40,000 students over the last decade has been the Heiken Children's Vision Fund, which provides free comprehensive eye exams and custom-made glasses for low-income children throughout Miami-Dade.

#### SLOW DONATIONS

But donations have been light for the nonprofit group this year, and it has dramatically curtailed services.

By this time last school year, the Heiken fund had performed more than 3,500 exams and given away more than 2,200 pairs of glasses. This year, it has done less than half that and needs about \$250,000 to catch up.

"We keep sending out [grant] applications, and we get little dribs and drabs, but the need in the community has become so huge," said Mimi Budd, the fund's executive director.

The size of the typical private donation has also shrunk, she said, and donors who support child health and education are often drawn to more dramatic causes such as hunger and homelessness.

Improving a child's vision, Budd said, "doesn't necessarily save a life, but it can — and in many instances does — alter a child's life."

All Miami-Dade students receive basic vision and hearing screenings, but those only identify the problem — they do not provide solutions, especially for the thousands of families who lack the insurance or the cash for more thorough exams and treatments.

"They don't even know who to call, and that's if they know there's a problem," said Patrick Doyle, principal of Avocado, where more than 70 percent of the 1,026 students receive government-subsidized lunch because they are from low-income families.

More than 100,000 students receive basic vision screening from the district each year — mostly in kindergarten, first and fourth grades — and 10,000 to 12,000 fail, Budd said. About half of those meet the Heiken Fund's qualifications: They receive subsidized lunch, do not have vision insurance and do not qualify for Medicaid.

The American Optometric Association recommends a comprehensive eye exam for children when they are 6 months old, followed by exams



**EYE EXAM:** Valeria Romero, 6, gets her vision tested by Dr. Michael Siebert.

when they turn 3, when they start school and then every two years.

Many of the Heiken patients, however, are 8 or 9 years old and receiving their first exam. Their volunteer optometrists routinely see children whose vision problems have become significantly worse because they were undiagnosed for so long.

First-grader Valeria Romero, one of 21 students examined at Avocado this week, was farsighted in her right eye. Her brain had automatically compensated by focusing on the images with her left eye — and because the right eye was being largely ignored, it continued getting weaker.

"It leads to a loss of vision that's totally unnecessary," said Michael Siebert, one of four optometrists who perform the Heiken exams. "This could easily get missed, and she'd walk around with this for who knows how long."

The condition, called amblyopia, is easily solved; some patients need special glasses, but Siebert said Valeria's condition can probably be cured with vision therapy, a series of sight exercises that will strengthen her right eye and bring it in balance with the left.

About half of the children examined by Heiken optometrists require glasses, and the foundation provides them free. A nonprofit lab in Orlando grinds the shatter-proof lenses, and the children pick from an assortment of frames.

#### SAME-DAY SERVICE

They are delivered two weeks later by a licensed dispensing optician, who makes sure the glasses fit correctly on the children's faces. And because so many children receive them the same day, they rarely feel the self-consciousness that discourages some kids from wearing glasses.

"If one doesn't get them, we have hysteria," Budd said. "That's wonderful, because they want

what they actually need."

For many, the results are profound. Adianez, the 8-year-old who struggles to see in class, had 20-400 vision — so weak that even the huge "E" at the top of the eye chart was a blur.

With her new glasses, she will have roughly normal vision — 20 times better than today.

#### OFFICE ON WHEELS

At some schools, the Heiken staff brings a van-load of screening equipment to set up in a spare room. At others, they use a customized minibus that is essentially an optometrist's office on wheels.

Inside, an outreach specialist such as Shelli Cabrera performs preliminary tests, checking the child's depth perception, color vision and visual acuity with a series of high- and low-tech tools.

A few feet away, Siebert makes a preliminary diagnosis, using vision charts and a phoropter, the complex metal mask that tests patients' vision through a wide range of lenses.

Cabrera then uses a series of drops to dilate the patient's eyes, which allows Siebert to make a more accurate diagnosis. The dilation leaves the children extremely sensitive to light for a few hours, and the area outside the van fills up with preteens preening in disposable plastic sunglasses.

In a few hours, Siebert catches a number of relatively serious conditions, including strabismus, a crossed eye that can cause the child to see double, and severe astigmatism, which can make everything appear to have a shadow.

He calls some parents to explain their child's condition, often repeating directions about how and when the new glasses should be used — only with reading and homework for some students, only for distance vision with others.

"One of the big problems is parents think glasses need to be worn all the time," Siebert said, explaining that can actually hurt a child's vision by putting undue strain on their eyes.

Some of the children have more severe problems; Heiken refers them to a network of 104 local doctors who provide at least an initial consultation at no charge. Some have donated entire surgeries.

Most students, however, need little more than a new pair of glasses.

"She's going to see a whole new world," Siebert said as Adianez hopped off the exam chair and out the door. "She's going to see leaves in trees she had no idea she was missing."