



PRESS RELEASE

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Contact: Jeff Baldwin
Communications Director
Office: 888.790.2020 ext. 9
Cell: 804.836.5489
jeff@conexusvision.org

Conexus Leadership Appointed to VDOE Workgroup to Study Impact of Digital Devices in the Classroom

In early December, Melissa Perry, Conexus Director of Community Programs and Public Health, and Dr. Evan Silverstein, Conexus Board Member and Pediatric Ophthalmologist at VCU Medical Center, were appointed to a Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) Workgroup to focus on the impact of digital devices in the classroom. This workgroup is the result of legislation sponsored by Delegate Patrick Hope (2020 HB817).

In addition to staff from VDOE and Conexus, this group also includes Dr. Percita Ellis, Rockbridge Area Health Center, Joanna Pitts, Virginia Department of Health; Jacquelyn Wilmoth, VA Board of Nursing, Department of Health; and Dr. Bela Sood, MD Psychiatrist.

This workgroup's goal is to develop, in collaboration with the Department of Health and medical professional societies, and distribute health and safety best practice guidelines for the use of digital devices in public schools no later than the 2021-2022 school year.

According to VDOE, the guidelines shall be based on peer-reviewed, independently funded studies and shall at a minimum address digital device use for different age ranges and developmental levels, the amount of time spent on digital devices in the classroom, appropriate break frequency from the use of digital devices, physical positioning of digital devices in the classroom, the use of digital devices for homework, and recommended teacher training to ensure best practice implementation.

The new Conexus program, Blink20, will play a significant role in the creation of guidelines that aim to limit a child's screen time and reduce digital eye strain.

Earlier this year, Conexus recognized that digital eye strain had been evolving as a significant problem and COVID-19 virtual and hybrid learning models had hastened the problem significantly and developed, in collaboration with our Council for Pediatric Vision, created Blink20.

Blink20 a four-pronged approach aimed at preventing vision damage; *20-20-20*: every 20 minutes look away at least 20 feet for at least 20 seconds to vary your viewing distance and give your eyes a break from looking at your screen; *Distance/Work Area Set-Up*: arranging the workspace so that eyes are a distance of about 23-25 inches from your computer screen; *Blinking Frequently*: blinking frequently as you use your device and during your 20-20-20 breaks; and *Get Outdoors*: natural light, multi-distance focal points, and exercise are good for your eyes.

The VDOE Workgroup and its subgroups will meet as needed over the course of the next several months.

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ABOUT CONEXUS

Conexus for Children's Vision, based in Richmond, VA, is a private, non-profit 501 (c) 3 organization whose mission is to help every child reach their fullest potential by eliminating undetected and untreated vision problems as barriers to success in school and life. Originally established in 1957 as Prevent Blindness, becoming Conexus in 2014, the agency strives to support an unmet need within the vision community. 80% of what a child learns in school is through vision and 1 in 4 school children have a vision problem significant enough to impact learning. The Essilor Vision Foundation reports that children with uncorrected vision of less than 20/20 are 3 times more likely to fail a grade in school. Undetected and untreated vision problems impact incidences of juvenile delinquency, adult illiteracy, and unreach potential.

Conexus provides comprehensive vision programs to students across the Commonwealth of Virginia including VisioCheck; a vision screening program which evaluates several factors that affect vision clarity and function; and a Mobile Vision Clinic that provides on-site eye exams in schools where access to care or other barriers broadly prevent follow up on vision screening referrals. These non-dilated eye exams are intended to assess and treat visual function; concerns about eye health or the need for additional services and/or dilated exams are referred out for additional care. If prescribed, children participating in the Mobile Vision Clinic have the opportunity to select their very own frames. A few weeks later, Conexus returns to the school with an optician to ensure that the glasses are properly adjusted for each individual child.

In the 2019-2020 school year, Conexus provided 59,238 vision screenings, 3,149 eye exams, and dispensed 2,296 pairs of glasses to students across the Commonwealth of Virginia.