

## CHICAGOLAND



Ollie Lee looks in a mirror held by Miranda Smith, a vision technician, as he tries on glasses at a Chicago public schools vision clinic. KUNI TAKAHASHI/TRIBUNE PHOTOS

## Vision clinic a blessing for students

By Carlos Sadovi  
TRIBUNE REPORTER

For 9-year-old Josual Martin, reading is a study in patience.

The 4th grader strains to make out the letters his teachers jot on blackboards at Fermi Elementary School on Chicago's South Side. And he repeatedly goes over blurry words in books as he squints to read.

Although he considers himself a good student who likes school, poor eyesight may have helped land him a failing grade in reading.

"I need some glasses because I really can't read well. I'm kind of struggling reading books," he said.

Josual recently got a free eye exam and pair of glasses as one of more than 4,400 Chicago public school students who attended a vision clinic



Alyssa Ramirez gets her eyes checked by Dr. Frank Valentino at a free vision clinic this month that drew about 4,400 students.

at a former West Side elementary school put on by the non-profit Communities in Schools of Chicago, the Lions Club, school district and a foundation set up by eyewear maker Luxottica.

For many students, some-

thing as simple as an eye test and glasses may be the bridge to academic success, said Ken Papineau, the district's director of coordinated school health services. School officials screen children for the vision clinic, and

many special-education students are found to need glasses, he said.

"This project is designed to remove that barrier to learning," Papineau said.

Nearly 40,000 students have been treated since the twice-a-year clinics began four years ago, said Katheryn Stafford-Hudson, vision project manager for Communities in Schools of Chicago.

While schools offer basic eye screens, many students have never had more thorough exams. Parents may not have health coverage because they are in the country illegally, can't afford insurance or opt out of vision coverage.

"They honestly don't have the money, [but] they know the children need the eye care," Stafford-Hudson said.

The district recently got \$3

million from the state to offer more vision services for students through May, Papineau said. Using state and private money from other donors, the district's goal is to treat 30,000 students in the spring.

Although many students at the clinic this month never had glasses, others had gone years without a replacement after prescriptions lapsed or the glasses were misplaced.

That's what happened to D'Angelo Dobbs, a 7th grader at Lafayette Elementary School in Humboldt Park. He lost his glasses two summers ago. As he tried on glasses and chose stylish wire frames, D'Angelo said he hopes to hold onto this pair longer.

"I think I'll do a lot better," D'Angelo said.

csadovi@tribune.com