

Bill focuses on children's eyesight

By John Greiner and Jim Killackey
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State senators sent the governor a proposed law Monday requiring about 140,000 children to have vision screening before entering kindergarten, first grade or third grade.

The bill would take effect for the 2007-08 school year if approved by Gov. Brad Henry. Paul Sund, Henry's spokesman, said the bill will be reviewed.

Oklahoma has about 47,000 kindergartners, 49,000 first-graders and 44,000 third-graders, officials said.

"If you can't see, it makes it difficult to learn," said Sen. Susan Paddack, D-Ada, Senate author of the bill.

"Everybody realizes the critical connection of being able to see and learn," Paddack said.

Vision screening is offered at no cost by many Oklahoma groups. Parents also can get their children's eyes tested at county health departments, she said.

"One in four school-age children has a vision problem," said Dianna Bonfiglio, executive director of Prevention Blindness Oklahoma, a volunteer organization that could help with the vision screenings. The organization already provides vision screenings to students at most state elementary schools.

Dr. Michael Siatkowski with the Dean A. McGee Eye Institute said the proposal "gives us three points in time when children won't fall through the cracks."

A need for glasses often is overlooked at a young age, said Siatkowski, an ophthalmologist.

Dr. Kim Hefner, an Oklahoma City optometrist, said "undetected and untreated vision deficiencies can take a large toll" on learning and comprehension.

Studies have shown that 60 percent of students identified as "problem learners" have undetected vision difficulties, Hefner said.