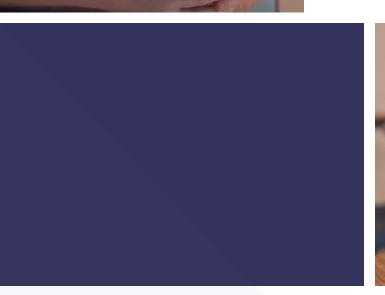# Integrating Teletherapy Into Your Service Delivery Model

Lessons learned from spring school closures to help you plan for a successful new school year

PresenceLearning

What Is Teletherapy for Schools?

Teletherapy in schools is used to deliver a wide range of therapy services. Typically, teletherapy utilizes webcams, audio headsets, and videoconferencing to facilitate synchronous interaction between clinicians and students. Leading professional organizations such as ASHA, AOTA, and the APA* recognize teletherapy as an appropriate model for service delivery for speech-language therapy, occupational therapy, and behavioral & mental health therapy for many students. Teletherapy in the United States has been developing as a field since the 1990s.

PresenceLearning is the leading provider of live online teletherapy services. Founded in 2009, PresenceLearning has delivered over 2.5 million live, online therapy sessions. PresenceLearning speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, and school psychologists and social workers have served tens of thousands of students with speech-language therapy, occupational therapy, and behavioral & mental health services in schools across the United States. The PresenceLearning Care Network of providers has more than 1,200 licensed, clinical professionals with school experience. Hundreds of school districts partner with PresenceLearning to deliver services and ensure students meet their goals.

Why Use Teletherapy?

Schools and school districts use teletherapy to deliver a wide range of services. In rural areas facing a shortage of qualified clinicians, teletherapy provides access to timely evaluations and therapy. And in large urban districts where the need for SLP, OT, and PsychEd services can place unreasonable demands on onsite staff, teletherapy provides a means to supplement onsite clinicians, and help with caseload management.

Today's 21st century learners have grown up with technology. Using Skype and FaceTime with grandparents, playing interactive video games with friends, or watching academic videos for class, they're often most "at home" online. SLPs, OTs, school psychologists, and licensed clinical social workers in the PL Care Network, some with over 10 to 20 years of onsite school experience, back this up. They have reported that many of their students are more engaged with teletherapy than they've ever seen—they enjoy the video interaction with their therapists, find the PresenceLearning teletherapy platform easy to use, and look forward to materials and games that are fine-tuned to their individual interests.

School Closures and the Shift to Distance Learning and Hybrid Models

Planning for the 2020–2021 school year has been heavily impacted by school closures in the spring and summer of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Models for this school year vary widely with some districts opting for 100% distance learning while other districts opt for 100% in-person learning, and others for hybrid models that include some in-person classes and some online classes and services. One thing is clear. School districts need to be prepared to adapt their plans quickly to meet fluid public health conditions. Districts that already have some form of online learning and services with staff trained and comfortable with online platforms are able to adapt quickly. Being proactive in planning for hybrid and in-home delivery of services will make transition smoother and faster if and when it is needed.

Lessons Learned from Spring 2020 and the COVID-19 Pandemic

In July, 2020 PresenceLearning hosted a 2-part webinar, Back-to-School: Integrating Teletherapy Into Your Service Delivery Model. In Part 1, PresenceLearning clinical experts, Kristin Martinez, M.A., CCC-SLP, Clinical Director, SLP and OT, and Stephanie Taylor, Ed.S, NCSP, Clinical Director for Psychoeducational Services, shared lessons learned from school closures to guide back-to-school planning for remote, hybrid, or in-person reentry.

And in Part 2, school partners Mike Lowers, M.S., Executive Director of the Central Kansas Cooperative in Education, Melissa Phillips, M.A., CCC-SLP, Lewis Cass ISD, and Julian Duffey, Bonneville Joint USD #93, joined PresenceLearning clinical experts to share strategies their districts used for back-to-school planning and to answer questions submitted by school districts and clinicians across the country. Following are some of the strategies shared.

7 Steps for Getting Started with Teletherapy

01 Platform Considerations

With spring school closures, many school districts were caught off guard and had to scramble to deliver classes and services online. Many schools tried to use business platforms and quickly ran into a host of unanticipated challenges from security issues to lack of participation. Melissa Phillips, CCC-SLP at Lewis Cass ISD, learned some lessons about platform considerations.

Melissa works with children who require a lot of tangible reinforcement. She started out using a business platform to do teletherapy and one of her students with autism refused to attend after initial attempts.

Melissa explained, "She would cry and run away when her dad told her it was speech time. It just wasn't working. My director came to me and asked if I wanted to try the PresenceLearning platform. I jumped on it because I wasn't happy with what we were doing. We implemented PresenceLearning with her as my test student. Her visual attention and participation improved immediately—she's engaged more than 90% of the time. Her dad said 'I didn't know she could pay attention like this.'"

Mike Lowers of Central Kansas Cooperative in Education described how they hastily selected a business platform for their staff to use in the spring. Right away they were faced with FERPA compliance and how it would work with students at home. They used some workarounds that got them through until they adopted PresenceLearning's FERPA compliant teletherapy platform, built by clinicians for clinicians.

Here are a few questions you should ask when considering a platform for teletherapy and tele-assessment:

- What was the platform built for originally?
- Is it secure? (HIPAA and FERPA compliance are essential.)
- Is the platform interactive?
- Does it include an activity library and the ability to save activities?
- Does it allow second camera integration?
- Does it have features that support administration of online assessments?

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02 Collect Data about Student Resources

Student resources can vary wildly across districts. In many homes, a single computer may be shared with siblings and a parent or caregiver. Whole communities may lack robust internet access. Understanding what technology and internet access students have at home is an essential foundation for creating a plan that will work.

Mike Lowers described how his cooperative did surveys initially to understand which students and families had hardware and bandwidth available and which families did not. Mike explained:

"It was surprising the number of people that only had internet on their phone and didn't have any kind of internet in their house. We bought temporary hotspots and took them out to their houses with Chromebooks to get them going. In some of our grade levels not all the kids had Chromebooks that they carried back and forth from school. It made us move to a full 1:1 initiative. That was a priority.

We have students with all kinds of special needs so we had to really think about physical disabilities—hearing, vision. We had equipment set up in the classroom but suddenly we had to prioritize those kids and make sure they had the equipment they needed at home. We had to buy some new equipment but not an enormous amount."

PresenceLearning clinical experts have created a Teletherapy Home Environment Survey to help you with this step. You will find it in the Resources section at the end of this article.

Here are a few questions to help guide your data collection on student resources and equipment:

- Do students have the internet bandwidth necessary for synchronous teletherapy?
- What options do you have to provide solutions for students without the internet at home?
- Is all necessary equipment available in the correct quantities?
- How can you prioritize equipment if there is short supply?
- Do you have a plan to track who receives equipment?
- Where would the service take place in the home? (environment)
- Who is at home with them? Who is available for support if needed?
- Can coaching or guidance documents be created to help the parent/caregiver prepare a location conducive for therapy?
- Will translation services be needed for setup and/or support of teletherapy?
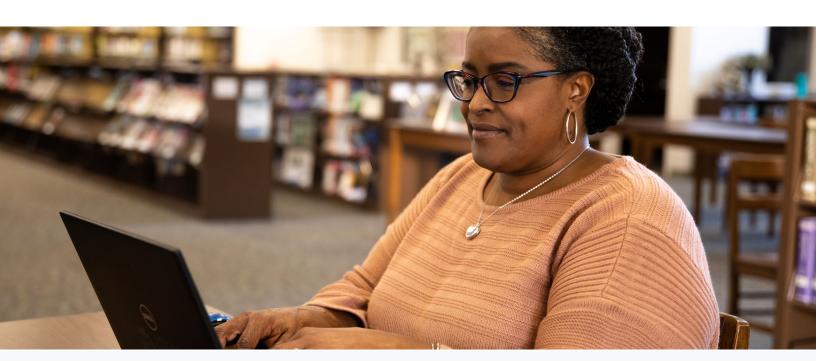
03 Staff contingency planning

Staff needs can change quickly so it's important to be prepared so that if or when a new need arises, you're ready. One large district that partnered with PresenceLearning grappled with an unanticipated change moving students from onsite to in the home. When the students were onsite, most of their students were in groups. They were concerned about privacy so they moved to 1:1 in the homes which changed their staffing needs. They had to bring in additional teletherapists to support this new model.

Staff members may need to step away for a time to take care of family members and children. And staff mental health should be addressed. You might need back up staff to make sure your onsite staff is supported through anything that comes up. In addition, getting caught up on Delayed Services, sometimes referenced as Recovery Services, is an issue following school closures. Districts must consider what is needed to help students get caught up on the time they missed that may have impacted their functionality or goal regressions. In these cases, students may need more time to help them get back on track. This can require additional staffing.

Here are a few questions to help you with staff contingency planning:

- Will therapy need to change from groups to 1:1?
- Will onsite staff need to take on duties related to the school closures that will prevent them from doing their traditional duties?
- Will those staff need time away?
- How will staff mental health support be addressed?
- Will staff be utilized to get caught up on delayed services (Recovery Services)?

04 Provide Training

Training is integral to support any significant change in process. In the spring as schools had to pivot to online services immediately, staff and service providers didn't have time to consider carefully how to do that appropriately or methodically. Many were challenged to figure it out on the spot. PresenceLearning's clinical experts heard from one large district about their plans to use all of their in-service days before the start of the year to train for both in-person and online contingencies. They're training on safety and sanitizing protocols if they are there in person. But they are also training on how to use a teletherapy platform, and making sure regardless of what happens, that their staff and students will feel comfortable.

When planning for teletherapy and tele-assessment, it's important to help your staff think through what they know about teaching and doing therapy in person and consider how to transition those skills online, both functionally and logistically. Providing actual hands-on time using your online tools of choice will ensure your staff are not just confident in how to use the tools, but how to work with students in a new environment.

One key takeaway we've heard for training: schools are bringing in guest speakers well versed in teletherapy for their in-service days, and they're utilizing experts in the field of teletherapy to help them plan for all their student needs. Experts can reduce the learning curve by sharing what they already know about research-based best practices for quality teletherapy. And they can provide access to actual therapeutic techniques and resources that lead to success in the teletherapy environment.

Here are a few key questions to guide your training efforts:

- What makes for quality teletherapy and tele-assessment?
- How does teletherapy work for students with moderate-to-severe needs?
- How do you adapt in-person activities and therapy techniques in an online environment?
- How are student behavior and attention needs managed via teletherapy?

05

Work with Parents as Partners

One major change from in-person to online delivery in homes is that staff will need to prepare to work with parents and caregivers as partners. Service providers need to prepare to collaborate with parents and caregivers to support students. It's important to see the shift from onsite to in-home as an opportunity to connect with parents, build rapport, and see the home environments in ways that have not been possible previously.

Preparing to work with parents as partners will help ensure the delivery of quality services to the students. Communication is key to a successful partnership. Some schools use a combination of emails and phone calls to introduce the idea of teletherapy to parents initially, and follow-up with regular and frequent check-ins. To help parents feel confident that they can facilitate effectively and support their children in teletherapy, schools transitioning to home services provide a checklist and clear instructions for parents. And they make sure that parents have quick access to great tech support to minimize any down time and frustration.

Here are a few key questions to consider for working with parents as partners:

- What is the first choice channel to communicate with parents?
- How will you reach out to parents who don't respond?
- What schedule and frequency would be best for communication with your parent community?
- What information do parents need to be able to facilitate their childrens' teletherapy sessions?
- How will you handle tech support?

06   Logistical Planning for Home Delivery of Services

Transitioning services from onsite to in-home brings with it unique challenges. It's important to consider and create policies to address questions about engagement, absences, and refusals. Logistical planning in advance for in-home services will help avoid difficulties later.

One of the first things districts learned from spring closures is that it's essential to plan for getting students in front of the computer. Engagement, absences, and refusals are examples of topics where seeking input from experts who have extensive experience in teletherapy and tele-assessment can help you. People with a depth of experience in teletherapy and tele-assessment services have learned how to work around possible issues with the right platform and activities to reduce refusal behaviors as well as provide support with behavior plans to get students motivated to attend and work. They understand that the interactivity of the teletherapy platform is key.

Here are a few questions on logistical planning to think about:

- How will you address student absences and refusals?
- What can help engage students?
- How can you support parents in encouraging their children to participate in the teletherapy sessions?
- Based on research, what size of groups are appropriate for remote services?
- What's the best way to share expert input with your clinicians and parent partners?

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07 Other Important Considerations

There are also important considerations that require districts to think through issues and create clear policies—for example, compliance timelines, privacy and groups, service minutes, paperwork, and in-person assessments.

Compliance timelines

You'll need to think about how your district will address compliance timelines. Guidance from the federal government has been pretty clear that there will be no suspension of the standard timelines or of compliance requirements so it's important to consider in advance how you plan to address compliance timelines.

Privacy

Privacy considerations for groups is another important topic to address. We heard from districts that were doing groups when students were in brick-and-mortar settings. Once they transitioned to home services they heard from parents who had concerns about their child and themselves being viewed by other people in their home on their computer. You'll need to determine in advance how your district feels about this and consider if you have specific policies or secure protocols you want to implement to minimize potential privacy issues.

Mike Lowers of Central Kansas told us:

"*Communication with parents is extremely important . . . be very transparent about what you're doing. We always gave parents the option to opt out of group speech and do 1:1 individual. And we asked them to sign a waiver as well. No one had a problem with that. It worked out very well.*"

Assessments and Service Minutes

Unfortunately, many students have lost service time to school closures. Never before have schools wrestled on a mass scale with how to restore months worth of time. So, how are schools reimagining these services? What is the right balance between what students need to continue making progress, maintain their current LRE, but also restore lost time? Does one supercede the other? Districts have let us know they feel there are no clear answers here and that each case is unique, so you're not alone if you find yourself challenged by this. The good news seems to be that "individualized" education plans are still the best way to move forward in uncertain times. Documenting that the specific needs of the individual student have been considered and addressed is key.

Paperwork

Another consideration and challenge is paperwork. Districts are looking at how to manage paperwork differently. They're asking questions like: Do we need to amend IEPs? Do we need to amend timelines? What is it we need to do in the absence of very specific guidelines from the government? You will need to ask if and when it is appropriate to make changes. It's important to bear in mind that many of these issues are hopefully short term due to the pandemic. We found school district opinions really differed on when to make amendments, but all agreed on the importance of creating policies to ensure all schools district-wide have standard guidelines to help them address these questions.

Julian Duffey, M.S., M.Ed, Director of Special Education & Federal Programs at Bonneville Joint Unified School District #93, explained the process his school district adopted:

> *"We didn't amend a single IEP. We used parent meetings. We used a group mailing to parents. We utilized personal contact via phone and we utilized written notices...simply because this pandemic is a temporary event even though it's going to stretch longer...We're already pulled as far as resources go...We write all of our IEPs as if school and services are basically in progress as normal and then we tack a written notice with detailed minutes on top of it discussing what services will look like when we are in Covid closedown mode. This coming fall we will have 4 different phases so we will have four different options sitting in the written notice. That way we are at least meeting the letter of the law and trying to do what's best for kids, and also trying to reduce our workload since it's high enough already, by using those written notices."*

In-person assessment

And finally, another important consideration is how your district will address students requiring in-person assessment. Online assessment is appropriate for most students but there will always be some situations where in-person assessment is required, either due to the function level of the student or because the appropriate in-person support is not available. Preparing in advance for what you'll do in these scenarios is important.

Some districts we've spoken to who are doing in-person assessment for individuals as needed told us they have set up a special station in the school in order to do in-person assessment safely, employing sanitizing protocols and utilizing social distancing which presents unique challenges in the testing environment.

We recommend that you meet with your whole assessment team and parents to examine what is the most appropriate route. You'll need to address whether you have concerns about the student's current mental health functioning, and if you are going to get a valid measure of their abilities to help you decide whether in-person or remote assessment is appropriate.

Please note: You'll need to stay up to date on these topics to make sure your team is aware of any updates or significant changes that might impact your district.

In Conclusion

Consider teletherapy as a long term solution to help you meet the needs of your students whether they are at home or in a school-based setting. Integrating teletherapy into your service delivery model can give you the flexibility and resilience to meet the changing needs of your districts, your staff, and your students.

> *I am not an easy sell. I frankly brought biases into this. I guess I am old enough that I thought I'm not sure this can work with all kids. I'm just not sure how it will work at all. PresenceLearning has turned out to blow all of those out of the water. It does work well. The kids like the technology. It's very engaging for them. So you have to keep an open mind.*

—Mike Lowers, M.S., Executive Director, Central Kansas Cooperative in Education

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PresenceLearning Resources

- **Back-to-School: Integrating Teletherapy Into Your Service Delivery Model** Webinar Series
  - **Part 1** — PresenceLearning clinical experts, Kristin Martinez, M.A., CCC-SLP, and Stephanie Taylor, Ed.S, NCSP, share lessons learned from school closures to guide back-to-school planning for remote, hybrid, or in-person reentry.
  - **Part 2** — PresenceLearning clinical experts and school partners, Mike Lowers, Central Kansas Cooperative in Education, Melissa Phillips, CCC-SLP, Lewis Cass ISD, and Julian Duffey, Bonneville Joint USD #93, share strategies their districts used for back-to-school planning.
- **Teletherapy Home Environment Survey**
- **Tele-assessment—What You Need to Know** Webinar
- Learn more about our options for **professional development**

If you're interested in learning more about how to integrate teletherapy into your service delivery model, please **request a consultation** on our website at presencelearning.com.

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A Checklist of Questions to Consider

Platform Considerations

○ What was the platform built for originally?

○ Is it secure? (HIPAA and FERPA compliance are essential.)

○ Is the platform interactive?

○ Does it include an activity library and the ability to save activities?

○ Does it allow second camera integration?

○ Does it have features that support administration of online assessments?

Provide Training

○ What makes for quality teletherapy and tele-assessment?

○ How does teletherapy work for students with moderate-to-severe needs?

○ How do you adapt in-person activities and therapy techniques in an online environment?

○ How are student behavior and attention needs managed via teletherapy?

Work with Parents as Partners

○ What is the first choice channel to communicate with parents?

○ How will you reach out to parents who don't respond?

○ What schedule and frequency would be best for communication with your parent community?

○ What information do parents need to be able to facilitate their childrens' teletherapy sessions?

○ How will you handle tech support?

Collect Data about Student Resources

○ Do students have the internet bandwidth necessary for synchronous teletherapy?

○ What options do you have to provide solutions for students without the internet at home?

○ Is all necessary equipment available in the correct quantities?

○ How can you prioritize equipment if there is short supply?

○ Do you have a plan to track who receives equipment?

○ Where would the service take place in the home? (environment)

○ Who is at home with them? Who is available for support if needed?

○ Can coaching or guidance documents be created to help the parent/caregiver prepare a location conducive for therapy?

○ Will translation services be needed for setup and/or support of teletherapy?

Staff contingency planning

○ Will therapy need to change from groups to 1:1?

○ Will onsite staff need to take on duties related to the school closures that will prevent them from doing their traditional duties?

○ Will those staff need time away?

○ How will staff mental health support be addressed?

○ Will staff be utilized to get caught up on delayed services (Recovery Services)?

Logistical Planning for Home Delivery of Services

○ How will you address student absences and refusals?

○ What can help engage students?

○ How can you support parents in encouraging their children to participate in the teletherapy sessions?

○ Based on research, what size of groups are appropriate for remote services?

○ What's the best way to share expert input with your clinicians and parent partners?