Resources and Recommendations for School-Based Telehealth Implementation

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November 2023

Kathryn King, MD, MHS
Assistant Executive Medical Director, Center for Telehealth
COE Co-Project Director
Associate Professor, Pediatrics
Medical University of South Carolina

Katie Reget, MPH
Senior Program Specialist, Clinical Innovations
AAMC
kreget@aamc.org

Ayanna Williams, PMP
Project Management Specialist
AAMC
aywilliams@aamc.org

Rosha McCoy, MD, FAAP
Senior Director, Advancing Clinical Leadership and Quality/Health Care Affairs
Principal Investigator for the CDC Cooperative Agreement
AAMC
rmccoy@aamc.org

Suggested citation: King, K, Reget, K, Williams, A, McCoy, R. *Resources and Recommendations for School-Based Telehealth Implementation*. Washington, DC: AAMC; 2023.

This guide is meant to serve as a resource for organizations seeking more information about and aid in developing school-based telehealth programs. It includes a brief description of points to consider and links to publicly available resources for further assistance.

What is school-based telehealth?

Over the last decade, telehealth services have increasingly grown, which has accelerated in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. With this increased use of services, there has been a notable culture shift in awareness of and willingness to use telehealth services. School-based telehealth has emerged as a newer care model for pediatric communities that capitalizes on this culture shift of growing telehealth use and acceptance.

In addition, school-based telehealth models have proved to be important in improving health care access for under-resourced communities and helping to connect pediatric populations who may not usually have access to higher levels of care. Many health systems across the country are prioritizing health equity and initiatives targeted at improved access to care. School-based telehealth has emerged as a model to address these priorities for the pediatric care community.

School-based telehealth combines two non-traditional health care delivery methods — primary and secondary education settings and technology — to bring care to pediatric communities. While school-based telehealth models may differ depending on their affiliated health system or institution, the common component is employing technology resources to connect a child at school to a provider at another location. The primary technology resources typically involve audio-visual equipment to enable a synchronous video connection between the student and the provider. The student's location is often referred to as the originating site, and the provider's location is often referred to as the distant site. Additional technology resources may include peripheral devices such as an electronic stethoscope or exam camera to enable a detailed physical exam. Some models for school-based telehealth care include existing infrastructure support such as a school nurse or school clinic location.

General school-based telehealth resources

American Academy of Pediatrics Section on Telehealth Care:
aap.org/en/community/aap-sections/telehealth-care

American Telemedicine Association Operating Procedures for Pediatric Telehealth:
americantelemed.org/resources/operating-procedures-for-pediatric-telehealth

National Telehealth Centers of Excellence:
telehealthcoe.org

National Consortium of Telehealth Resource Centers:
telehealthresourcecenter.org

Department of Health and Human Services:
telehealth.hhs.gov/providers/best-practice-guides/school-based-telehealth

Services

The list of services that could be offered through a school-based telehealth model is extensive. While not every health complaint can be fully diagnosed and treated via telehealth, connecting to a health care provider often facilitates in-person care that may not have otherwise been accessible. When planning a school-based telehealth program, it is important to consider the population's specific needs, issues of access to be solved, and stakeholders involved.

Often, the goals of school-based telehealth programs involve reduced missed class time for students, reduced missed days from work for parents, and increased convenience of care for an underserved community. Accordingly, many school-based health centers choose to begin with episodic or urgent care for common low-acuity needs. These conditions may include environmental allergies, upper respiratory tract infections, ear infections, and rashes. Studies have found that caregivers feel strongly that school-based telehealth programs have reduced barriers to accessing care for these conditions.

In scaling school-based telehealth programming, it is important to consider chronic conditions because some specific chronic diseases are particularly well suited for treatment via school-based telehealth. Many school-based health centers have focused on common chronic diseases such as asthma, ADHD, and diabetes. All of these can be well managed in the school setting, with school nurses serving a central role in coordinating care with providers and parents. School-based telehealth can also facilitate access to specialists, enable daily medications to be administered at school for increased compliance, and help to ensure close follow-up, all of which may lead to faster medication titration and symptom resolution.

Another potential area to consider in scaling school-based telehealth is access to mental health treatment, particularly specialty mental health treatment. These areas of care remain a challenge for many children and often for those from under-resourced communities. School-based telehealth may serve an important role in reducing barriers to treatment options. Important special considerations for these programs include the need for private space and safety planning; however, mental health treatment typically requires simpler technology than other treatments that may more commonly require physical examination.

Furthermore, schools have often been engaged as resources for mandated health screenings such as vision, hearing, dental, and developmental assessments. While not all of these may be fully implemented via telehealth, telehealth's access to providers may help facilitate these services or referrals to treatment options when a student screens positive. These connections may also offer increased access to vaccine information, counseling, and facilitate on-site vaccine administration.

While student health care is typically emphasized when discussing school-based telehealth, it is important to note that programs may also extend care to school faculty and staff, which can create added satisfaction, reduction in missed work, and a "trickle-down" effect in which students and caregivers feel more comfortable accessing the program because of the precedent set by faculty and staff participation.

School relationships

Many school-based telehealth programs rely on referrals from, if not direct involvement of, school nurses in facilitating encounters. School nurses play an important role in providing first-line public health care for children and are often the first step in facilitating access to primary care. Establishing a trusted relationship between a school nurse and an external provider is pivotal in school-based telehealth program implementation and prolonged success. The National Association of School Nurses position statement offers related resources.

In its 2019 Census, the National School-Based Health Alliance determined that Federally Qualified Health Centers, followed by hospitals or medical centers, and nonprofit or community-based organizations provided a significant proportion of school-based telehealth care. Telehealth technology may be helping to renew interest among innovation-driven hospitals and medical centers in providing care to youth at school. The involvement of local school boards and governing bodies is essential in building these programs.

The School-Based Health Alliance offers resources for developing school-based telehealth programming.

Legal and compliance considerations

Memorandums of understanding, contracts, or agreements will likely be required to protect the relationships in school-based health centers. Consent forms for diagnosis and treatment should outline the use of telehealth and include disclosures related to the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. Further regulatory issues include malpractice insurance, billing compliance, and professional practice guidelines, which vary by state. The following resources for navigating these issues are available:

School-Based Health Alliance:
ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6811756

Department of Health and Human Services:
telehealth.hhs.gov/providers/best-practice-guides/school-based-telehealth/billing-for-school-based-telehealth

Center for Connected Health Policy:
cchpca.org/resources/medicaid-state-telehealth-policy-school-based-telehealth

Business models

The School-Based Health Alliance has promoted models that include diverse funding sources as the most successful in supporting traditional school-based health models. Telehealth adds potential for increased efficacy but also complexity in these funding models. Models typically involve a combination of public and private funding and fee-for-service or value-based reimbursement models. The value proposition for school-based telehealth use cases must be clearly defined in the early planning stages to encourage important stakeholders. Resources for business modeling and reimbursement can be found here:

School-Based Health Alliance:
tools.sbh4all.org/telehealth/business-model-and-case

Metrics of success and evaluation

Once the value proposition has been defined, it is important to consider that success metrics will likely vary by program maturity. For example, an important goal of a school-based telehealth program in its early stages may be reducing health care access disparities. Therefore, geographic coverage and access measurement in areas with the least access may be a primary outcome to track. Other indicators for metrics could include referrals and utilization measures since the success of school-based telehealth programs depends on programmatic integration into school culture, awareness, and acceptance. As a program matures, the ability to overcome barriers to care as well as school nurse, student, caregiver, and provider experience may be important factors to study. Traditional quality metrics and key health outcomes become more apparent over time among populations served by mature programs. Finally, the effects of school-based telehealth on health care expenditures and patient outcomes are long-term success metrics. The following resource may be helpful in planning program evaluation:

American Academy of Pediatrics:
aap.org/en/community/aap-sections/telehealth-care/sprout

Technical resources

Technology is often one of the most exciting aspects of a school-based telehealth program, and as the market for telehealth technology continues to grow, choosing the right technology for a program can be difficult. Choices regarding technology needs are best made after considering all other aspects of the program, as described above. It is important to have defined the specific problems to be addressed, conditions to be treated, and populations to be served. Financial implications, connectivity, space, and training are also important aspects to understand before selecting equipment. Resources to guide in this selection are available here:

School-Based Health Alliance:
tools.sbh4all.org/telehealth/technology-and-equipment

National Telehealth Technology Assessment Resource Center:
telehealthtechnology.org