

Long-distance Lessons

'Teletherapy' Pilot Program Eases Shortage in Lamar CISD

by Phillip Sulak

The young girl appears thoughtful as she tries to determine what clue to give to her speech therapist. She looks at the two pictures being used as visual aids. The words sound the same and are spelled the same, but they have different meanings.

One picture shows a flying mammal. The other shows a piece of equipment used in the game of baseball.

"The bat is hard," she finally says. The speech therapist quickly figures out which picture the student is indicating. "You mean this one," Nicole Champlin says, pointing to a baseball bat. Champlin is a certified speech therapist with Clinical Communications, based in Houston. She is like hundreds of speech therapists working with children all over the state, trying to improve communication skills for children. But unlike other speech therapists, Champlin is miles away from her students while giving instruction.

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The speech therapist can see the child, and the child can view the speech therapist. By switching to a separate camera, the student can also look at the visual aids that the teacher has at her location. The teacher can then switch back, so the child can then view the teacher's face again or both at the same time.

While Lamar CISD is apparently the only district in the state using distance learning for speech therapy, it is not the first time this concept has been used. Speech therapists in Oklahoma and North Dakota have reached rural students via distance learning.

While certified therapists sit in Tulsa or Bismarck, or wherever they can hook to the internet, students elsewhere in the respective states tune in through the Web and the relevant equipment. Both states

use trained paraprofessionals to provide the hands-on help needed by the students.

A Critical Shortage

So why would Lamar CISD be interested? While Oklahoma or North Dakota might be trying to provide service to students in small rural districts, Lamar CISD has more than 20,000 students.

Lamar CISD—and many similar school districts—face a critical shortage of speech language pathologists; therapists are forced to carry a heavier caseload than recommended. And the therapists generally are covering more than one campus. In a district the size of Lamar CISD, that could mean a 30-minute, one-way drive between campuses, adding the expenses of lost time due to driving and mileage.

The U.S. Department of Labor Statistics estimates that 34,000 new speech therapists will be needed in the period between 2000 and 2010—and they will be harder to find.

Since teletherapy is conducted in real time, it meets the guidelines for instruction. A therapist can sit at a central location and provide services to multiple campuses; thus more children can be served. Just as important as money savings, early indications are that the therapy actually works better for many children.

Angela Geurin, a certified speech therapist for Lamar CISD, provides services at Dickinson Elementary and has been observing while some Dickinson students receive instruction via teletherapy. Geurin designed the lesson plans that the students are following, so they are getting the same instruction that she would give. The only difference is that the instruction is coming from 30 miles away via television.

Geurin said she purposefully chose students who might be more challenging. She spoke with parents about the program before making any changes in the children's instruction.

"There has been better achievement," Geurin said. "Some of these students are hyperactive and have trouble staying focused. This has them motivated."

Exciting Possibilities

Geurin was afraid that after the novelty of teletherapy wore off, the children



Photo courtesy of Lamar CISD

Lamar CISD students and in-room teacher Angela Geurin interact in real time with certified speech therapist Nicole Champlin on screen via the district's teletherapy pilot program.

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would be bored and need a lot of redirection. But that hasn't been the case. "The students are looking forward to coming to my room," she said. "It's been a positive thing."

Lamar CISD Special Education Director Carolyn Meeks said the results have been good enough to forge ahead; the district has purchased six small

portable units for supervision and classroom observation. No extra software is needed, only a high-speed internet connection, which the district already has.

"We're excited at the possibilities," she said.

Diana Christiana, president of Clinical Communications and chair of the Telepractice Task Force for the Texas Speech and Hearing Association, sees this as the first step in providing services to the far reaches of the state.

"Teletherapy may be used to overcome barriers of access to services caused by distance, unavailability of specialists, and impaired mobility," she said. "Now, districts have another option simply by plugging into the internet to get the often-needed supplemental help for their existing staff. This is distance education at its best."

For more information about Lamar CISD's teletherapy program, contact Lamar CISD Communications Coordinator Phillip Sulak at 832-223-0333.★

Phillip Sulak is communications coordinator for Lamar CISD.