

Mississippi Telehealth and Teletherapy Services

Eric Syverson and Chris Duncombe

To address the numerous physical and mental health issues students face, **Mississippi** is investing its federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) dollars to establish the first statewide in-school telehealth and teletherapy program in the country. These services are especially crucial in rural areas of the state where student access to primary care physicians and medical care is a major challenge that [may lead](#) to higher levels of [chronic absenteeism](#). By providing students quicker access to healthcare, the program aims to improve student attendance and performance in school and offer school nurses needed support.

In partnership with the [University of Mississippi Medical Center](#), a hospital system renowned for its [telehealth services](#), Mississippi will leverage resources from a health care partner to rapidly create a robust telehealth infrastructure that addresses local communities' critical health needs. The state will accomplish this by purchasing necessary medical equipment and by offering continued technical assistance for school nurses implementing the program. Of the 150 school districts in the state, 103 have opted into the program so far. The state's goal is to have all schools operational by the end of 2023.

The Mississippi Department of Education approved an initial grant of [\\$17.6 million in ESSER III funds](#) for the telehealth and teletherapy program. The bulk of funding will be used to offset initial costs to set up programs in schools, which includes purchasing equipment and software for video conferencing as well as medical equipment. School districts will join the program in phases; the first group of district programs began in August 2022 and the last will begin in August 2023.



Strategically Identify the Needs of Local Communities

As indicated by the [state's ARP ESSER plan](#), Mississippi identifies student access to mental and physical health services as a top priority. Compared to other states, Mississippi has higher proportions of students and families whom live [in poverty](#) or rural areas. Combined, these two factors pose challenges to Mississippians receiving routine and critical health care services. By locating telehealth and teletherapy services in schools, the state wants to help students address their health needs with services that may otherwise not be available in close proximity. Instead of missing school, students in participating school districts may receive onsite care and referrals. Decades of [research](#) highlights the close relationship between student mental and physical well-being and academic success.

Additionally, the state plans to leverage this program to [promote health education](#) in schools. According to a recent [primary care needs assessment](#), Mississippi has a higher prevalence of diabetes and untreated oral health issues than the [national average](#). The telehealth program will provide lifestyle coaching for students at risk of developing diabetes and promote dental health education in hopes of mitigating these issues and encouraging healthier lifelong habits.



Form New District Partnerships

The foundation of the program rests on the state's partnership with University of Mississippi Medical Center, a nationally recognized telehealth provider that is already providing services in a few school districts. The medical center will initially set up medical and telehealth equipment and provide training to school nurses. After the programs are up and running, the center will provide ongoing IT support to districts if any issues arise. In hopes of streamlining the process to connect students with health care providers and resources, the center will reduce school nurses' administrative burden by creating limited intake forms. In addition to the support offered to districts, it also allows health records to be shared between a student's primary care physician and the hospital system. Data sharing can effectively create a collaborative care network to monitor students' health conditions, which can improve long-term [health outcomes](#).



Implement Technology-Based Solutions

The main investment this program makes is in purchasing telehealth technology for participating school districts. Each school will be outfitted with a HIPAA-compliant laptop, webcam and accompanying software to conduct video conference appointments. Likewise, nurses will use USB-enabled [otoscopes](#) with lenses to conduct general exams and USB stethoscopes to listen to heart and lung sounds. Schools will have access to supplemental resources like app-based behavioral health tools as well. Finally, all records of student visits and use of telehealth and teletherapy services will be connected to a HIPAA-compliant electronic health record that can be shared with other primary care physicians.



Ensure Financial Sustainability

The program's funding is sufficient to cover the high, upfront costs associated with purchasing and installing medical equipment and obtaining software licenses. After the grant period ends in September 2024, all medical equipment will remain in schools for continued use. In addition, all video visits through this program are [available free of charge](#). Depending on how many schools eventually join and implement the program, UMMC officials estimate relatively low ongoing costs annually, approximately 10-15% of start-up costs. With the large initial costs taken care of, coupled with the significantly lower ongoing costs to maintain the program, both UMMC and the Mississippi Department of Education hope the program proves valuable enough to secure funding once the grant period ends.

More Information

See additional state profiles in the series: [Innovative State Strategies for Using ESSER Funds](#).