

Pennsylvania State Advisory Council on Personnel Shortage

# School Speech and Language Pathology Telepractice in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

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## **Description of the Shortage Problem**

Recently, several school districts have been approached by outside agencies offering to provide speech therapy services via distance technologies (i.e., telepractice). Because of the shortage of Speech and Language credentialed personnel in many of the Commonwealth's school districts, Pennsylvania is an attractive target for these providers. As reported by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) for academic school year 2006-2007, 211 Emergency certificates were issued for Special Education: Speech and Language Impaired. If each Local Education Agency (LEA) employed only one Speech and Language Impaired professional to provide services district-wide, approximately 42% of these positions were staffed by individuals who held Emergency Certificates. Knowing that the shortage of highly qualified speech and language impaired providers will not be ameliorated soon; concern about the adoption of speech-language support telepractice by some school districts in Pennsylvania is warranted.

## **Current Best Practice of Speech and Language Support Specialists in the Public Schools**

Speech-language support specialists provide a continuum of services for public school students from prevention to intervention as required by Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This includes the more traditional pull-out of classroom for speech therapy services, along with observation and intervention in the student's regular classroom(s). Collaboration with teachers in the classroom is a common practice, as is the monitoring of students in the classrooms for carryover of communication skills. Additionally, many of the clinical practices involve manipulation of the oral speech mechanism to produce sounds accurately.

Under the requirements for best practices in schools, Speech and Language Support services include:

- Screening students identified with communication concerns by parents or teachers at the beginning and throughout the school year
- Utilizing a variety of speech/language service delivery models to meet student IEP goals. Social interaction, curricular materials, and strong connection to Pennsylvania Academic Standards are incorporated into therapy to promote achievement on grade level curriculum and high stakes testing
- Incorporating evidence-based practice to connect language and literacy in classrooms
- Acting as members of school teams, including students' at risk teams and multidisciplinary teams
- Facilitating assistive technology use instruction, implementation, and classroom observation for appropriate use of the device
- Participating in parent teacher conferences
- Supporting school personnel via suggestions, intervention strategies, and adapted materials for use in general education
- Providing continuous progress monitoring, data collection, and analysis
- Providing observations and suggestions within educational environments to assist with carryover of communication skills
- Facilitating ongoing education of educators, paraeducators, parents, and peers via workshops, inservices, and other training opportunities

## **Speech and Language Support Telepractice Adoption Concerns**

Speech-language support telepractice is not able to meet the continuum of best practice speech and

language impaired service provision, and it may not be able to address the requirements specified above. Thus, this continuum and its practice provisions must be thoroughly considered in drafting a set of guidelines for speech-language support telepractice in the Commonwealth.

The following areas of concern should be addressed:

- Definitions and Guidelines for the delivery of speech-language support telepractice in the state
- Proper certification of speech service providers per Pennsylvania regulations
- Guidelines on supervision of the person providing the services
- Guidelines on onsite support personnel (telepractice assistant) monitoring the student
- Knowledge of the Pennsylvania Academic Standards and Anchors
- Informed consent to the parents
- Consideration of ACCESS billing, and loss of revenue to school districts if unable to bill ACCESS
- Security/confidentiality of the transmission of information
- Lost time due to technology failures

### **Considerations for Speech and Language Support Telepractice Guidelines**

- Speech-language support telepractice services could be provided if
  - The service provider and the supervisor each hold a valid and active Instructional Teaching Certificate in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and follow current PDE requirements for distance education.
  - Therapy provided by telepractice:
    - Adheres to ASHA code of ethics, and scope of practice documents (<http://www.asha.org>)
    - Adheres to Federal and state laws (<http://www.education.state.pa.us>)--PA Code Chapter 45
    - Is of the same quality as those delivered face-to-face
  - Student selection for telepractice candidacy criteria considers
    - Severity and type of communication disorder
    - Capability to benefit from telepractice
    - Need for direct (hands on) manipulation of articulators to benefit from therapy
  - Telepractice is an option, but not a replacement for current in-person services:
    - Supplement current service delivery
    - Provide an option for students who would not otherwise have access to speech – language therapy services
    - Analyze the cost-benefit with student achievement before implementation of a speech-language support telepractice program
  - Service delivery providers understand and demonstrate ability to use and support the telepractice equipment and practice procedures
    - This would apply to the speech-language support specialists and any teaching assistants needed to conduct the sessions on both the sender and receiver end

### **Benefits of Creating Guidelines for Speech and Language Support Telepractice**

- Ensure quality services to students with communication disorders throughout the Commonwealth
- Protect the practitioners delivering the services to ensure they are operating within Pennsylvania's regulations and procedures
- Allow the use of technology to be used to enhance or deliver speech language services to all eligible student population in an appropriate predefined manner
- Provide appropriate guidance for the proper use of technology to deliver the service