For 8 years, Sevier County schools in Tennessee has partnered with Cherokee Health Systems to use telemedicine technology to bring high-quality care to thousands of students. In that time, families and employees have been able to reduce absences due to illness as well as learn more about proactive health. AMD recently spoke with Coordinator of School Health for the Sevier County School System Don Best and Regional Vice President of Cherokee Health Systems Julia Pearce to discuss how this program has become so successful.

Keeping 14,000 students and hundreds of faculty members happy and healthy is no easy task. For Sevier County School System, the challenge of providing high-quality in-school services to the largest rural district in Tennessee required thinking outside the box and reimagining public school healthcare practices. Don Best reached out to Cherokee Health Systems eight years ago in an attempt to radically transform his district’s healthcare services, integrating telemedicine technology into each school in Sevier County. Prior to this partnership, the students and educators in Sevier County struggled to stay healthy and productive. In fact, seasonal influenza alone caused rampant absences year after year. “In some winters, the flu could affect as much as 20 percent of students and educators, causing entire schools to shut down in an effort to slow the spread of the illness,” explained Best.

In the last 5 school years, however, there have been no school closings due to seasonal flu in Sevier County, a testament to how helpful telemedicine technology can be.

Challenges to improve student health:

- Mitigate consistent problems with communicable illnesses from spreading across the school/county and causing school closures.
- Delivering high-quality healthcare services to 14,000 students across nearly 2 dozen schools.
- Lack of healthcare personnel onsite at schools to address daily medical issues with students.
- Promoting education and awareness among apprehensive parents.

Results achieved through use of telemedicine technology:

- Over 11,000 telemedicine encounter visits completed.
- Sevier County has gone 5 years without a school closure due to seasonal flu.
- Students can now receive immediate diagnosis and treatment for ailments such as strep throat, flu and many other communicable illnesses.
- Patient’s ongoing issues such as high blood pressure, diabetes or nutrition can now be tracked and monitored.
Promoting education and understanding

Implementing telemedicine technology across Sevier County required educating not just school nurses and faculty, but community parents as well. Best explained that families in Sevier County were largely apprehensive of technology and sharing health records, but after viewing a telemedicine encounter, hesitation almost always subsides. Now parents are useful allies in promoting the program, and are given updates and treatment plans following a student’s telemedicine visit.

Educators are also beneficiaries of telemedicine technology in Sevier County Schools. Like their students, teachers can have a telemedicine appointment with a remote provider, and if necessary have a prescription filled to be picked up after work. According to Best, promoting proactive health among students and faculty has been instrumental in minimizing distractions or setback due to sickness and has helped keep education as the top priority.

Mitigating the spread of illness

When telemedicine devices are paired with video conferencing sessions to perform a remote patient exam, students can be treated for a number of conditions, and potentially contagious diseases can be treated as quickly as possible. Not only do telemedicine exams have a positive impact on recovery times, but they also play an important role in helping to minimize the amount of classroom time missed. Even for young children, spending just a day outside of school can make it difficult to keep up with the rest of a unit or lesson plan.

Now in its eighth year, there have been over 11,000 telemedicine encounters between students at the schools and a remote medical provider from Cherokee Health Systems. In the 2015-16 school year alone, there were 1,631 visits across 23 schools in Sevier County. With the help of an in-school nurse and an attending nurse practitioner or provider, students can be treated for everything from an ear infection or strep throat, as well as the seasonal flu.

School nurses and Cherokee Health staff can monitor students beyond instances of illness. Blood pressure, Body Mass Index and other health metrics can be tracked and students can be given tools and pathways toward mitigating issues. Regional Vice President of Cherokee Health Systems Julia Pearce stated that students are even checked for bed bug bites, lice and other skin irritation issues through the use of examination cameras used during telemedicine encounters.

Overall, telemedicine technology gives the in-school nurses the tools necessary to keep the students at Sevier County Public Schools safe and healthy. A consulting medical provider can provide a diagnosis in real-time, as well as coordinate with a student and his/her family or educator about on-going treatments.

Through the use of AMD’s specialty telemedicine devices and installed video conferencing equipment, a nurse can work with a medical provider to give a student a full assessment and examination. This not only keeps students in school, but in some instances represents access to high-quality care that is otherwise difficult to come by in rural Tennessee.

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To learn more about Cherokee Health Systems visit www.cherokeehealth.com.

To learn more about the Sevier County school health program visit www.sevier.org/coordinated-school-health.

“Having access to providers through the use of telemedicine technology not only keeps students in school, but in some instances represents access to high-quality care that is otherwise difficult to come by in rural Tennessee.”

Julia Pearce
Cherokee Health Systems