

RE: WC Docket No. 21-93

April 5, 2021

To Whom It May Concern,

On behalf of PresenceLearning, Inc., thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Emergency Connectivity Fund for Educational Connections as part of the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 and how children with special needs have been most impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

About PresenceLearning

PresenceLearning is the nation's largest provider of live, online special education related services to K-12 schools. During the pandemic, we have delivered over 500,000 online therapy sessions, providing essential speech therapy, occupational therapy and counseling services to students in the public education system. We partner with schools across 43 states to expand their capacity to serve all students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) or behavioral and mental health needs. Our full suite of services includes individual and small group therapy, assessment, caseload management, IEP development and meetings, and family resources – all backed by a team of clinical experts to ensure the highest levels of service and clinical care. The PresenceLearning Care Network of providers has more than 1,200 licensed, clinical professionals with school experience. Hundreds of school districts partner with PresenceLearning to deliver services and ensure students meet their goals.

Recommendations for Emergency Connectivity Fund to Close Homework Gap (DA/FCC #: DA-21-317)

The Public Notice notice asks, "what guidance should the Commission provide schools and libraries about how eligible equipment and services can be used? What safeguards should the Commission impose to ensure that schools and libraries are reimbursed only for the purchase of equipment and services used primarily for educational purposes?" (DA/FCC #: DA-21-317, at page 10).

Recommendation

Eligible services must explicitly allow for teletherapy services, including the assessment and delivery of speech-language pathology, occupational therapy and mental and behavioral health.

Rationale

The explicit inclusion of teletherapy services for students is necessary because its relation to "remote learning" in the proposed language and the meaning of "educational purposes" in the Communications Act is not clear. The ambiguity should be addressed because the pandemic has made it clear that teletherapy is critical to the educational development of millions of students.

Discussion of Rationale

Teletherapy and “remote learning.” The current language of the “Eligible Equipment and Services” section refers to “funding only for equipment and services that are needed to provide the connectivity required to enable and support remote learning for students, school staff and library patrons.” Supplemental special education services, such as OT, SLP and mental and behavioral health do support learning, but they may be inaccurately categorized as a health care service only. To avoid this inappropriate confinement, it is important to clarify that teletherapy is not excluded from the meaning of “remote learning.”

Teletherapy and “educational purposes.” The American Rescue Plan (ARP) provides that the Commission should promulgate rules for the provision of funding from the Emergency Connectivity Fund consistent with the Communications Act. The Commission has defined “educational purposes” in the Communications Act as “activities that are integral, immediate, and proximate to the education of students. As noted in the relationship of teletherapy and “remote learning,” the practice serves a vital “educational purpose” and it should run the risk of being inaccurately categorized as a health care service only.

Teletherapy can be critical to a student's educational development. The COVID-19 pandemic has drawn attention to gaps in access to high-quality, school-based therapy for students in special education programs across the country. Clinician shortages – particularly in rural and heavily populated districts – leave students without access to effective speech-language therapy, behavioral and mental health counseling, and occupational therapy. The pandemic not only highlights the need to expand the practice of teletherapy, but also demonstrates the need to modernize the policies and funding that govern practice to ensure that millions of students can benefit from technology to access the assessments and services required to fulfill their IEPs under IDEA. There are currently 7 million children, 14 percent of all public school students, who receive services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Ninety-percent of those students have high-incidence disabilities—requiring clinical expertise and treatment plans that vary according to disability.

How Teletherapy Works

Teletherapy is used to deliver a wide range of therapy services in schools. Typically, teletherapy utilizes webcams, audio headsets and videoconference to facilitate synchronous interaction between clinicians and students. Leading professional organizations such as the American Speech Language Hearing Association (ASHA), American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA), and the American Psychological Association (APA) recognize that teletherapy can be an appropriate model for service delivery for speech-language therapy, occupational therapy, and behavioral and mental health therapy for many students.

Teletherapy is impactful in serving vulnerable communities. In rural areas facing a shortage of qualified clinicians, teletherapy provides access to timely evaluations and therapy. And in large urban districts where the need for SLP, OT, and PsychEd services can place unreasonable demands on onsite staff, teletherapy provides a means to supplement onsite clinicians, and help with caseload management.

At its best, teletherapy can reach more students with a network of clinical experts, each highly skilled and specialized in their particular area, and provide technology supports that integrate traditional therapy materials—assessments, class assignments, games—with video conferencing. Teletherapy also offers the ability for students to participate in therapy sessions, no matter where they live or attend school (including from home as long as they have an Internet connection and a computer). The COVID-19 pandemic only increased the need for schools to provide more flexible solutions that support schools and families in meeting every student where they are. Many schools who hadn't previously considered teletherapy started using it, while others who were already using it expanded their offerings.

Teletherapy can also play a vital role in addressing the backlog of evaluations and assessments for special education services. Right now we are hearing from districts all over the nation that they have backlogs of overdue evaluations in the hundreds or even thousands per district, in some cases dating back to last spring. We can't get kids the therapy support they need if they haven't been diagnosed.

Districts are overwhelmed by this buildup of work, and they need funding and access to technology to be able to temporarily flex up their capacity of clinicians to complete the evaluations and get them back to a manageable level. Schools need additional resources to be able to catch up and return to timely evaluation and identification of students with special needs.

Why PresenceLearning is Submitting Comments

As the nation continues to grapple with both the short and long-term effects of the COVID pandemic on the academic achievement and mental health of our children, our hope is that we use this opportunity to innovate and expand programs and services that support children who need it the most.

The majority of PresenceLearning clients are in rural and urban underserved communities, and we disproportionately serve low-income, non-white student populations. PresenceLearning works with administrators struggling with the lack of resources in staffing and funding for on-site special education programs daily.

We know firsthand, both from the research and data that exists and from the countless stories of parents, students and teachers, that teletherapy services are an effective and equitable way to ensure children receive the services they need to reach their full potential. We are on a mission to ensure continuity for their services both through this pandemic and beyond.

Now more than ever, we can use technology to support the needs of our children and create a system that addresses all aspects of their learning, regardless of their ability level or local resources.

Thank you again for the opportunity to comment and provide feedback on the Emergency Connectivity Fund for Educational Connections. The ability for students to access technology and internet service for their teletherapy services is vital to their educational success and healthy development. We applaud the efforts of the administration to highlight and focus on the needs of students, especially those most impacted during the pandemic.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact us.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kelly Wolfe". The signature is written in a light gray or blue ink.

Kelly Wolfe
Vice-President, Strategic Partnerships and Regulatory Compliance
PresenceLearning