

Chester launches telemedicine program in elementary schools

By Rachel Southmayd

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School nurse Trina Feaster uses a scope to check second-grader Allie Colvin's ear during a demonstration of the new telemedicine program at the Chester Park complex, which houses three elementary schools.

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Germs are as common in elementary schools as notebooks and No. 2 pencils. Kids get sick, they go to the nurse, they get picked up, they get taken to a doctor if they can get an appointment, and they miss school – sometimes for issues that could take a doctor just minutes to diagnose.

In Chester County, there's a community effort underway to stop this cycle and help sick students see a doctor as quickly as possible, without leaving the Chester Park complex, which houses three of the district's elementary schools.

“Our telemedicine program is just going to be a phenomenal opportunity for students who maybe don’t get to go to the doctor that often,” said Laura Hinson, nurse at the School of the Arts.

The telemedicine program looks like this: A student comes to one of the nurse’s offices and tells the nurse his or her symptoms. The nurse does an assessment and determines whether the student is a good candidate for the telemedicine program, Hinson said. If so, the nurse alerts the parents and schedules an “appointment” that day with the office of Dr. Sam Stone, a doctor at Lowrys Family Medicine.

When the time comes for the appointment, the nurse and the student meet with Stone via webcam with medical devices hooked up at the school that transmit information such as images or sounds back to Stone’s office. He can then diagnose a child, prescribe medication or refer the student to another doctor, if necessary.

The virtual visit gets billed to the student’s insurance, just as it would if he or she went to the appointment in person.

“For us, if we don’t have healthy children, we’re not going to have those learners we need in the classroom,” said Jean Ligon, the school district’s director of exceptional children.

By providing the telemedicine service, Ligon said, the hope is that children will be healthier and, if they are sick, will be able to miss less school.

The development of Chester Park’s telemedicine program was a joint effort among the district, the Upper Midlands Rural Health Network and the Chester Healthcare Foundation, superintendent Agnes Slayman said.

“It was a wonderful concept to come out of Upper Midlands Rural Health Network because you were doing preventive services and intervention,” Slayman said. “If you can bring kids to the health care on-site, you don’t lose instructional time.”

While the telemedicine program has been up and running for several months, Ligon said it’s been a pretty healthy year for students at the Chester Park complex, so they haven’t had to bring out the equipment that frequently. But the nurses have had a few great experiences, she said, where children were able to get the medical attention they needed.

The Chester Healthcare Foundation hopes to expand the telemedicine program to other Chester schools soon, foundation president Bill Bundy said.

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