Four Pillars of Effective Teletherapy in Schools

Teletherapy is a growing strategy to meet kids’ needs for mental health support or interventions. Those who’ve tried it say schools need to invest in four key ingredients to run it effectively and smoothly.

1. **Location**
   - The room used for teletherapy should be quiet and private, but not isolated. Schools can use the school psychologist or counselor’s office for the teletherapy set-up.
   - Schools can also convert an office inside the student services suite—usually close to a principal’s office—for teletherapy. This way, the student can be monitored without encroaching on their privacy.
   - The room should be the smallest comfortable space a school can find. If it’s too big, chances are therapy gets bumped for an assembly or seminar.
   - If a nurse’s station or office is used, a partition should be set up between the nurse’s desk and the teletherapy set-up.

2. **Technology**
   - The computers used for teletherapy can’t be computer lab rejects. Schools must invest in new equipment—a computer with a functional camera.
   - Some experts recommend investing in high-quality webcams, too. For speech and language, or occupational therapy, there should be a two-camera setup where an additional camera will be focused on the activity for the day (like writing the alphabet).
   - A high-speed internet connection is a must. Therapists prefer ethernet cables to Wi-Fi because there are fewer chances of interrupted service in the middle of a therapy session.
   - For group therapy on one computer, schools should provide a headphone splitter, in case a coordinator needs to listen in.

3. **Privacy**
   - Online therapists maintain complete confidentiality with students, unless a student intends to harm themselves or their peers.
   - Teletherapy providers should be compliant with HIPAA, the federal healthcare privacy law. They must receive parental consent before they record their sessions with students.
   - Rooms for teletherapy should have white noise machines, so that sounds don’t travel out.
   - Students need to feel comfortable to share privately, but also should be within close reach of an adult in the school they trust.

4. **Coordinator**
   - Every school that intends to set up teletherapy needs an on-site coordinator—a paraprofessional, nurse, or school aide. They don’t need to be trained therapists, but do need training on how to handle students in case of an emergency.
   - The coordinator organizes the schedule for teletherapy sessions. For younger students, they escort the student from their classroom for their session.
   - Coordinators ensure that all the technology for the session is set up and the therapist is dialed in. For occupational therapy, they may do guided exercises with the student.
   - Some schools use their coordinators to keep parents informed about their child’s therapy needs, but this requires parent consent.

SOURCE: Education Week reporting