



## CASE STUDY: TELEHEALTH SCHOOL COUNSELING

**Kuspuk School District (KSD)** covers more than 12,000 square miles of southwestern Alaska and serves students in nine remote villages. It includes villages along the mid-Kuskokwim River from Lower Kalskag to Stony River, eight of which are only accessible by air and river travel. The school district office is in Aniak.

### PROGRAM OVERVIEW

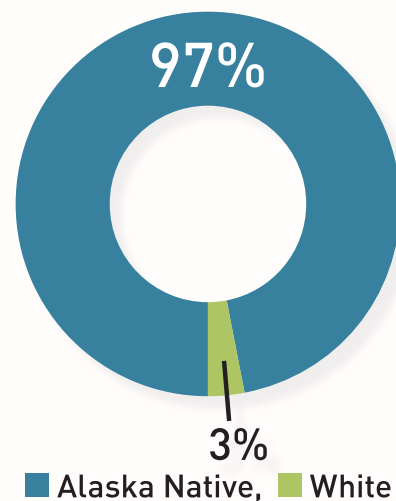
**KSD** partners with a telehealth company to offer students and staff a full-time school counselor that provides mental health services at all tiers of the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). The grant-funded program provides KSD's school communities access to virtual services such as social emotional learning lessons, individual counseling, and crisis assessments. The grant also reduces the funding and workforce barriers typically associated with hiring onsite mental health providers in Alaska's remote communities.

### Kuspuk School District

- » 359 students
- » 9 schools

### Demographics

- » 97% Alaska Native, 3% White
- » 96% free and reduced lunch
- » 14% students with disabilities



## BARRIERS TO CARE IN REMOTE COMMUNITIES

Like other school districts across the country experiencing the youth mental health crisis, the need among KSD's communities is acute. Suicides, traumatic events, and other mental health crises directly impact many community members. Due to the challenges of providing mental health services in remote Alaska, school communities in KSD have limited resources to respond to student and community mental health crises.

## DEVELOPING A TELEHEALTH SOLUTION

In the fall of 2019, KSD started building a foundation to fill the gap in school mental health supports and services. At the time, the school district did not have funding for school counselors. A leadership team member took on the role of school district champion and laid out a vision for increasing the availability of services through telehealth.

The school district contracted with [DotCom Therapy](#), a telehealth company that provided [remote speech therapy services](#) for the school district. The KSD team leveraged DotCom Therapy's telehealth expertise during the implementation and sustainment of the program. DotCom Therapy provided a Licensed Clinical Social Worker for part-time telehealth school counseling services. The role continued to expand and is now a full-time contracted position. The telehealth school counselor is based outside of Alaska but works the same school day hours as the onsite staff.

Services provided by the counselor include:

- » Student individual and small group counseling sessions
- » Staff counseling sessions
- » Crisis assessments
- » Social emotional learning classroom lessons
- » Staff professional development

### Committing to broad staff and student access

KSD prioritizes broad access to the program. Services are available to staff, enrolled students, and students in transition—including students who may temporarily drop out and later return to school. Regardless of a student's status, the school district tries to maintain "that line of contact" between the counselor and students. All counseling services are free to students and staff. This broad availability was essential to the program's early growth.

*"It's serving these communities and that's what we're here for." – KSD leadership*

### Establishing a referral process

Initially, student referrals to telehealth counseling services came through the Special Education Department. The program now allows teachers to work directly with the counselor to facilitate faster evaluation and, if needed, access to services. Typically, the teacher will meet with the counselor during the counselor's office hours to discuss observed student behaviors and potential needs. The counselor completes a brief student assessment and then collaborates with the teacher to send consent forms home to the student's family. If the family consents to their child participating, the student begins individual sessions with the counselor.

### Focusing on place-based programming

The school district champion and the counselor intentionally built an Alaska-specific telehealth program that includes cultural-based resources. The school district champion explained wanting,

“something that’s special for our population.” KSD provided the counselor with [Transforming Schools: A Framework for Trauma-Engaged Practice in Alaska](#) as an introductory resource. The counselor also participates in DEED webinars and engages in ongoing self-education about Alaska and Alaska Native culture. For example, the counselor invests time in learning about the Yup’ik language and the unique seasonal events that are part of students’ subsistence cultures. They adapt student materials and social emotional learning lessons to include relevant imagery and examples that better connect with life in western Alaska. Serving as an outside clinician employed by an external organization has also afforded the counselor the ability to focus explicitly on providing mental health support services without other responsibilities to the school.

## **BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF A TELEHEALTH DELIVERY MODEL**

Unlike an itinerant school counselor, the telehealth service delivery model allows the counselor to regularly engage with each school site. KSD leadership noted that maintaining the same counselor year over year has been critical to relationship and trust-building with students and staff at the various school sites. However, the school district champion emphasized that telehealth cannot replace the experience of in-person counseling support. The counselor also spoke about the impact a trained local community member could have in a similar role. Building connections with students’ families is particularly challenging without an onsite presence.

### **Expanding technology hardware and infrastructure**

While there are constraints to a telehealth model, KSD tries to replicate the experience of walking down the hall to see an onsite school counselor as much as possible. At first, counseling sessions were on school-issued laptops that the school district provided to students using COVID-19 relief

*“If this can be done at nine remote villages in Alaska, I think it can be done almost anywhere - as long as you have just a little bit of importance placed on it and find the right person or the right group to connect and contract with.”*  
– KSD leadership

funds. Utilizing school-issued laptops proved a challenge since students did not always bring their devices to school. The school district leadership adapted and collaborated with the KSD technology department to create telehealth stations, which provide reliable device access in a private space. KSD is also piloting a new telehealth facilitator role at their Aniak school site. The telehealth facilitator coordinates individual and small group counseling sessions, including helping younger students to and from their counseling sessions to reduce the burden on classroom teachers.

A second adaptation was improving internet access. The school district identified limited internet bandwidth as a barrier to expanding the program. During the 2021-2022 school year, KSD updated its internet contract to increase speeds. The improved bandwidth allowed for video counseling sessions, an enhancement that the school district champion described as “an incredible change.” For classroom social emotional learning lessons, the counselor started joining the students via Zoom and their classroom teacher or an aide served as the onsite facilitator.

Internet access does continue to be an issue outside of the school buildings. This limits the counselor's ability to communicate with school staff and students outside of school hours. The counselor regularly reminds students about phone crisis services for after-hours support. They recently hosted a lesson for students modeling how to use **Careline, Alaska's crisis intervention and suicide prevention line 877-266-HELP or dial 988.**

## GROWING AND SUSTAINING THE TELEHEALTH PROGRAM

In year one, the school district champion applied for and received funding for the telehealth program through three local grants: an education grant from Rasmuson Foundation, the YK & Northwest Arctic Health Fund from Bethel Community Services Foundation, and the GCI Suicide Prevention Grant. The three grants allowed KSD to contract with DotCom Therapy for part-time therapy services without requiring funds from the school district's general budget. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, KSD began using federal COVID-19 relief funds to cover the program's costs through 2024. Their vision is to eventually fund the telehealth counseling program through the school district's general budget, independently of grant dollars.

### Persistent engagement with school district leadership and staff

When the program launched, the school district champion decided to start small and focused on building out crisis response services. They presented a vision and action plan to the KSD School Board. The first proposal was a scaled telehealth crisis response and individual counseling program. During the first year, program participation started to increase. The counselor started offering more preventative services and supports, such as Tier 1 social emotional learning classroom lessons.

*"The biggest thing is that our boots-on-the-ground people are all connected and on the same page and if we can function that way, then we can bring in the outside people on the teleservices, and it works really well." – KSD leadership*

The school district champion regularly updates the board on program metrics, such as the number of:

- » Individuals served
- » Individual and small group counseling sessions
- » Class lessons
- » Hours worked by the counselor

*"Just start out as a cheerleader. Even if you don't have a program going, talk about a vision for a program and talk about what you see and get them to buy in." – KSD leadership*

There was a concentrated effort from the school district champion and the counselor to keep the program top-of-mind for school district leadership. The school district champion described creating a web of stakeholder support as an integral part of the program's success. They offered the following advice to other school districts interested in launching a similar program: "Start small."

KSD's district champion hopes to reinforce the telehealth counseling program with sustainable funding and school board policy. The school district is also preparing to re-launch [Satchel Pulse](#), a universal social emotional learning assessment, to measure the program's impact.