



ELUMA DISTRICT PROFILE

RENO COUNTY
EDUCATIONAL COOPERATIVE

August 2020

RENO COUNTY EDUCATIONAL COOPERATIVE: STARTING TELETHERAPY FOR NECESSITY, KEEPING IT FOR FLEXIBILITY

Necessity is the mother of invention. It's also the accelerant of innovation.

Prior to the 2019-2020 school year, Reno County Educational Cooperative had only used live, in-person professionals for speech, occupational, and physical therapy and special education. In the Heartland, there's a premium on interacting person to person, in the flesh.

Things change, and sometimes change turns out to be good. In response to a timely therapist shortage, RCEC started its first experiment with online teletherapy in 2019, augmenting its mostly in-person staff with eLuma's platform for live, online teletherapy.

When Covid-19 hit in the spring of 2020, what was initially an experiment in online therapy born out of necessity became an essential part of a flexible strategy for delivering vital special education services across rural Kansas.

ABOUT RENO COUNTY EDUCATIONAL COOPERATIVE #610

Located in the geographic center of the nation in Hutchinson, Kansas, RCEC is one of the most unique educational institutions in the U.S.

It provides centralized special education services to the students of 5 school districts across Reno County, Kansas.

Founded in 1973, RCEC was originally formed to ensure access to education for disadvantaged students across rural school districts. Today, RCEC annually serves about 800 students ages 3-21 and another 200 infants and toddlers through 100 licensed staff, 170 classified staff, and online teletherapy.

RCEC is situated in the classic American heartland, serving mostly small towns where churches outnumber banks and antique shops outnumber grocery stores. There are only about 65,000 residents in the entire county, and Hutchinson, the county seat, has about 42,000 of them.

Some fun trivia about Reno County:

- Every year, Hutchinson hosts the Kansas State Fair and National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) basketball tournament.
- Hutchinson is also home of the Kansas Cosmosphere and Space Center, a space and STEM education center that boasts more than 13,000 U.S. and Russian space artifacts — the largest collection in the world.
- The small town of Pretty Prairie hosts Kansas' largest night rodeo every July, pulling in 20,000 spectators and 250 contestants.
- Salt was discovered in the region in 1887, spurring an explosion of commerce. At one point, 17 salt mining operations were humming in the county, and Morton still has a large presence in South Hutchinson. A celebration called Salt Fest is held every year in June.



STAYING CONNECTED WITH TELETHERAPY WHEN THE WHOLE WORLD WENT ONLINE



RCEC's foray into teletherapy was supposed to be a slow-rolling experiment. When Covid-19 went viral in the U.S., it became the foundation of a new strategy almost overnight.

RCEC's initial rationale for trying teletherapy hinged on a problem that schools and districts are grappling with nationwide: the shortage of qualified therapists and counselors in cities and towns where they're needed. The initial pilot with eLuma was targeted on two school districts and one additional elementary school.

When the pandemic hit, the strategy had to change.

"The governor shut everything down; there was no more face-to-face teaching or special education services," said [Lena Kisner](#), Executive Director of Special Education at RCEC. "Right away, we had to adapt and change everything. Our in-person therapists were using Zoom. eLuma delivered teletherapy and helped train our in-person therapists, as well."

SERENDIPITY IN UNPRECEDENTED TIMES

Initially, online therapy was met with skepticism by some.

“Some districts and schools were a little apprehensive. They thought, ‘Are we not good enough for an in-person therapist?’” Kisner said.

That sentiment quickly changed, especially once everyone in the RCEC umbrella was forced to go online-only. Schools, students, and parents saw that the quality of service wasn’t compromised, and in some cases it was easier to match the specific needs of a student. Accessibility also increased by eliminating physical logistics like driving to appointments.

Some even developed a special affinity for their online therapists.

“The principal of one of our elementary schools came to me and requested to stay with their teletherapist,” Kisner said.



“People were able to see that the quality stayed the same, and sometimes even increased. We also learned that some of our students on the autism spectrum really thrived with online therapy.”

As RCEC prepared for the 2020-2021 school year, online teletherapy was no longer a fringe experiment, but a central part of the strategy.

“I think we’ll always have teletherapy as part of our mix,” Kisner said. “There’s definite value. Not all kids learn by the same modality, and the same is true for therapy and counseling. When you have someone to partner with, like eLuma, it makes it easier.”

WHY TELETHERAPY MATTERS TO MIDDLE AMERICA

Across the country, there's a growing acknowledgment that social and emotional health are vital parts of the educational experience. As this recognition grows, demand for therapy and counseling services grows as well. In fact, over 7 million students in the U.S. (about 14%) receive special education services.

This places a special burden on rural schools, which are less likely to have enough qualified, credentialed professionals living nearby. As part of a comprehensive strategy, online teletherapy can alleviate the logistical problems facing rural schools and ensure that every student has access to quality speech, occupational, and physical therapy and psychological counseling.

Technology is flattening the world and forging valuable new connections. For schools and districts located off the beaten path, it's a great opportunity to blend traditional in-person services with online teletherapy.