

Success Story:

Synergy Academies

Los Angeles, CA

Charter School's Test for One Reluctant Student Becomes Successful Online Speech Therapy Program

The Challenge

Charter schools often face criticism for not serving students with special needs. Not so at nationally recognized Synergy Academies in Los Angeles, California. "We here at Synergy, we serve students with special needs. We accept every student who walks in the door with open arms and a big smile," said Sommer Jones, Director of Special Education and Student Services at Synergy Academies.

While charter schools that operate under the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) have options allowing LAUSD to run parts or all of their special education programs, reducing both liability and risk, Synergy chose to be wholly responsible for providing any special education services a student may need. This means that Synergy could face legal action if it does not meet the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for any of its students with special needs. While this allowed the charter school to have more control and flexibility, a local shortage of highly-qualified, certified speech-language pathologists (SLPs) turned this situation into a high-stakes challenge.

"When we started delivering our own services, we chose in-person SLPs as our method of delivery. Since there was a shortage of licensed SLPs in our area, we had an SLP oversee speech-language interns who were conducting small group sessions with students participating in conversations," said Jones. "I attended several of these sessions and found that they were not well-aligned with the students' IEP goals. It made me wonder if the students were getting much out of it."

When a high school student began to outright refuse to attend speech-language therapy sessions, Jones knew it was time to consider different speech-language therapy options to serve the school's students.

Choosing PresenceLearning

After hearing about PresenceLearning's online speech therapy through the LAUSD Charter Operators Program, Jones pursued a pilot of the services in the fall of 2013 for the one student who refused to attend speech therapy. She was hoping that the new technology would motivate the student to attend therapy sessions. While observing several online therapy sessions, Jones saw that the online therapy was very-well planned, tailored to the student's specific needs, and that the student was benefitting from doing academic work during the therapy sessions.

(continued...)



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Benefits & Outcomes

After a very successful and smooth pilot with the now-motivated student, Synergy Academies began offering online speech therapy to other high school students and wanted to expand to the middle school as well. When Jones asked the charter's middle school if it wanted to do an online speech therapy trial, the middle school principal, who was hired after the initial PresenceLearning pilot started, was initially apprehensive about using online speech therapy with her students. Jones invited her to observe a high school student's online therapy session to help alleviate her fears.

"It was the first day of our school implementation, so I was worried that any sort of hiccup would make her veto online speech therapy," said Jones. "After a smooth first session, she thought it was phenomenal. She was convinced from the first visit that this would be beneficial for all students."

Synergy Academies now has dozens of middle and high school students using PresenceLearning and making progress on their IEP goals. In addition, all student IEP meetings are up-to-date and the district has virtually no compensatory time backlogged.

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Click [here](#) to watch a video showcasing a Synergy student's progress with PresenceLearning.

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