

Success Story:

Sultan School District

Sultan, WA

Remote Therapists Bridge the Gap in the Delivery of Occupational Therapy at Washington District

The Challenge

About 40 miles outside of Seattle, WA, Sultan School District sits on the Skykomish River, along the breathtaking I-5 Corridor. Natural beauty aside, Sultan School District's small size and its distance away from the Seattle metropolitan area make it hard for the district to recruit and retain clinical professionals, especially occupational therapists (OTs).

"Finding teachers to come to the District is much easier as many of them come from outside the area and move out here," said Robin Briganti, Executive Director of Teaching & Learning and Student Services. "However, when we go looking for OTs, it is hard to get people to come out this far. The further from Seattle you are on the I-5 Corridor, the more difficult it is to get therapists. This leaves us relying on contract services to hire an OT, which is hit or miss: sometimes it works and sometimes it does not."

Choosing PresenceLearning

In December 2014, Sultan School District was short one occupational therapist. When the district's education service agency (ESA) was unable to provide the district with an OT, they suggested that Briganti look into online occupational therapy services with PresenceLearning. The ESA had used PresenceLearning when they needed to provide services to students in its authority area in the past.

Curious about how this would work for Sultan School District, Briganti did her research by speaking with the district's new Director of Fiscal and Food Services, Daniel Baller. His previous district neighbored a very small district that began using PresenceLearning to help supplement therapist shortages and it had worked well.

Sultan School District began using PresenceLearning's online OT services in February 2014 with approximately 35 students.

Benefits & Outcomes

"Using PresenceLearning's online OT was a big shift for us," said Briganti. "Our community is not wealthy and the idea of being high-tech scared some parents. We sent home a letter to invite the parents to come in and look over materials and even log into the PresenceLearning platform to see how it would work. We assured them we were using a reputable solution and there were not any complaints."

(continued...)



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Robin Briganti,
Executive Director
of Teaching & Learning
and Student Services

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To make sure faculty and the special education staff understood how online OT works, and could explain it to parents if necessary, each teacher and paraprofessional participated in a training session. During the training, they watched an online OT session from start to finish and they were taught how to set up the equipment.

“We even had a teacher who volunteered to act as the student while the other teachers and paraprofessionals were observing,” said Briganti. “It was very important to us that everyone understood that online OT consists of a live video session over the web, not just putting on an instructional CD for students to follow.”

Sultan School District is currently doing both individual student sessions and small group work using a combination of PresenceLearning’s online OT services and the district’s full-time OT paraprofessional. In the district’s preschool program, 20 students (eight in the morning, 12 in the afternoon) have OT services outlined in their IEPs. PresenceLearning provides individual sessions for those students, as well as a group session once a week. In the district’s autism program, eight students are receiving both individual and small group sessions.

PresenceLearning’s online OT services and the district’s full-time OT paraprofessional work together to accommodate difficult student cases. For example, an elementary school student did not realize that the online occupational therapist was a real person, so was uncomfortable during sessions because he thought the computer was talking to him. The online OT and the paraprofessional worked around this by conveying specific directions to the paraprofessional who would in turn relay instructions to the student, all while a camera was pointed at the student so the online OT could ensure that the student was successfully completing tasks. Eventually the student became comfortable with the online OT and can now interact with her directly without anxiety.

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