

SUCCESS STORY

Page County Public Schools

Page County Public Schools in rural Virginia includes nine schools that serve a total of 3,200–3,300 students. Of those students, about 420 have been identified as having special needs, including behavioral mental health needs.

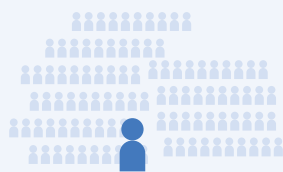


The Challenge

Page County Public Schools faced a growing need among students for psychoeducational services. The district only had three school psychologists on staff, which amounted to one school psychologist per one thousand students. They also needed to provide their school-based team with professional learning in delivering services in a virtual environment, especially in speech and occupational therapy.

**3**

School psychologists available on staff

**1:1,000**

School psychologist to student ratio

The Solution

Kanga by Presence helped the district's school-based team effectively deliver services through teletherapy. In addition, a school psychologist in the Presence network helped round out their school team—using the Kanga platform to administer a significant portion of their psychoeducational assessments remotely.



The Results

Now, the Page County Public School system is identifying needs efficiently and keeping up with the increased volume. Looking ahead, the district now knows they can lean on Presence for direct therapy to support students, in addition to ongoing assessment support.

New Reality: Serving Special Needs Students Virtually in Virginia

In planning for fall 2020, Page County Public Schools knew they needed to be prepared for a fully remote school year—but they also needed to be ready for an inevitable pivot to an in-person or hybrid model. Being ready for the pivot is the new reality for schools.

- School continuity planning was a leading concern for the district, and this included providing professional learning to help their in-school providers deliver teletherapy.
- Another leading concern was the mental health crisis that was accelerating in their community and in adolescents throughout the country, due in large part to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Simply put the district knew there would be a lot of need among vulnerable children and that their team would require extra support. Although COVID-19 had created challenges, it also had a silver lining.

When the pandemic started in the spring of 2020, schools across the country were unprepared to serve their students with special needs remotely. This experience opened the district's eyes to new ways of delivering services and an urgency for navigating school disruptions in the future.

// COVID-19 was kind of the saving grace for us in terms of transitioning to a virtual school psychologist. Because everyone was slammed into this virtual world that none of us had really experienced, this transition was really seamless.

— ELLEN BILLER
Director of Special Education
Page County Public Schools



Word of mouth matters

Even before the pandemic began, Page County Public Schools knew they needed more help in assessing students for school psychology services. Biller had reached out to the director of special education in neighboring Shenandoah County to learn about the district's use of remote evaluation and therapy solutions. The director there was pleased with the support they were receiving for speech therapy through Presence and tipped Biller off to the company's range of offerings, including in psychoeducational assessment and behavioral and mental health therapy.

Page County needed to fill a school psychologist position and, as the pandemic took hold, decided to test the waters with a live, online clinician during 2020–2021.

They partnered with Presence on administering student evaluations through the Presence platform (opening up access to a range of psychoeducational assessments, including the Woodcock-Johnson® IV and Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children® Fifth Edition), which freed up their own school-based team to spend more time providing direct therapy to students.

The district also turned to Presence to help educate their school-based team on best practices in delivering therapy online and ensuring the school-

based providers had the right equipment to conduct sessions. Document cameras (which help the psychologist observe students as they complete their responses in the booklet) were in short supply nationwide, but Presence supplied them to the district as part of the product bundle.

Onboarding a talented (remote) team member

Onboarding Brittany to the team was a smooth process that went hand-in-hand with the fact that Page County was essentially operating a fully virtual school district to commence the school year, including for special education. Everything from direct therapy with district clinicians to remote evaluations, written reports, and eligibility meetings with Brittany, the Presence clinician, were conducted in an online format. Brittany quickly became a meaningful contributor.

Brittany served students in three buildings remotely—one elementary, one middle, and one high school—and was also deeply engaged in student care and communication.

"Brittany calls parents to review the reports, especially if she knows there's going to be questions. She makes sure to reach out and fosters a really good connection with parents," said Cathy Marston, who is the Special Education Supervisor for Page County Public Schools and is also in charge of Medicaid billing, eligibility meetings, compliance, and unfinished learning recovery due to COVID-19. "She's never been afraid to reach out to us and ask

// Small details make for a smoother transition. We don't feel any different than we would have felt with a live person; the district was prepared for both potential outcomes of teletherapy and it has been great.

— CATHY MARSTON
Supervisor of Special Education
Page County Public Schools



a question, and this is reciprocal. We've called her in emergency situations for help, and she has jumped right in and never says no. It's been wonderful."

"She is part of the team and a regular face now. The staff has formed relationships with her and can easily call her up to discuss things and ask questions. It has been seamless."

Planning for special education: Peer advice

What advice do Biller and Marston have for colleagues who may be considering remote solutions for student therapy and care? Number one, they say, is to spend time upfront, integrating teletherapists into the school community and culture. At the beginning of the school year, Biller introduced all of their school psychologists, including Brittany, to the community and families during an online forum. The school team also met with Brittany and included her in the team's planning meeting.

"It's important to meet ahead of time, so the school psychologist can get to know their new team members and become part of the team," she said.

During those early meetings, they reviewed with Brittany district-specific practices and policies about managing meetings with students and parents. She gained useful background knowledge. They also set Brittany up with a district email address so that it was easier for staff to communicate with her.

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Looking ahead: school post-pandemic

As the country begins to emerge from the pandemic, a key goal for Page County Public School district is to understand student needs and be well-prepared for them. They are also wisely drawing upon ESSER funding. During the summer, the district is offering opportunities to address unfinished learning at each grade and age level. They will also deploy remote evaluations to students throughout the summer.

// Based upon our success so far, we may well look to Presence for helping us provide direct therapy for students, too.

— ELLEN BILLER

Director of Special Education
Page County Public Schools

"We are seeing an unprecedented number of students who need evaluations in PreK and are grateful for help in managing the volume. We usually see some uptick during Kindergarten registration, but never like this—and so far most of the evaluations have been legitimate and absolutely necessary."

With COVID-19 restrictions easing up, the district has shifted from fully virtual to fully in-person learning; but that didn't shift their reliance away from Brittany or remote services. And it didn't change their planning for the future.

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