



ELUMA DISTRICT PROFILE

PASCO SCHOOL
DISTRICT

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PASCO SCHOOL DISTRICT: STAYING STEADY WITH ONLINE SPECIAL EDUCATION AMID COVID-19

When Covid-19 shut down much of the country in the spring of 2020, the American school system was sent scrambling. The educational experience in the U.S. is predicated on in-person learning, and very few educational institutions were fully prepared for an overnight switch to remote learning.

While the nationwide mad dash to adapt to remote teaching and learning has been well documented, there has been relatively little discussion about how vital student services — like speech and occupational therapy, and school psychology and mental health counseling — have been impacted.

For some, the transition to providing these services virtually was surprisingly smooth — because they were already doing it.

Pasco School District in Washington state had been delivering teletherapy services through eLuma's online therapy platform for special education for two years prior to the pandemic. So, when it all hit the fan, PSD had a deluge of new challenges to solve, but delivering high-quality therapy services wasn't one of them.

ABOUT PASCO SCHOOL DISTRICT

Pasco School District serves the community of Pasco, Washington, which is the county seat of Franklin County in southeastern Washington. Pasco is one of three cities comprising the famous Tri-Cities area of Washington, and Pasco is home to nearly 75,000 residents.

Pasco School District serves about 20,000 students at 16 elementary schools, 3 middle schools, 4 high schools, and 1 completely online K-12 school. About 13% of all students in the district require special education — over 2,500 kids.



PIONEERING TELETHERAPY & ONLINE SPECIAL EDUCATION

Juanita Kamphuis joined PSD as Assistant Director of Special Services in 2017. In the previous two decades of her career, she had never worked in an educational setting where teletherapy was part of the mix.

“It wasn’t something we ever talked about. We had always used full-time in-person therapists and counselors, so I had not considered another way of doing things, to be honest,” Kamphuis said. “I wasn’t opposed to it, I just didn’t have a reason to consider it. We thought everything was fine.”

When she joined PSD, the district had plans to use eLuma’s online therapy platform as part of a hybrid model, with 25 full-time local therapists augmented by a set of dedicated teletherapists that students can access online for live video therapy sessions.

It was not a half-cocked experiment. After Kamphuis arrived at PSD, the eLuma teletherapists became fully ingrained into the district’s operations. They even joined monthly department meetings.

“We consider them part of the department,” she said.

At first, parents and students in the Pasco School District were a little apprehensive about using teletherapists because it was new, Kamphuis said. That changed quickly, with some of the eLuma online therapists becoming essential resources for students with special needs throughout the district.



SHIFTING TO ONLINE THERAPY AND SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

In the spring of 2020, when classes shut down and went online in Washington and across the country, many hoped it would be a short-lived experience. "At first, I thought we'd shut down for a bit and be back up and running after spring break," Kamphuis said. "I really thought that." As the weeks and months passed, and the virus' impact grew in Washington and beyond, it became clear that students would not be returning to classes during the 2019-2020 school year.

Educators, administrators, parents, and students all adjusted in real-time to one of the most abrupt changes to modern daily life in memory. Businesses were ordered to shut down, then reopen with drastically altered operational plans. Many companies shifted their employees to work-from-home arrangements. Political drama raged from coast to coast.

All the while, students and teachers were trying to adjust to the considerable inertia of teaching and learning amid incredible tumult and commotion. Assignments were delivered and completed through learning management systems or email. Lectures and demonstrations were done via video conferencing or recordings. All of it tested resolve and pushed the limits of today's educational infrastructure.

As change dominated, many went searching for signs of consistency. In PSD, one shining example was the delivery of speech and occupational therapy. Because the district had already implemented teletherapy, these critical services were delivered to some of the region's most vulnerable students without interruption.

THE HIGH STAKES OF SPECIAL EDUCATION IN AMERICA

In recent years, the stigma of special education has largely vanished as more Americans recognize the need for personalized paths to educational success. At the same time, there has been rising acknowledgement of social and emotional learning as a crucial aspect of human development.

Consequently, there has never been more demand for therapy and counseling services in American schools. Currently, over 7 million students in the U.S. (about 14%) receive special education services, and more students, parents, and teachers are beginning to recognize the importance of social and emotional learning for all students.

At the same time, it's getting harder to deliver these services with full-time, in-person therapists and counselors. There is already a national shortage of speech-language therapists and other vital counselors, such as school psychologists, in schools, and recent events are only widening this chasm.

Online teletherapy is a modern solution to this modern problem. Thankfully, online interactions are becoming more common and accepted, even for high-stakes interactions. Covid-19 forced a nationwide experiment in virtual work for many industries, and it was largely deemed successful. As a result, American mobility has been greatly increased and virtual interactions have been normalized.

As uncertainty looms, many are looking for the constants in life. In Pasco, students, parents, and educators know they can count on online special education services as one of those constants, no matter if they do school at home or in the classroom.

