



ELUMA DISTRICT PROFILE

SANTA RITA UNION
SCHOOL DISTRICT

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SANTA RITA UNION SCHOOL DISTRICT: TURNING TO TELETHERAPY IN A QUEST FOR QUALITY

If it takes a village to raise a child, the same is certainly true about educating our youth. Of course, K-12 teachers are the most influential force for learning in the daily lives of most kids. But what about the others who make a deep imprint?

Specialized student service professionals — such as speech learning pathologists (SLPs) and occupational therapists — play an undeniable but often understated role in shaping a child's educational journey. While their contributions are sometimes less obvious, savvy administrators know of their profound impact.

That's why it's a big problem when a school or district can't find enough qualified therapists and counselors.

This is the quandary Santa Rita Union School District faced in 2018, and it led to a progressive solution: online therapy and counseling services, delivered through the [eLuma teletherapy platform](#).

Here's how SRUSD's journey to teletherapy started as a solution to a timely problem, and then became a staple in its overall special education strategy.

ABOUT SANTA RITA UNION SCHOOL DISTRICT

Santa Rita Union School District

comprises four K-5 elementary schools, two 6-8 grade middle schools, and one pre-school.

SRUSD is located in [Salinas, California](#), the county seat and most populous city in California's beautiful Monterey County.



Salinas is located about two hours south of San Francisco, on the southern edge of the Greater Bay Area. The city of about 150,000 residents is situated about 8 miles east of the Pacific Ocean, and its marine climate is heavily influenced by its close proximity to the ocean. This picturesque setting was home to the great American novelist and Nobel Laureate John Steinbeck and is the backdrop for many of his timeless tales, including *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Salinas is known as the "Salad Bowl of the World" for its vibrant agricultural industry, which produces tremendous wealth for landowners and business magnates and stable employment for wage workers on large, industrial farms.

Most of the students in SRUSD come from lower-income households, and many are raised by parents who don't speak English as their primary language. These socioeconomic dynamics elevate the importance of non-curricular educational services like speech and occupational therapy and school-sponsored counseling.

STRUGGLING TO FIND QUALIFIED COUNSELORS WHEN GEOGRAPHY IS A CONSTRAINT

In 2018, Nadene Dermody faced a vexing problem. As Director of Special Education for SRUSD, it's her responsibility to ensure that the district has a sufficient number of qualified therapists and counselors. But what if you can't find enough good candidates who live in your area?

Schools have long grappled with the problem of geography. Most notably, logistical challenges have played out with what has ostensibly been framed as a national teacher shortage. Some estimates suggest that there may be a shortfall of 100,000 qualified teachers in the U.S., but a report from the National Council on Teacher Quality poses the problem differently: the shortage is local, not national.

It's hard to match qualified teachers to the places that need them. It's even more difficult to find highly specialized professionals, such as therapists and counselors, to fill gaps in specific locations, like Salinas, California. If the talent isn't physically there, the schools are stuck.

That's the quandary Dermody faced in 2018.

"We didn't have enough qualified candidates to fill our open therapist roles, and we couldn't serve all the therapy and counseling demand in our schools," she said. "The teacher shortage doesn't just apply to teachers. We need counselors, therapists, and other skilled professionals to ensure good outcomes for our students."

The district's caseload for speech and occupational therapy, in particular, was rising, putting added burden on existing therapists. Dermody faced a tough choice: settle for less-qualified candidates and reduce caseload, or hold out for quality and get crushed by demand.

She kept the focus on quality and looked for new solutions.

"When you're in a pinch, everyone wants a quick fix," Dermody said. "I was very committed to quality. I wasn't ready to compromise on that point just to get bodies in the seats. We serve a vulnerable population that depends on these important services."

EMBRACING TELETHERAPY TO DELIVER QUALITY THERAPY AND COUNSELING WHEN TOP TALENT IS IN SHORT SUPPLY

Dermody made a progressive proposal: what about augmenting with online therapy and counseling services?

“I faced some pushback from staff, which is understandable,” she said. “Many of them weren’t familiar with teletherapy and assumed it wouldn’t work, or that the quality would be worse than in-person. I had to help them realize that quality was the reason I wanted to explore this option.”

Dermody heard about eLuma from a colleague in another district. She investigated the company and vetted the therapist and counselor network, and the technology platform. She brought in key stakeholders and agreed to conduct a pilot, limited to one elementary school and focused on speech teletherapy during the 2018-2019 school year.

SRUSD’s requirements were specific. They needed therapists versed in helping with speech development for elementary and middle school children, and the therapists needed to be bilingual. eLuma found the right matches and built the program.

Staff, students, and parents were quickly won over. The district expanded the program in the 2019-2020 school year, and the timing proved prescient. Covid-19 slammed the country in the spring of 2020, shutting down all schools in the district for several weeks in March. When schools resumed with online instruction in April, SRUSD was well equipped to provide special education services via eLuma’s teletherapy platform.

“These connections were really important at a time of great stress and anxiety for families,” Dermody said.

Now, with online therapy and counseling normalized and embraced by staff, students, and parents, SRUSD is thinking about additional experiments, including offering online counseling.

“If anything, we’re going to end up expanding our virtual services,” Dermody said.

WHAT'S AT STAKE WITH SPECIAL EDUCATION



Nationwide, there's a growing recognition that education is about more than what happens in the classroom. The educational experience comprises every aspect of the self: mental, emotional, social, physical.

With this recognition, demand for special education services has exploded.

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, even if talent shortages in local markets make it hard to deliver these vital student services with quality and at scale.

Online teletherapy is catching on as an effective way forward. Online interactions are becoming more common and accepted, even for high-stakes situations like therapy and counseling. Covid-19 pushed many traditionally offline activities online, including K-12 therapy and counseling, and schools across the country are discovering the virtues of teletherapy.

There's never been a greater need for quality special education. K-12 districts like SRUSD are leading the way in showing that blending the online and offline worlds can deliver the quality needed to achieve desired outcomes with the flexibility necessary to manage growing caseloads.