

## Success Story:

### Benton County School District

Camden, TN

## District Uses Assistive Technology Grant to Implement Online Speech Therapy and Train Neighboring Counties

### The Challenge

Bordering the western branch of the Tennessee River, Benton County School District is located in serene and rural northwest Tennessee. The district currently serves 2,300 PreK-12 students, including approximately 500 students who receive special education services. A majority of the students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) require speech-language therapy, but due to the rural location and other conditions, the district and surrounding counties often experience a shortage of speech-language pathologists (SLPs).

"We have been fortunate in our county to maintain a level of SLPs that has been able to provide adequate services to our students," said Pam Chmelik, director of Special Needs at Benton County School District. "However, surrounding counties have been in need of specialists because of specific situations like maternity leave or Extended School Year (ESY) programs during the summer."

"One county near us has a speech-language teacher but not a SLP," said Chmelik. "Only a licensed SLP can do the testing and the data gathering to see if a child is going to meet the eligibility standards in Tennessee to receive services." Without a fully qualified SLP on staff, schools are unable to determine which students need services.

### Choosing PresenceLearning

To help neighboring counties find solutions to their special education needs, Benton County pursued an assistive tech grant through the state. This grant allowed the district to evaluate the surrounding counties' needs, investigate which technologies could help alleviate the issues, and share training and other services with surrounding counties.

Chmelik first became aware of online speech and language services during a conference in Nashville. With piqued interest, she began to investigate how PresenceLearning would meet the requirements of the assistive technology grant.

"I thought, 'That sounds like a great avenue for rural counties, especially where there may be a larger need,'" said Chmelik.

*(continued...)*



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**Pam Chmelik,**  
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After addressing the technical needs, Chmelik discussed the opportunity with existing staff. Then the district sent a letter to the parents of students who would be receiving the online speech therapy explaining how the process worked. They were also invited to observe an actual one-on-one student session. From the onset, parents were on board with this method of delivering speech-language therapy.

## Benefits & Outcomes

PresenceLearning has proved to be an innovative application for Benton County. Not only is online speech therapy increasing support for students, it is more appealing to older students and helps them feel more comfortable. Some students, once they reach third or fourth grade, feel uncomfortable being pulled out of class for speech therapy.

“We had a fourth grader whose mother was about to sign him out of therapy because she felt it was separating him from other students,” said Chmelik. “When we started using the assistive technology, it made him feel much more involved in his services. He now comes to speech language feeling excited about his time on the computer, instead of feeling bad about being pulled out of class.”

Although the district is still evaluating the effect online speech therapy has on student outcomes, it has witnessed a new-found collaboration between on-site SLPs and the online SLPs. The PresenceLearning SLPs even offer to attend the students’ IEP meetings by phone or online. The district has also commented that the sessions are more interactive than expected.

“Online speech language programs are not a canned box where students push a keyboard key to answer questions,” said Chmelik. “The online SLP is delivering live services just like an on-site SLP would. The online SLP has come to know the students in our counties and look at them as her own students.”

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