

## Success Story:

### North Adams School District

North Adams, MA

## Focusing on Successful Student Outcomes, Not Staffing Issues

### The Challenge

Nestled in a lush valley at the foot of the Berkshire Mountains, the city of North Adams was born as a mill town and has evolved into a center for tourism, culture, and recreation. But the vistas in this stunning locale have one major drawback—the nearest interstate is an hour away, the roads there are steep and winding, and it is tough to attract special education staff to work at the local schools.

When the Special Education Department found itself in need of an additional Occupational Therapist to service an influx of students, the district contracted with the special education collaborative located in Northampton, 1.5 hours away. That solution worked well until winter arrived, when the collaborative decided it was too risky to send its employees driving up the mountain. North Adams needed a better way to serve students consistently.

### Choosing PresenceLearning

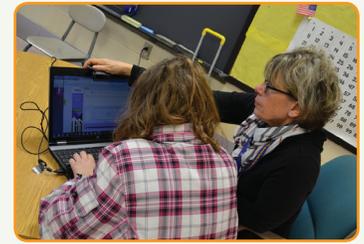
In the Fall of 2013, North Adams received a new batch of OT students—more than they could handle. “We were overwhelmed,” says Noreen Donnelly, North Adams’ Administrator of Special Education. “Our on-site OT had recently moved away, and the Northampton collaborative didn’t want to continue working with us because of the unpredictable weather and driving conditions. I started looking for a new solution and found PresenceLearning.”



*An online OT session in progress*

North Adams initially implemented PresenceLearning in one school. A majority of U.S. schools already have the technology necessary to support telehealth, and the implementation was speedy; soon two elementary schools were using online OT for a selection of students, with a third to be added. “Having the right people in place, both here and at PresenceLearning, made implementation simple,” says Noreen. “To be able to take a few kids and move them to online occupational therapy was very helpful—not to mention successful for the students.”

*(continued...)*



#### District Profile:

North Adams Public Schools  
North Adams, Massachusetts

<http://www.napsk12.org/>

- Roughly 1,500 K-12 students
- 3 elementary schools (K-7) and 1 high school

#### Mission Statement:

“The goal of North Adams Public Schools is to provide all students with the values, knowledge, and skills needed to reach their full potential, with the ultimate goal of becoming lifelong learners and productive members of the 21st Century. As a district, we are committed to providing a safe environment in which all individuals embrace the core values of diversity, inclusiveness, shared community responsibility, breadth of learning, and continuous growth and improvement.”

#### PresenceLearning

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## How Does Online OT Work?

Online OT sessions are similar to on-site therapy. The PresenceLearning therapist assigned to North Adams plans the content for each session, and works very closely with North Adams' on-site Special Education Teaching Assistant, Claudia Ellet, to guide students through a series of activities. Claudia gathers session materials and tools, keeps students focused on the task at hand, and adjusts the webcam so the online therapist can accurately observe the student. The tools used for occupational therapy remain the same—balls, putty, pencils and paper, scissors, games, and other manipulatives.

## Benefits & Outcomes

Students in North Adams are excited to attend therapy sessions, plus using a computer often removes learning barriers that prevent students with unique needs, particularly those on the autism spectrum, from participating fully in traditional therapy. "I think PresenceLearning online occupational therapy is a wonderful program," says the on-site TA. "These children respond really well to computers and technology, and with the right therapist on the other side, students are totally engaged."

Job satisfaction has improved dramatically in the years since North Adams introduced online therapy—plus caseloads are reduced and workloads have normalized. And word is spreading of the successes relating to online OT: convinced that a student would respond enthusiastically to teletherapy, one on-site therapist recently proposed adding a tech-savvy student to the PresenceLearning caseload. Noreen, the Administrator of Special Education, now has plans to demonstrate PresenceLearning to all her OTs so they can be empowered to recommend students best suited for the online model.

Claudia, the on-site Teaching Assistant, can't say enough about the PresenceLearning OT working with North Adams students. "Our online therapist is phenomenal. We have great communication and we check in regularly, plus she is good about meeting deadlines so I can be ready for sessions. It is a wonderful experience from start to finish."

*“The entire PresenceLearning process is so user-friendly for the student—and for the staff—and students are very engaged. They love technology and they love being on the computer, but online therapy isn't just staring at the computer—they are active and they enjoy it tremendously.”*

Noreen Donnelly,  
Administrator of  
Special Education

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