



CASE STUDY:

Meeting the School Staffing Challenges in the Rural Mountain West

A Customized Approach Complements In-Person with Technology Solutions to Provide Mental Health Care to Students



Executive Summary

Located in western Colorado, recruiting specialized schools professionals to Mesa County Valley School District can be a challenge. AMN Healthcare partnered with the district to understand their needs and implement a custom solution to support their students through a complement of in-person and virtual therapy solutions to provide mental health services across 12 schools. In 2021, the team provided about 4,000 mental health minutes per month to students, a dramatic increase from the previous year, as well as crisis interventions and cognitive, academic, and social-emotional evaluations.

Abundant Beauty, Limited Resources

Mesa County Valley School District is the largest school district on the Western Slope of Colorado and 14th in size in the state. The largest employer in the county, its nearly 2,800 employees serve 21,000 students in 47 schools and programs. The school population of the county is diverse, with 30% minority students and 52% receiving free and reduced cost lunches.

2,800 EMPLOYEES
21,000 STUDENTS
47 SCHOOLS & PROGRAMS

In western Colorado, Mesa County, with Grand Junction as its county seat, is the only metropolitan region not on the more heavily populated eastern, or front range of Colorado. Despite being surrounded by incredible natural beauty and year-round recreation, recruiting specialized schools professionals here can be a challenge.

The Challenges

Early in the summer of 2021, Mesa County Valley School District reached out to AMN Healthcare to fill 7 vacant school psychologist positions to work across 12 schools. The district had job postings open for months and, despite their best efforts, had received no applicants for onsite services.

The National Association of School Psychologists recommends a 1 to 500 ratio of school psychologists to students but due to the shortage of staff, the current national average ratio is 1 to 1,381.

Data from AMN Healthcare shows that demand for school professionals overall went up 200% from 2020 to 2021 and continued to rise into 2022. Increase in demand, March 2021 to March 2022 for school psychologists nationwide went up 172%.

The nationwide shortage of school psychologists is due to a variety of reasons, including not enough graduate programs, small graduating cohorts, ever increasing numbers of students who are being referred for special education services, more awareness for mental health support with students, and the retirement of many school psychologists.

Solutions

Working closely with the school district, the AMN Healthcare team examined their request, looked at the staffing resources they had, and developed a plan together to determine the best way forward.

The team proposed a hybrid solution of four onsite school social workers, who can provide some of the services also provided by a school psychologists, and 2.5–3 virtual school psychologists to provide the evaluations and services that only school psychologists can provide. To ensure they had the support their students needed.

Through the pandemic, in-person roles became more and more difficult to fill, and many therapists started to prefer to provide remote therapy. Utilizing virtual services to complement in-person support has been a win-win for schools, special education teams, and students. A recent [white paper](#) shows how successful and accepted teletherapy in schools has been in both rural and urban settings, of which Mesa County has both.

The key to success with teletherapy is ensuring therapists have support and mentorship from clinical liaisons as well as a platform that meets all HIPPA regulations. Mesa County Valley School District knew that with AMN Healthcare they would have both, through AMN's Clinical and Education Solutions team and supported state-of-the-art technology.

The Results

The school social workers and the virtual school psychologists covered 12 schools throughout the 2021–22 school year. The virtual school psychologists were available to the school teams during the regular hours through phone, email, or by video conferencing. Additionally, a team lead provided support to the mental health team, holding weekly meetings and was available throughout the school day as needed. She also met with special education coordinators and the special education director as needed as well as assisted when a school psychologist needed coverage.

The team provided about 4,000 mental health minutes per month to students – a dramatic increase from the previous year.



AMN Healthcare is a true partner and took the time to learn about our needs to find the perfect fit for our programs.

— Teresa Bandel-Schott, Ed.D., Mesa County Valley School District

Approximately 230 evaluations were completed, consisting of cognitive, academic, and social-emotional evaluations. The school social workers partnered with the virtual school psychologists to assist with in-person testing as well as working with the school team to complete approximately 50 Functional Behavior Assessments.

The school social workers completed crisis interventions with the general education population as needed, as well as suicide assessments, risk assessments and threat assessments with the school teams. Additionally, the social workers provided interventions to the general education population when referred for consideration of special education services.

As a dedicated part of the internal team, the mental health team from AMN Healthcare attended weekly special education team meetings, specialized training as requested by the district, all special education referral and evaluation meetings, IEP meetings, and the school psychologists completed manifestation determination meetings as needed.

RESULTS THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

4,000+

Minutes
Per Month
provided to students

230

Evaluations
Completed
cognitive, academic,
and social-emotional

12

Schools Assisted

by school social workers
and the virtual school
psychologists

A Partner That Understands Schools and Technology

Staffing therapists in the school setting requires extra attention to detail and qualifications. AMN Healthcare’s school psychologists and school social workers, whether in-person or virtual, are dedicated to promoting an environment of open communication and removing any prior stigmas to mental health.

The team provides staffing solutions for all school departments and clinician types — from RNs to school nurses and trained SLPs who can work one-on-one with your students.



Reach out today to see what creative solutions AMN Healthcare can help implement to give your students the mental health care they need and provide more support to your internal teams.

