



Empowering Progress: A Customer's Digital Journey to Streamlined Evaluations

For all the discussion of teacher shortages,¹ most K-12 leaders struggle even more to bring in and support school psychologists, speech-language pathologists, and other student services specialists.

The numbers tell part of the story:

- In 2023–24, there were 1,065 students for every school psychologist — **more than double** the recommended ratio of 500:1.²
- **59%** of public schools say that insufficient staff coverage hurts their ability to provide mental health services.³
- Schools across the country experience “**critical shortages**” of speech-language pathologists — and the demand for these specialists keeps rising.⁴
- **Nearly three-quarters** of elementary and middle schools report difficulty filling special educator positions.⁵

But the problems extend beyond staff shortages. Demand for clinicians’ services keeps growing. Even as enrollment declines, the number of K-12 students receiving services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has risen. From fall 2022 to fall 2023, the figure increased by 3%, to more than 7.3 million.⁶ That’s more than 15% of the student population.⁷





External factors contribute to the rising demand for assessment. For example, special education due-process complaints jumped more than 16% nationally from 2021–22 to 2022–23. And nearly half of schools nationwide report growing conflict with families over individualized education programs (IEPs).⁸

So how can school leaders address these challenges and give students the services they need?

This playbook provides answers.

The schools within Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, confront all these issues head on. But the Montgomery County Intermediate Unit, which provides services, solutions, and support to more than 200 schools, has found innovative ways to overcome the challenges.

School leaders can learn from Montgomery County's successes to support clinicians and serve students efficiently and effectively.

Growing demand for services, limited school resources

15%

The percentage of K-12 students with disabilities

16%

The one-year increase in special education due-process complaints filed in the U.S.

1,065:1

The number of students per school psychologist — more than double the recommended ratio

THE CHALLENGE

Heavy caseloads, limited tools

Jean Miksch, a nationally certified school psychologist with 30 years' experience, works with the Montgomery County Intermediate Unit. "School clinicians are overwhelmed with the sheer number of students they need to see," she says. Burnout is widespread, with school psychologists leaving the field or retiring early. "We don't have enough people being trained to fill in behind those who leave."

When districts can't keep up with their caseload, they call on the Intermediate Unit. Miksch and her colleagues crisscross the county to conduct evaluations. "We serve students with all types of disabilities, from those with mild speech and language challenges to students with intense, complex needs," Miksch says. "So we need a wide variety of tools at hand."

For years, that meant lugging around bulky suitcases filled with paper assessments. She jokes, "My family always thought I was leaving home because there were so many black suitcases in the back of my car."



Traditional testing kits limited school-based clinicians as well. Not every school had every test, so clinicians spent a lot of time traveling to a central district location to get assessment materials.

Such a setup can **create unequal access**, where more centrally located or affluent schools end up with a more robust library of assessments.

The nature of traditional assessments makes it difficult to engage some students, Miksch finds. “When a psychologist walks in with a big suitcase and sets up papers on an easel, it can create a barrier,” she says. “Students get apprehensive. Even if you overcome that hesitancy, you might struggle to keep them engaged throughout the assessment.”

Miksch observes that “administrators don’t always understand” everything that goes into a successful assessment. Clinicians need to plan carefully to find the right window to assess students: “What special events are going on that the child won’t want to miss? When is gym, lunch, recess? You have to work around all this, or else the student isn’t going to perform their best. You won’t get an accurate picture.”

Traditional assessment tools **limit clinicians’ flexibility**.

“Sometimes you start an assessment and realize it’s not the right one,” Miksch says. “If you don’t have the appropriate form with you, you need to reschedule the session.”

All these factors result in:

- Overwhelmed clinicians
- Lost time
- Less effective assessments
- Disengaged students
- Unequal access to assessment and support

“School clinicians are overwhelmed with the sheer number of students they need to see.”

Jean Miksch, EdS
School psychologist



THE SOLUTION

A digital assessment library that works

Several years ago, Miksch heard from colleagues who were having success with an iPad-based digital assessment system, Pearson's Q-interactive. Miksch had recently returned to assessing school-age children after focusing on early intervention. She decided to give Q-interactive a try — and was pleased to see how much it helped her assess students.

And the biggest improvement came when the county secured a license for Pearson's comprehensive Digital Assessment Library for Schools (DALs). Miksch says she “got really excited” when DALs came along.



DALS has helped her and her colleagues overcome many of their previous struggles:

- **Portability:** “I don’t have to haul around nearly as much anymore,” Miksch says. “Now I carry a small bag with a couple of iPads, and I’m good to go.”
- **Equal access:** Thanks to the countywide DALS license, every school has access to the same library of assessments. This spares clinicians from running around to pick up forms and ensures that every student gets the level of assessment they need.
- **Efficiency:** Miksch rarely needs to stop a session and reschedule now. “If I decide, mid-assessment, that another test is more appropriate for a child, I can substitute that test on the fly, and we just keep going,” she says. Nor is she fumbling with papers. “Everything is seamless.”
- **Student engagement:** “Whereas the easel and suitcase made a lot of kids apprehensive, screens are second nature to students,” Miksch notes. “The digital format really helps them stay engaged.” She recalls a recent session where a student stayed focused for 90 minutes. “I checked in with the student to see if he wanted a break, but he always said, ‘No, no, I want to keep going.’ When we went back to the classroom, his teacher couldn’t believe he had remained engaged for so long.”

As effective as digital assessments are, Miksch offers an important caveat: “Some providers are going all digital. That’s a mistake. Every student is different, and sometimes paper is still the best option. Pearson’s DALS allows for both.”

“Although some school clinicians initially hesitated to embrace digital administration of assessments, we see more and more not only accepting digital tools but even asking for more functionality.”

Chuck Eberle

Senior Product Owner of Digital Assessment Library, Pearson





THE IMPACT

Time saved, students supported

In her role at the Montgomery County Intermediate Unit, Miksch trains and supports district-based clinicians. This position allows her to see the countywide impact of Pearson's DALs.

Increased efficiency is a recurring theme. "I often go out to districts to show them how the digital assessments work," Miksch says. "Even technology-averse psychologists warm up to digital tools when they start using the technology and realize how much time it saves them."

Previously, school psychologists sent behavior rating scales home with students and waited for them to come back. "Now you can email forms, receive alerts when completed forms come back, and use built-in checklists to know when you have everything ready to write your report."

Assessment scoring is automatic, too. "Instead of worrying about making sure my math is right," Miksch says, "I can focus on what matters most: the student."

Montgomery County school psychologists are hardly alone in embracing this efficiency, says Pearson's Chuck Eberle, who manages the Digital Assessment Library product line. When DALs launched, school psychologists were wary of having the application make scoring decisions, so Pearson allowed users to make those decisions. "But within months," Eberle recalls, "we were getting messages saying, 'Why do we have to click the button to assign a score? Please just score it automatically for us.'"

The efficiency that comes with digital tools gives clinicians more time to communicate with families. Miksch observes: "When psychologists are overwhelmed, they tend to rush to complete the IEP. But it's so important to sit down with parents and discuss the assessment results. Families need to understand things like why we used certain tests, what scores mean, and what the results show about the child."

Digital assessment tools foster that communication by presenting a range of analytics. Beyond standard scores, many assessments in the DALs library provide growth scale values, which show how the student's performance on the same test changes over time. "This longitudinal data provides a great way to track student progress," Miksch says.

The point is to demystify the process and to show that clinicians and educators are working with families to support the child. "It's important for parents to understand what we're doing," Miksch says. "Then it's not as scary."

With complaints about IEPs on the rise, this transparency is more important than ever.

For all these reasons, digital assessments can help schools attract and retain top talent. When clinicians have access to the right tools and training, their work becomes more efficient. Digital tools ease common stresses and streamline work processes, leading to greater job satisfaction and helping clinicians avoid burnout.



Serving students — and controlling costs

K-12 leaders face real uncertainty over future funding. In this context, another benefit of digital assessment tools takes on even greater significance.

That benefit? *Cost containment.*

Miksch explains, “The DALs license has helped districts control costs and budget more accurately.”

In the past, each district had to estimate which assessment materials it would need for the school year. But it’s difficult to anticipate every need, and “our estimates were often wrong,” Miksch says. Ordering extra forms not only costs the district more, but also slows down the process, as orders need to go through the business office.

But DALs removes the guesswork. “It’s all incorporated in one predictable fee,” Miksch says of the county’s DALs license. “Plus, it reduces the administrative load on clinicians and business offices.”





Miksch feels confident moving forward with these digital tools because “Pearson keeps adding features and functionality.” One recent update, for example, allows clinicians to pivot quickly when a scheduled session gets canceled. “If I suddenly have 45 minutes free, I can grab another student and start an assessment without having to return to the office for setup.”

The shortage of school clinicians is not going away — and the number of students in need of assessment keeps rising. These challenges would be difficult enough to overcome even without tight budgets. But as cost containment and efficiency become imperative, high-quality digital assessment tools offer school leaders the best path forward.

These tools help clinicians work more effectively, schools use their resources wisely, and students get the support they deserve.

Visit Pearson’s [DALs website](#) for more information, or connect with your state’s [Assessment Consultant](#) to learn how to make DALs a reality for your district.

Sources

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- 5 "Most U.S. Public Elementary and Secondary Schools Faced Hiring Challenges for the Start of the 2024-25 Academic Year," National Center for Education Statistics, October 17, 2024, https://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/press_releases/10_17_2024.asp. See also Madeline Will, "States Are Desperate for Special Ed. Teachers. But They Can't Cut Corners to Get Them," *EducationWeek*, October 25, 2022, <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/states-are-desperate-for-special-ed-teachers-but-they-cant-cut-corners-to-get-them/2022/10>.
- 6 Kara Arundel, "Special Education Enrollment Climbs to Nearly 8M," *K-12Dive*, February 25, 2025, <https://www.k12dive.com/news/number-of-special-education-students-climbs-to-near-8-million/740413/>.
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