

## **Project SEARCH**

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Project SEARCH is a unique, one-year, work-preparation program that takes place entirely at the workplace.<sup>1,2</sup> This innovative, business-led model features total workplace immersion, which facilitates a seamless combination of classroom instruction, career exploration, and worksite-based training and support. The goal for each program participant is competitive employment. Real-life work experience combined with training in employability and independent living skills help youths with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) make successful transitions from school to productive adult life. Moreover, the goal is to achieve employment in jobs that go beyond the traditional limits often imposed on people with IDD. That is, Project SEARCH prepares program participants for real, rewarding jobs that are complex and systematic; aligned with the interests and skills of the individual; important to the operation of the company; and in integrated settings where employees with IDD can work alongside colleagues with and without disabilities, report to the same management structure, and receive the same employee benefits as their peers.

Project SEARCH ChristianaCare is a collaboration between the Red Clay Consolidated School District (RCCSD), ChristianaCare, Division of Vocation Rehabilitation (DVR), Delaware Department of Education, Community Integrated Services, and Autism Delaware, which started in 2011. Interns attend Project SEARCH for a full academic year (August – June) and follow the RCCSD calendar. Breakfast and lunch are provided by the RCCSD. Interns are responsible for their own transportation each day and may utilize Paratransit, DART Fixed Route or family members. The program can accommodate up to twelve program participants a year and is open to all students in New Castle County, Delaware. Eligible program participants are 18 to 21 years old, who have either just completed their high school academic requirements and earned a diploma the spring before entering the program, or who are in their last year of eligibility in an 18 – 21 transition program. Program participants apply in the winter and spring of the year they will enter the program. The Project SEARCH recruitment team facilitates the selection process that includes a student application, skills assessment, tour, and interview.

The team, which consists of a special education instructor/program coordinator, paraprofessional, and skills trainers, work to meet the educational and training needs of the students over the course of the year. Interns undergo a specially designed vocational assessment. The assessment explores skills that relate to the individual internships as well as basic job skills. The specific job skills will vary depending on the internship assigned; however, certain core skills, such as filing, computer skills, telephone use, and the ability to follow instructions and solve problems, are important in nearly any business setting. To become oriented to the ChristianaCare facilities and culture, the interns participate in “way-finding” exercises; review the employee code of conduct; hear presentations by representatives of ChristianaCare on the mission and core values of the business and how the interns contribute; learn about and practice communication protocols in use at the business; and complete any mandatory employee education, such as safety and confidentiality training.

After an initial orientation period, the interns’ day consists of a one-hour morning classroom session where they participate in activities designed to enhance employability and independent

living skills. Classroom activities are designed around eight major focus areas: team building, workplace safety, technology, self-advocacy, maintaining employment, financial literacy, health and wellness, and preparing for employment. The curriculum is flexible so that, as the year goes on and the instructor gets to know the interns better, the instructor customizes the curriculum to accommodate the specific needs and interests of the interns and the business as they arise. This flexibility helps to ensure a meaningful and successful experience for program participants, as well as responsiveness to the business.

The rest of the day is devoted to learning specific, relevant, and transferable job skills in an internship. Interns rotate through three different worksite internships at ChristianaCare over the course of the year. These include touring the potential internship sites, creating a resume and cover letter, and practicing interviewing skills. Throughout the week, the interns participate in 20 hours at their internship to learn work skills, as well as social and communication skills. As they experience the culture and learn to function with support and guidance, they utilize classroom time at the end of the day to review their work and experiences, discuss different options, and plan for the next day.

Starting in the second half of the school year, the emphasis shifts to refining skills, finalizing the career goal, and carrying out an individualized job search. The employment specialist from the supported employment agency takes the lead in the job search for a given intern, but all the members of an intern's team are involved. Job development is based on the intern's experiences, strengths, preferences, and skills.

Worldwide, there are over 600 Project SEARCH High School Transition program sites, with the majority in the United States. On average, each site serves eight individuals in a program year. Overall, Project SEARCH serves over 4800 young people with IDD every year. The number of program sites continues to grow each year, with a corresponding increase in the number of young people with disabilities served.

For more information, please email [projectsearch@redclay.k12.de.us](mailto:projectsearch@redclay.k12.de.us)

## References:

1. Daston, M. M., Riehle, J. E., & Rutkowski, S. (2012). High school transition that works: Lessons learned from Project SEARCH. Baltimore, MD: Brookes.
2. Rutkowski, S., Daston, M., Van Kuiken, D., & Riehle, E. (2006). Project SEARCH: A demand-side model of high school transition. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 25, 85–96.

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