

Our Story



Project SEARCH was developed at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, a research environment that fosters visionary thinking and innovation. It all began in 1996, when Erin Riehle was Director of Cincinnati Children's Emergency Department. Erin felt that, because the hospital served individuals with developmental disabilities, it made sense that they should commit to hiring people in this group. She wondered if it would be possible to train people with developmental disabilities to fill some of the high-turnover, entry level positions in her department, which involved complex and systematic tasks such as stocking supply cabinets. As a starting point, Erin presented her ideas to Susie Rutkowski, then the special education director at Great Oaks Career Campuses. Erin and Susie formed a partnership that was instantaneous, and together they launched Project SEARCH.



Since its inception, Project SEARCH has grown from one original program site at Cincinnati Children's to over 240 sites across 35 states and four countries. Some of our business partners include, but are not limited to, Fifth Third Bank, Medtronic, the U.S. Department of Education, the U.S. Department of Labor, Zoo Miami, Indiana State Government, Emory Midtown Hospital, Kaiser Permanente, and the University of Rochester Medical Center. Project SEARCH's primary objective is to secure competitive employment for people with disabilities.



Project SEARCH is driven by collaboration among the following community partners:

- ❖ Hospital or Business
- ❖ Local School District(s) and/or Educational Organization
- ❖ Vocational Rehabilitation
- ❖ Community Rehabilitation Partner
- ❖ Long-Term Support Agency
- ❖ Young people with disabilities and their families



"Project Search breaks down stereotypes by increasing the public's expectations about people with significant disabilities. The Project Search program provides young people with significant disabilities the opportunity to contribute to their communities and to society at large by providing the necessary supports to work and receive minimum or prevailing wage. We are proud here at DOL to be the first Federal agency to embrace this program. This summer, we will hire several Project Search graduates at above minimum wage."

Kathleen Martinez, Former Assistant Secretary for the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), Department of Labor, Washington, DC



The High School Transition Program is a one-year internship program for students with disabilities in their last year of high school eligibility. It is targeted for students whose goal is competitive employment. The program takes place in a business setting where total immersion in the workplace facilitates the teaching and learning process as well as the acquisition of employability skill and specific marketable work skills. Students participate in three internships to explore a variety of career paths. The students work with a team that includes their family, a special education teacher, a Rehabilitation Services Administration counselor, and business representatives to create an employment goal and support the student during this important transition from school to work.

BENEFITS of the Project SEARCH Model:

Benefits to the Student Interns:

- ❖ Participation in a variety of internships within the host hospital / business
- ❖ Acquisition of competitive, transferable and marketable job skills
- ❖ Increased independence, confidence, and self esteem
- ❖ Individualized coaching, instruction, and feedback
- ❖ Linkages to Vocational Rehabilitation and other adult service agencies

Benefits to the Business:

- ❖ Access to a new, diverse, talent stream with skills that match labor needs
- ❖ Interns/employees with disabilities who serve as role models for customers
- ❖ Access to a demographic of the economy with intense buying power: people with disabilities represent one of the fastest growing market segments in the US
- ❖ Increased regional and national recognition through marketing of this unique program
- ❖ Increased performance and retention in some high-turnover, entry-level positions

