

# TRANSITIONING

## with Disabilities



### Peg Allen

is public information specialist at the Warren County Career Center in Lebanon, Ohio. She can be contacted by e-mail at [peg.allen@mywccc.org](mailto:peg.allen@mywccc.org).

### Jean Ciancio

is public relations coordinator at Great Oaks Institute of Technology and Career Development. She can be contacted by e-mail at [ciancioj@greatoaks.com](mailto:ciancioj@greatoaks.com).

### Susie Rutkowski

is manager of disability education at Great Oaks Institute of Technology and Career Development. She can be contacted by e-mail at [rutkowss@greatoaks.com](mailto:rutkowss@greatoaks.com).

## into Work

By Peg Allen, Jean Ciancio and Susie Rutkowski

The growth and success of the Project SEARCH model is a source of pride and excitement for those of us who have been associated with the program over the years

**F**or students with disabilities, the opportunity to work in a supportive environment is one that can bring them, and their employers, great rewards. A program started more than a decade ago at the Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center is giving students just that kind of opportunity through innovative workforce and career development. Begun in 1996 by J. Erin Riehle, then the director of the emergency room at the hospital, Project SEARCH is a one-year high school transition program for seniors. With the help of classroom instruction in employability and independent living skills, work onsite, and feedback from instructors, students are able to secure employment after they complete their required rotations.

### **Model Components**

Project SEARCH is a business-led initiative built on collaboration that utilizes braided funding to ensure sustainability of the model. The essential partners represent education, rehabilitation, long-term support, and business. Each partner brings together needed human and critical resources that support the students and the host business. Educational staff works onsite blending in to the work environment and culture to give students the support they need to succeed. The program takes place in a health care or business setting where total immersion in the workplace facilitates the teaching and learning process. Each student participates in three to four internships throughout the school year learning marketable work and social skills needed to reach the program outcome—competitive employment. The students, who have disabilities including cognitive and physical,

are successful in positively impacting the organization and changing the corporate culture about employing people with disabilities. When the students have completed the program, the business has the opportunity to hire them if there is a need and there is a good match. A key to the program's success is the invaluable partnerships forged.

"One of the most unique aspects of Project SEARCH has been the development of collaborations between business, education and rehabilitation," said Riehle, Project SEARCH director. "These types of partnerships are revolutionary and allow the partners to maximize resources, meet the needs of all parties, create programs that they might not have thought of on their own, and braid funding that leads to sustainability."

There are many benefits to school districts and the businesses that get involved:

- Students with more significant disabilities who may not be successful in a traditional career and technical education (CTE) program have achieved success in Project SEARCH.
- Relationships with associate schools and families improve as a broader range of students are educated.
- Project SEARCH is based on research and incorporates best practices that bring positive results. (High school students with disabilities who participate in CTE programs are nine times more likely to become employed. Work-based learning promotes problem solving, cognitive thinking, teamwork and social relationships.)
- Workforce diversity is enhanced.
- Attendance and productivity rates are higher for this population than for typical employees.
- Communities are enriched when young adults with disabilities become productive, contributing members of the workforce and society.

## Success Stories

Mary Bodle, a patient escorter at the hospi-

tal, was in the class of 2001. At the end of her internship, she applied for an opening in the department and was hired dependent on her ability to complete a minimum of nine patient transports a day. After her probationary period, she was able to complete an average of 16 transports on a daily basis. She is such a vital part of her team that she was recognized twice with the "Robert E. Davis" award. (The award recognizes patient escorters who exemplify positive attitudes, dedication and capable performance.) Recently, Bodle traveled to San Antonio, Texas, with her manager, Bill Lecher, to speak at a National Children's Hospital conference regarding the department's achievement of effective patient transports (17.5 minutes per transport). She went not as a person with a disability, but as a successful employee who helped her department reach its goal.

Collin Biddle, a file room processor at Fifth Third Bank, is a 2005 graduate. He began a three-week job tryout period in the summer of 2005 working on data entry for more than 15,000 loan documents. On his second day it became evident to his supervisor that he would complete this project well before the three-week period was over. Biddle worked independently with 99.2 percent accuracy, and completed the project in less than one week. Biddle was hired in 2005 after doing a test in which he completed 12,000 10-key-strokes per hour with 100 percent accuracy. To date the hospital has employed more than 60 Project SEARCH participants, and the bank has employed 12 graduates.

## Replication Efforts

There are 27 Project SEARCH sites operating throughout the country. Cincinnati's Children's Hospital, Great Oaks Institute of Technology and



Career Development, and the Hamilton County Board of Mental Retardation and Development Disabilities are the original partners. But because of the program's success, it is being replicated to offer opportunities to an even wider population. In Ohio, Project SEARCH is working with the Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council to replicate Project SEARCH with a goal of 22 programs over the next few years. Other states, including California, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Pennsylvania and Washington, have similar initiatives. Project SEARCH staff is also working with the National Health Service, Remploy, and the Employers Forum in the United Kingdom to introduce the program over there. Russia and Italy are exploring this model for their young adults with disabilities. Even more exciting are the other

60 partnerships around the globe working to implement this model for the young with disabilities in their local communities.

"The growth and success of the Project SEARCH model is a source of pride and excitement for those of us who have been associated with the program over the years," said Robin White, president and CEO of Great Oaks. "The program fulfills the needs of employers who must rely on skilled, reliable workers to do basic, vital work. At the same time, Project SEARCH provides individuals who have disabilities with the opportunity to discover how they can best use their talents, develop skills, and eventually find a niche as a productive, valued employee. We are not surprised at the interest shown by many organizations in the United States and abroad. It is a proven model that offers many benefits to all stakeholders." ■



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