

Project SEARCH Finds Success

BY JESSICA BELL

SOMETHING REMARKABLE is happening at the Project SEARCH partnership at Bayhealth. Student interns with intellectual and developmental disabilities are learning transferable, marketable skills and gaining independent living skills. Then they are applying those skills by getting jobs in the workforce.

Project SEARCH at Bayhealth was recognized by Project SEARCH Headquarters for employment outcomes (intern students who graduated the program and remain employed) of 75% for the 2014-2015 year. They are on track for 2015-2016 year, too, with 70% of the Class of 2016 having already secured employment. That's an incredible achievement, considering that the national unemployment rate is almost twice as high for people with disabilities, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

So how do they do it? The Project SEARCH High School Transition Program is a business led, one year school-to-work program that takes place entirely at the workplace. According to Lisa M. Enright, M.Ed., Project SEARCH Instructor for the Capital School District-Kent County Community School, the key component of their success is the host business: Bayhealth.

"Bayhealth is the perfect Host Business partner for the execution of Project SEARCH because as a hospital, it operates like a community. Essentially, Project SEARCH is the combination of an educational, social, and employment service provided in a business setting, which makes a partner like Bayhealth critical for the success of the program. Bayhealth offers 21 department opportunities for interns, who rotate through three ten-week internships based on the "three actuals" principle: actual place, actual parts, and actual data. Each department has mentors that help guide student interns as they're immersed directly into the environment."

Project SEARCH is an international program, but each partnership is local. Project SEARCH at Bayhealth is a partnership between Bayhealth, Capital School District-Kent County Community School, and the Delaware Department of Labor-Division of Vocational Rehabilitation.

"There is a skills gap for people with disabilities transitioning directly from high school to employment that the program explicitly addresses through instruction and on the job coaching," Enright says.

Interns acquire core skills like communication, work ethic, and team-



Moriah (left) talks with Pil Kim, Lead Environmental Services Assistant at Bayhealth and a Project SEARCH mentor, as she works at her job inside Kent General Hospital.

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work, measured by weekly mentor evaluations and intern self-evaluations that allow the program to adjust coaching and instruction. Expectations of performance are high, and every stakeholder - every mentor, manager, administrator, state agency, community partner, business partner, and the interns themselves - must work to deliver the tremendous results the program delivers.

Because the program is structured to address students' needs both personally and vocationally to achieve transition goals, throughout the academic year students develop relationships with adult service providers facilitated through family meetings, classroom events, guest speakers, community involvement, and progress meetings.

By the time student interns graduate from the program, they've met the curriculum competencies, developed a career portfolio, and acquired a skill set that will translate into competitive employment in the community, paving their path to independence. After the graduate is comfortable in their secured employment, coaching is transitioned to another job coach with the respective companies, Autism



Students in Project Search at Kent General Hospital, work on their banking skills before heading out to their jobs at the hospital.

Delaware, and CIS, Community Integrated Services.

Project SEARCH at Bayhealth is welcoming its third cohort of student interns this year. ■

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