

Youth with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are at higher risk of unemployment than their peers with other types of disabilities (Wehman et al., 2020). When looking at ways to prepare students with ASD for future employment, practitioners turn to proven, work-based learning models like Project SEARCH. This research brief describes Project SEARCH and how it has been modified to successfully meet the unique needs of individuals with ASD.

What is Project SEARCH + ASD Supports?

Project SEARCH is a business-led transition model where schools create collaborative partnerships with large local businesses to offer work-based learning opportunities for students with disabilities. Primary components of the model include classroom instruction, career exploration, and internship rotation among worksites within one business. The goal of Project SEARCH is to support students to transition into competitive integrated employment.

The development of Project SEARCH + ASD Supports combines the effective Project SEARCH model with additional supports for students with ASD. Depending on the student, these supports might include social communication training, behavioral consultation, consistent structure, visual supports, self-monitoring checklists, role-playing, and intensive instruction (Schall et al., 2015; Wehman et al., 2020). In the Project Search + ASD Supports model, supports are customized to meet the needs of the individual.

What the Research Says

Students with ASD who participate in Project SEARCH + ASD Supports have higher rates of post-school employment than students who do not participate in the program. Wehman et al. (2014)

found that 87.5% of students obtained employment at the completion of Project SEARCH + ASD Supports as opposed to only 6.25% of students in the control group. Similarly, Whittenburg et al. (2020) found that 83% of students who completed Project SEARCH + ASD Supports obtained employment within 12 months following the program, however, none of the students waitlisted to participate in the program obtained employment. Also of interest, Wehman et al. (2020) found that students with ASD who participated in Project SEARCH + ASD Supports were 6.65 times more likely to be employed at graduation than those who did not participate. Work experiences within the programs studied have spanned a range of community sites, including hospitals, department stores, fitness centers, restaurant/event venues, and food courts, illustrating the adaptability of the program model across a range of employment settings.

Guidelines for Practice

Existing research on Project SEARCH + ASD Supports describes numerous practices for supporting students with ASD in community-based work experiences. The types of supports provided depend on the unique needs of each student. The following guidelines illustrate key practices to consider when supporting students with ASD in Project SEARCH or other work-based learning experience programs.

Create personalized training opportunities — In order to address the individualized needs of the students, consider matching their interests and skills to specific internships in order to provide personalized training opportunities.

Evaluate worksite instruction — Determine if there is ample, systematic instruction, and opportunities for students to receive needed training and social skills practice throughout their workday.

Build the bridge from school-based to adult services

— Look for opportunities to braid the services of educational staff, vocational rehabilitation, and other provider agencies to encourage a more seamless transition from school to post-school supports.

Create a plan to address behavior — Identify and prioritize behaviors for intervention and plan for strategies and support.

Design staff training — To best support the success of work-based learning experiences, seek opportunities to provide disability-specific training for both program and worksite partners.

Establish program takeaways — Program participants should be exiting the program with comprehensive documentation of their work experience. This might include resumes (written or video format), examples of successful work, letters of recommendation, and professional references.

Additional Resources**Project SEARCH**

www.projectsearch.us

The official Project SEARCH website provides additional information about Project SEARCH, available training, program locations, and how to start a Project SEARCH program.

ICTW Project SEARCH Research Brief

<https://ictw.illinois.edu/resources/research-briefs/wble/brief-project-search>

This research brief describes Project SEARCH components, outcomes, and guidelines for practice.

References

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