

Community work-based learning (WBL) experiences require a collaborative relationship between employers and schools to provide structured learning experiences for students. There are a wide range of WBL models employed in schools across the nation. This brief will delve into one well-known and researched WBL program model called Project SEARCH.

What is Project SEARCH?

Project SEARCH is a model transition-to-work program that is structured to provide employment instruction and preparation entirely in the workplace. Project SEARCH participants engage in a combination of classroom instruction, career exploration, and hands-on training through worksite rotation. They receive long-term job coaching and continuous feedback from trainers, teachers, and employers. The approach to establishing worksites focuses on meeting the needs of employers. One of the unique components of Project SEARCH is an intentional collaborative partnership using support and resources from a range of partners including local schools, Vocational Rehabilitation, Community Rehabilitation Providers, Intellectual and Developmental Disability Services Agencies, families/advocates, and Workforce Investment Boards (where available). The ultimate goal of the program is competitive employment, so typically students participate in Project SEARCH during their final year of school.

What the Research Says

Project SEARCH is associated with positive post-school employment outcomes. An investigation of 3,906 students in one state who participated in some form of WBL experience (i.e., school work study, work adjustment training, iJobs, Project SEARCH) found that Project SEARCH was the only WBL model significantly associated with an

outcome of competitive integrated employment (Osamni et al., 2022). The researchers credit the success of Project SEARCH with full immersion into the worksite for nine months coupled with internship rotation, skills instruction, and fading of supports. Similarly, Davis et al. (2021) investigated the outcomes of 285 students who completed Project SEARCH within two school districts and found that 78% of the students in one district and 90% of the students in the other district obtained competitive integrated employment following their internship. Most students who obtained employment worked part-time and earned \$7-\$10 hours per hour.

Employer satisfaction is an important determinant of the success of Project SEARCH. Mueller et al. (2018) surveyed 114 employers and found that most were very satisfied with their Project SEARCH interns, the individuals they hired follow the internship, and the support they received from Project SEARCH staff. Of the respondents, 91% reported willingness to hire Project SEARCH interns in the future.

Guidelines for Practice

Below are three key takeaways from the research surrounding Project SEARCH. Regardless of whether a school employs Project SEARCH or another WBL model, these takeaways may be helpful for educators and service providers looking to build or improve WBL opportunities.

Workplace immersion is key – the standout characteristic of Project SEARCH is the 9-month immersion into a community-based worksite. There is no other way to set students up for authentic learning than spending as much time in the community as possible. There are often barriers to spending this amount of time at community WBL sites, so working with school administration and worksites to maximize the amount of time students spend at the worksite is essential.

Upfront and ongoing training for all stakeholders – another flagstone to the Project SEARCH program model is the upfront training provided to students before starting an internship. Spending intentional time prior to a student beginning an internship rotation sets both the students and the staff involved up for better success for the duration of the program. This training is continued throughout the program both in a classroom setting as well as within the context of the internship. Training related to program expectations, job coaching strategies, and disability awareness are noted as top priorities for worksites.

Establish collaborative partnerships – creating a positive and collaborative partnership between the host business and their employees, vocational rehabilitation agency, participants, and the school is the only way to make a program like Project SEARCH work. Most importantly, the attitudes of the employees of the community-based worksite can make or break a program's success. It's imperative that the partnerships are as collaborative and communicative as possible in order for everyone to feel heard, supported, and, in turn, able to create a positive work experience for the students involved.

Additional Resource

Project SEARCH Website

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.

References

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This research brief was developed by the Illinois Center for Transition and Work at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign through a contract with the Illinois State Board of Education. Information presented may not reflect the position or policy of the Illinois State Board of Education.

