

PROJECT SEARCH: HELPING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES FIND SUCCESS



Jeffco Public Schools has a unique school-to-work program for high school students with significant disabilities: Project SEARCH. The program is supported through Jeffco Transition Services and partnerships with Children's Hospital Colorado, University of Colorado Hospital (UCHealth), the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), and Easterseals Colorado.

During this one-academic-year program, students learn work skills through two different internships (one each semester) on the Anschutz Medical Campus at Children's Hospital or UCHealth. The goal at the end of the program is for students to gain

competitive employment.

There are eight Jeffco students in the program this year: four at Children's and four at UCHealth. Two of those students, Chris Jordan (Children's Hospital) from Arvada West High School and Reinaldo Mercado (UCHealth) from Lakewood High School, have already experienced success with the program.

Students begin their day in the classroom with instructors Renee Salvi (Children's Hospital) and Hannah Scott (UCHealth), where they work on skills to support independent living. Then, the students head off to their internships. Jordan works in Food Service and Mercado first interned in the Inpatient Infusion Center, and now is working in Facilities. Students work alongside a mentor in their department, and paraeducators and job coaches are there to support the students in skill development.

All students take either RTD or Access-a-Ride to get to work. Learning to travel alone using public transportation is a big part of the program. Thanks to a partnership with Via Mobility, students receive travel training the summer before they begin the program.

"Something we encourage is learning to take public transportation. So, once they get a job, they can continue to get to and from where they need to go," explained Salvi.

"It ends up being one of the most powerful parts of Project SEARCH because it leads to that really independent person who not only can go to work but go do fun things with their friends," added Scott.

To be accepted to Project SEARCH, students go through a skills assessment and interview day. Project SEARCH staff also meet with the students and their families to learn more about what support systems are needed and what the student's interests and job goals are. Students then interview for their specific internship to make sure it will be the right fit.

When they begin the internship, there is a week to two-week period where Project SEARCH staff stay closely connected with the students and iron out any issues that may arise.

"During that time, it's one-on-one with one of us, paraeducators, or job coaches. Our goal is to have them be as independent as possible in their internships with those natural supports around them – mentors and additional coworkers," explained Salvi.

Throughout the internship, Project SEARCH staff are always there for support. Instructors also check-in with the students' managers every four or five weeks and discuss how they are doing compared to the standards of the hospital.

Both Jordan and Mercado have impressed their respective departments. After just four weeks on the job, Food Services wanted to hire Jordan on and Mercado was named Employee of the Month at the Infusion Center.

Food Services has been so impressed with Jordan, that they asked to keep him in the department for a second semester to expand his skills and knowledge. Jordan was happy to oblige since he knows he wants to stay and learn a variety of roles. The Food Services team can't wait to have Jordan as a permanent employee.

After his very successful stint in the Infusion Center, Mercado moved to Facilities which has brought him closer to his ultimate goal to learn plumbing. Not only does he do some plumbing work, but a variety of jobs in the department. Facilities also plan to hire Mercado after Project SEARCH.

About half of the graduates stay at Children's or UCHealth when offered permanent positions.

"A lot of students from Jeffco are pretty far away, so it's a family decision to continue the travel or look closer to Jeffco. More of those independent travelers choose to stay," said Scott.

If students don't stay at the hospitals, Project SEARCH and their partners help students find positions in their communities.

"We always tell students, families, and teachers considering Project SEARCH that students don't have to want to work in a hospital," explained Salvi. "It's just a great place to learn a variety of different skills. You learn a lot of transferable skills that can be used out in the community – whatever their goal is."

"[Hospitals] are little cities that can accommodate all those different skills," added Scott.

Overall, the program has great employment outcomes, with 73 percent of graduates finding employment within six months of graduation.

"The majority of students want to work. That's why they come to Project SEARCH, to gain those skills and get that support in finding employment," said Salvi. "Those who have held onto that goal of employment, we make sure they find employment."

