

SEARCHing for work: High school, hospital program helps students with disabilities

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Marshfield School District and Ministry Saint Joseph's Hospital have partnered to ensure students with cognitive disabilities can enter the workforce after leaving high school. The two entities have launched Project SEARCH, a yearlong internship program that began Sept. 1. "It's an amazing opportunity to experience life outside of school," said Anne Dick, a Project SEARCH coordinator and special education teacher at Marshfield High School. "It's about (the interns) and their interests."

The program gives the four students — Melissa Kaiser, 19, of Hewitt, Marissa Stangl, 19, Brandon Hart, 19, and Mark Sternweis, 20, all of Marshfield — job coaching, workplace skills and hospital internships. Each of the four interns was placed into participating departments within the hospital where they showed the most interest.

Kaiser, who wants to eventually work at a day care center, works in the laundry area of the neonatal center. Sternweis started Monday in environmental services, where he's cleaning and emptying garbage and recycling bins. "I'm excited to start," said Sternweis, adding that he had a previous internship at Total Body Fitness where he performed some of the same work.

"Special education services can begin for children at age 3 and continue until they're 21", said Jesse Jackson, Marshfield schools' director of student services. "Many times kids with cognitive disabilities will stay until 21, because they're not ready to be fully independent," Jackson said. "It's not fair for them to stay in high school and have all their buddies leave and they have to come back. It feels like they're being punished, when they're just going to school. We focus on creating independent living, learning and vocational assessments.

Project SEARCH was developed in Cincinnati 15 years ago to create a vocational training program for students with disabilities inside of a hospital workplace. Since then, the program has spread across 42 states and four countries. In the last five years, the program has taken off in Madison, Milwaukee and Eau Claire. The school district received a \$15,000 Medicaid Infrastructure Grant to send Dick and other special education specialists to Cincinnati for Project SEARCH training. Dick is funded through the school district and the state's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation funds the job coaches from Opportunity Development Center for any job training the student interns need. Community Care Marshfield School District of Central Wisconsin will continue to fund the coaches after DVR's funding is exhausted.

"The classroom instruction is directly tied to job readiness skills," Jackson said. "So they're talking through interviews, how to conduct yourself, what to wear, how long you should be speaking, resume building and then the instruction goes from there to specific tasks."

The interns complete workbooks that help them identify characteristics or skills they need to develop for the job or career they're looking to enter. They'll spend 10 weeks in a specific job before rotating

among the five departments — laundry, environmental services, central sterilization, food nutrition and pharmacy. “I wish every employee we had was this enthusiastic,” said Layton Anderson, vice president of hospital operations for Ministry Saint Joseph’s Hospital. “When Jesse (Jackson) approached us and we started looking at the program, we saw it blends well with our mission.”

Dick also trains hospital staff for working with the students. “Many employers haven’t had the opportunity to work with people with disabilities, so they may be hesitant with taking them on as interns or employees,” Jackson said. “Working with kids with disabilities, it’s good for morale,” Jackson said. “We all have natural prejudices built in that we don’t know we have. Will I do well with a kid with disabilities? Are they fragile? Will I hurt them? But they’re super happy to be there and they have a better work attitude.”

The program is expected to grow to up to 12 interns, Dick said, adding that next year the program will enroll students from other districts. Students who apply for the program have to commit to leaving high school. The students also have to behave appropriately, demonstrate good hygiene, display their preparedness and treat others with respect, Jackson said. “Our mark of success will be 100 percent employment,” he said.

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