

# Agencies partner to offer innovative Project SEARCH program

Seeks to secure competitive employment for students with developmental disabilities

When 11 high school seniors in the Montgomery area leave for school each morning, they are actually going to Baptist Medical Center South in Montgomery to participate in a unique school-to-work program called Project SEARCH. This innovative program focuses on serving young adults with a variety of developmental disabilities by helping them secure competitive employment. Project SEARCH's High School Transition Program is a one-year, business-led program that takes place entirely at the workplace. Developed in 1996 at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, Project SEARCH has since grown to over 200 sites across the U.S., Canada, England, Scotland and Australia.

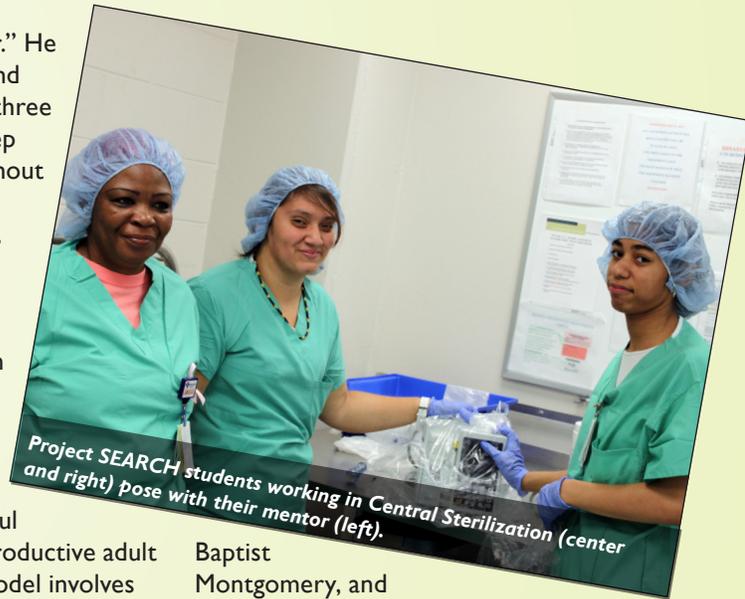
In Alabama, Project SEARCH began just this past August. It is a collaboration between the Alabama Department of Mental Health, Alabama Council for Developmental Disabilities, Alabama Department of Education, and Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services and its Division of Vocational Rehabilitation's community offices. Byron White, consumer employment specialist at ADMH, serves as the statewide Project SEARCH coordinator, overseeing progress at its two sites: Baptist Montgomery and Shelby Baptist Medical Center in Alabaster. White says first impressions of Project SEARCH are very favorable, "It gives students training in an exciting environment with more creative ways to learn

that the schools cannot offer." He adds that the goal is to expand Project SEARCH to two or three more sites next year and keep building the program throughout the state.

Through Project SEARCH, students learn relevant, marketable and transferable skills while immersed in an actual business. The program provides real-life work experience combined with training in employability and independent living skills to help ensure successful transitions from school to productive adult life. The Project SEARCH model involves an extensive period of training and career exploration, innovative adaptations, long-term job coaching, and continuous feedback from teachers, job coaches and employers. As a result, at the completion of the training program, students are employed in nontraditional, complex and rewarding jobs.

Typically, Project SEARCH serves students on an Individual Education Program and in their last year of high school eligibility. Students attend the program for a full school year (August – May) at the host business, which provides access to an on-site classroom for the students. Once the school year begins, the first few weeks of the program are focused on new employee orientation, hands-on skill assessment, and familiarization with a business environment. Students develop a career plan which guides the internship selection process and individualized job search. Sites are staffed by a special education teacher and one to three job coaches to meet the students' educational and training needs.

Valerie Johnson is the on-site coordinator of Project SEARCH at



Project SEARCH students working in Central Sterilization (center and right) pose with their mentor (left).

Baptist Montgomery, and is also in charge of planning and teaching the program's Employment Skills curriculum. Johnson was formerly a special education teacher at Sidney Lanier High School before joining Project SEARCH. She states, "I saw so many students there who were not passing school and who were not going on to fulfill their potential. I knew there was a need for some kind of transitional program and told my principal that if he heard of any opportunities, I wanted to be involved. Once we learned about Project SEARCH, I knew it was my opportunity to truly make a difference."

Throughout the school year, students will spend approximately one hour of their day with Johnson working on employability and functional skills. Classroom activities are designed around the following focus areas: team building, getting around the workplace, workplace safety, technology, social skills, communication, presentation skills, interviewing skills, money management, health and wellness, job search skills and keeping a job. Johnson says, "The most rewarding thing about my work is teaching them new skills, knowing they are digesting and learning those skills, and seeing the skills applied outside of the classroom in their internships."

Those internships make up approximately



Marteena (left) with her mentor in Human Relations, Penny (right).

five hours of the student's school day. The students at Baptist Montgomery are currently working in the first of three targeted internships they will complete by the end of the school year. These internships will enable them to acquire skills to use in applying for related positions. Students are also building communication, teamwork and problem-solving skills important to their overall development as a young worker. The student internships were identified earlier this year through a collaborative process involving the teacher, job coach and business liaison.

Enter Scott Watson, job coach at Baptist Montgomery. As a job coach, Watson serves as a link between Baptist, the students' schools, their parents and staff at community vocational rehabilitation offices. He provides detailed job training to the students, which started with him working with Baptist to identify potential internship sites and duties, job accommodations and standard work procedures. Watson next learned and carried out the duties himself, and then taught the students how to fulfill those duties. The internship rotations began a few weeks after the start of the program. A department mentor is identified at each site, and interacts with the teacher, job coach and student as a consistent source of guidance and feedback. Working from a task list, students acquire core skills, and once those are mastered, additional skills are layered on to improve their marketability.

Currently at Baptist Montgomery, three students work in the Cafeteria, two in Central Sterilization, two in Volunteer Services, one in Human Relations, one in the Sleep Apnea Clinic, one in ER and one in Respiratory Stock. In Volunteer Services, Andrew announces that his favorite part of his job is visiting with all the volunteers as he delivers coffee to them each day. Tameka

prefers to stay behind the scenes filing paperwork and coordinating files for each of the volunteers. Their mentor Renea says, "These internships are really useful because you can see where their strengths lie, so you get a sense of what kind of jobs they'd enjoy most and where they will have the most impact. It has been a pleasure working with Tameka and Andrew. They are great students and are always smiling."

Over in Central Sterilization, Elizabeth and Maxie keep busy cleaning, packing pills and sterilizing equipment. Their mentor, Gloria, remarks about the excellent job they do and how conscientious they are. She also notes that Maxie has impressed everyone in her department with her memorization skills. Gloria laughs, "She had all the codes for the doors around this whole place memorized in one day!" In the Cafeteria, Tamarieo and Dominic help keep the food prep area clean, while Vinetta is swiftly becoming known for her infectious smile as she opens the door for diners and welcomes them in.

Marteena also enjoys the social aspect of her job in Human Relations. She declares her favorite part of the job as, "Sitting out front so I can see everyone and everything that is going on." She is also in charge of filing, making labels and answering the phone. Her mentor, Penny, says, "I enjoy my daily interaction with Marteena, seeing her develop social skills and maturity, and helping with that process." Overall, Watson says these internships are, "Key to the success of the program, and it's so rewarding to be a part of it all." He adds that the response from the leadership at Baptist has been overwhelmingly positive, "They are excited to be a part of this program and see the students grow."

During the last few months of the school year, Johnson and Watson's emphasis will be on refining skills, achieving goals and working with vocational rehab to carry out individualized job placement. Upon satisfactory completion of the program (95% or better attendance, good attitude, successful skill acquisition at each



job site) the students will receive a Career Portfolio that generally contains a resume, letters of recommendation, competency profile, and any awards or special recognition received while in the program. The team will take each student's skills and experience, and work to place them in full employment either at Baptist or in the community. ADMH's goal is to then place as many students as possible on the waiver for long-term support and follow-up.

According to White, currently Project SEARCH has sites in more than 40 states with a success rate of around 70 percent in terms of finding employment for students exiting school. Around 30 percent of students go on to be hired at their host site. To ensure that level of success continues, Project SEARCH requires sites to adhere to a fidelity model that encompasses best practices and core model components.

Project SEARCH considers the sole definition of a successful outcome as competitive employment in an integrated setting for each intern, with year-round work of 20 or more hours per week, making minimum wage or higher. In addition, the presence of a Project SEARCH site can bring about changes in business cultures that have positive effects on attitudes about hiring people with disabilities and the range of jobs in which they can be successful. Johnson agrees, "I enjoy seeing how everyone involved, especially the employers, get attached to the students so quickly. They can no longer see their disabilities, but just the abilities they had all along." The 11 students at Baptist Montgomery have made quite an impression with their abilities, as three students have already been offered jobs there when they finish school.

