



## **PROJECT SEARCH**

### ***A Model Worth Replicating***

*4 Ways Arizona Can Expand the Nation's Most Successful Internship Program for Students with Intellectual Disabilities*

Most adult Arizonans with intellectual disabilities are unemployed. Just 17% of the state's recent high school graduates with an intellectual disability are engaged in competitive employment, compared to 38% of graduates with other disabilities. Only 28% of working-age Arizonans with an intellectual disability have jobs.

While competitive, integrated employment is the true goal of education for people with disabilities, it remains elusive—particularly for those with intellectual disabilities. Yet one program, Project SEARCH, defies the odds. And there are four steps Arizona can take to reach even more students with this life-changing program.

### **What Is Project SEARCH?**

Project SEARCH is a nationwide internship program for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. This year-long program engages students in work and learning at a host business site. Most participants are students in their last year of high school, but the model can extend to recently graduated adults.

With over 700 sites across the country, few—if any—programs can boast better outcomes than Project SEARCH. Take a look at the program's stats from 2021-22.

- Enrolled students: 3,855
- Employed students: 2,614
- Students employed in a competitive, integrated job: 67%
- Program completion rate: 92% (3,551 students)

Project SEARCH offers students valuable experiences that help them seamlessly transition from high school to employment.

## **The Project SEARCH Framework**

Project SEARCH measures success within the following framework:

- Competitive employment in an integrated setting (i.e. among co-workers with and without disabilities);
- Year-round, non-seasonal employment;
- 16 hours/week or more; and
- Prevailing wage.

## **Does Project SEARCH Operate in Arizona?**

Yes. Arizona has seven Project SEARCH sites with the intent to expand. The Sonoran Center for Excellence in Disabilities at the University of Arizona serves as project coordinator.

- 344 interns have graduated from Project SEARCH in Arizona.
- 71% of Arizona's Project SEARCH graduates obtained competitive integrated employment in 2019.

### **Arizona's Project SEARCH Programs**

- Mayo Clinic - Paradise Valley Unified School District
- Banner Health Gateway - Gilbert Public Schools
- University of Arizona - Pima Joint Technical Education District (JTED)
- Banner UMC - Pima Joint Technical Education District (JTED)
- Renaissance Glendale Hotel & Spa - West Maricopa Education Center (West-MEC)
- SanMar - West-MEC
- Luke Air Force Base - West MEC (inactive)
- Easterseals - Banner UMC (inactive)

## **Cultivating Business Partnerships**

Project SEARCH demonstrates true partnerships with businesses. Project SEARCH's success in Arizona is due to collaborations with host businesses, career and technical education centers, Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), the Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD), and local school districts.

The program's funding model reflects the collaborative nature of the model. Funding is braided and can vary from site to site depending on the partnerships. For example, schools often provide trainers, businesses may offer site-based resources while DDD and VR offer direct student support. (It's important to note that all Project SEARCH interns must be eligible for Vocational Rehabilitation.)

## How Can Arizona Bring Project SEARCH to Scale?

There are four simple ways Arizona can expand Project SEARCH to create more transition opportunities for youth and young adults with disabilities across the state.

### *1. Increase Capacity*

The Sonoran Center has provided strong leadership, but the state can offer additional support to kickstart more programs and locations. With the Sonoran Center in Tucson, a second coordinator in Phoenix or Flagstaff could help build more capacity.

### *2. Set a Goal*

With the leadership of the Arizona Developmental Disabilities Planning Council, the state could set goals and create a strategic plan to dramatically expand the number of Project SEARCH sites. Goals could differentiate between high school and young adult programs.

### *3. Support Arizona's Career Technical Education Districts*

Career Technical Education Districts (CTEDs) are perfectly designed to cultivate the relationships needed for this program's success, as demonstrated by the West-MEC and Pima JTED sites. Arizona could adopt a goal for each CTED to house a Project SEARCH site.

### *4. Offer Start-up Grants*

Even when the partnerships begin to fall in place, the program licensing fee of \$18,000 can be a barrier. The Arizona Developmental Disabilities Planning Council could partner with the Arizona Department of Education and VR to create a launch fund to support efforts.

#### **Arizona's Project SEARCH Programs**

The Kansas Developmental Disabilities Council supported the expansion of Project SEARCH in its five-year plan and now has 11 sites.

<https://kcdd.org/about-us/council-accomplishments>