

Implementing Project SEARCH in rural counties: A case study approach

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Abstract. Project SEARCH has been recognized nationally for its widely replicated employer-based job training model. In this article we describe the implementation of Project SEARCH in two rural areas of Virginia. Three student intern profiles are provided to illustrate how this on-the-employment site training model impacted the interns' lives. Rural culture, transportation and regional collaboration are described in the context of Project SEARCH.

Keywords: Special education, transition, employment, rural employment, rural culture

1. Introduction

1.1. Profile #1: Darren

Darren is a gregarious 20 year old student with multiple disabilities who lives along a ridge in Southwest Virginia's Appalachian Mountains. He graduated with a special education certificate from his local high school one year ago but maintained eligibility for a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). During his high school experience Darren participated in a traditional special education unpaid employment awareness program, in which students were placed in local businesses and volunteered for up to two hours per day. He had few opportunities to interact with typical peers beyond another volunteer position with his high school's football team. Darren's post graduate employment history included stocking shelves in a drug store chain for three months. He was laid off because his manager felt he could not devote the time Darren needed to learn the job. This affable young man also worked for one month in his uncle's tanning booths located in a local gym, where

he swiped membership cards and sanitized tanning beds. After the tanning business closed unexpectedly, Darren's Department of Rehabilitative Services (DRS) counselor referred him to Project SEARCH. During the application process his parents expressed concerns about the travel distance to the hospital (27 miles one way), but agreed to transport him from their home.

Darren participated in a series of interest inventories and job shadowing opportunities during the four months prior to his participation in Project SEARCH. He indicated a strong interest in staying busy. Darren did not want to work in isolation or do public speaking. Darren walks slowly and has difficulty standing for longer than 20 minutes. He wears an ankle foot orthotic (AFO) on his left leg and a metal brace to support his right leg. Speech therapy was provided to him from elementary through middle school for articulation and stuttering. The Project SEARCH team arranged for onsite speech assistance through his school division as a related service. His speech teacher worked with Darren for one hour per week during the first two weeks of each hospital rotation.

His first rotation was in a financial records office where he scanned materials and supplies used by patients. Darren used a small, motorized cart to deliver hospital mail to various hospital floors. Darren's

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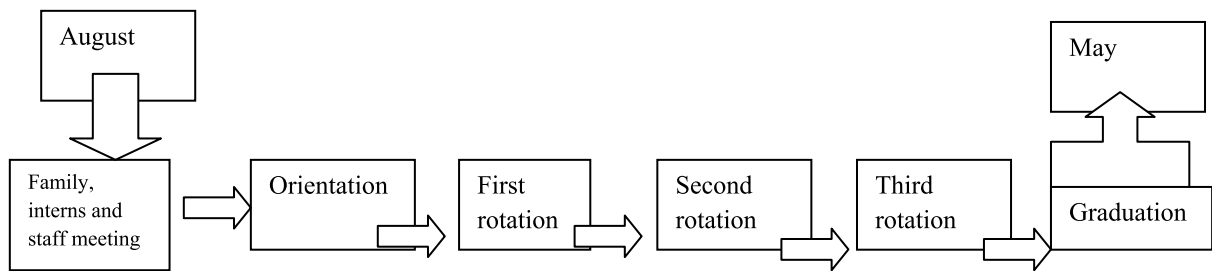


Fig. 1. Project SEARCH schedule.

attendance was 100% and his evaluation was stellar; the manager requested that Darren remain in this unit. The Project SEARCH staff and Darren were appreciative; however, in order to maintain the fidelity of the model Darren moved to his next rotation. He began working in the oncology radiation unit where he greeted patients, served snacks and matched patient charts with rooms. The staff created a diagram so that Darren could arrange the radiation treatment beds to target cancerous tumors. Using a word/picture checklist, he sanitized treatment boards. Darren then used an illustration on a monitor to set the boards up for chest or brain radiation treatments; for some patients, head cups or leg supports were added. All work was checked by an oncology nurse before Darren moved to his next tasks. His gregarious nature and empathetic attitude were natural fits for this unit; Darren again received high marks for follow-through and patient care. His parents remarked to Project SEARCH staff that this was the first semester in his high school life in which he was ready at 6AM, eager and prepared to go to work at the hospital. Darren took pride in his uniform (khakis and Project SEARCH shirt), even laundering and ironing them each night. Darren moved to his third and final rotation with the engineering department, where he learned basic maintenance and inventory skills. Darren learned to manage computerized inventory requests, assist with deliveries and place barcodes on supplies. His attendance remained in the 99% category, missing only one day for an orthopedic appointment two hours away. As his third rotation was ending, Darren requested an opportunity to work in his local community, specifically at a large discount store he and his family frequented located within three miles of his home. It was a source of pride for them that Darren was hired as a full time associate earning \$9.50 per hour with benefits. His job coach began fading support after four weeks.

This case scenario describes how Project SEARCH impacted one young man's employment outcome. In

his small rural community the local gathering spot is a big box retail establishment. Most of his neighbors, friends and teachers shopped and saw him there at least weekly. Prior to his involvement with Project SEARCH he was at home with bleak employment prospects.

Multiple school divisions across the United States have implemented Project SEARCH, a comprehensive school to employment transition model for youth with intellectual or multiple disabilities and/or autism spectrum disorder (Rutkowski, Daston, Van Kuiken, & Riehle, 2006). This project has grown from one original program site in Cincinnati to over 200 in the US and Canada, England, Scotland, and Australia. All participants' initial involvement in Project SEARCH began by answering one question affirmatively: 'Do you want to work after high school?' A multi-step process commenced with student applications, interviews and finally, acceptance. All students agreed that their one year in Project SEARCH would be their final year of high school, thereby maintaining eligibility for special education services. In some cases, students who had graduated with special education certificates re-enrolled in school. This article focuses on two school divisions in Virginia using the Project SEARCH model (see Fig. 1).

2. How do federal laws govern transition and employment for youth with disabilities?

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA, 2004) strengthened from previous iterations language regarding the transition process from school to adulthood. This legislation defined special education and related services to meet the unique needs of youth with disabilities and to prepare them for postsecondary education, employment and independent living. Transition Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) emphasize:

“the coordinated set of services to be designed within a results oriented process. Transition IEPs must include measurable postsecondary goals based on age appropriate transition assessments related to training, education, employment and where appropriate, independent living skills” (IDEA, 2004).

Transition assessments now guide the IEP development and transition process (Wehman & Wittig, 2009). Sometimes the results of those assessments increase employment training opportunities in the community or postsecondary education institutions. School divisions collaborate with state rehabilitation agencies and developmental disabilities organizations to improve student outcomes. The legislation changed the landscape for high school students with disabilities. A sharper focus has been placed on where the students want to be educated, employed and live after high school. The legislation opens the door for creative training opportunities while students with disabilities are still enrolled in high school.

There is greater accountability in transition planning (IDEA, 2004; Wehman & Wittig, 2009). States develop and submit a State Performance Plan (SPP) to the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). Four indicators relate directly to transition planning:

- Indicator One measures the percent of youth with disabilities graduating from high school with a regular diploma (Virginia Department of Education, 2012).
- Indicator Two reveals the percent of youth with IEPs who dropped out of high school compared with all youth who dropped out (Virginia Department of Education, 2012).
- Indicator Thirteen requires school divisions to review transition IEPs to ensure that they include annually updated measurable postsecondary goals based upon age appropriate transition assessments. The IEPs must incorporate transition services, including courses of study that will enable the student to meet the postsecondary goals. Annual IEP goals must be related to the student’s transition service needs (Virginia Department of Education, 2012).
- Indicator Fourteen focuses on post school outcomes. This indicator measures the percent of youth who are no longer in secondary school, who had IEPs in effect when they left school, and were enrolled in higher education, competitively employed, postsecondary training or some com-

ination thereof within one year of leaving high school.

The authors believe that this accountability forces school divisions to examine and develop or modify transition services to improve the transition process and post school outcomes (Virginia Department of Education, 2012). The National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (NSTTAC) has developed checklists and guides for Indicators Thirteen and Fourteen (National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center, 2012).

3. What is the project SEARCH model?

Project SEARCH emerged in 1996 to become a widely replicated model for employer based supported employment. A goal of this project is to provide employability skills training for students with significant disabilities through immersion in a business site. A cornerstone of Project SEARCH is to teach individuals with disabilities non-traditional, complex and systematic job skills in the employment site. A partnership exists among the business, school district, supported employment agency, vocational rehabilitation, and developmental disabilities offices to implement this model (Rutkowski et al., 2006).

The project requires students with significant disabilities (intellectual, multiple or autism spectrum disorder) to apply for one of the participation spaces prior to their final year of high school. Local school divisions and the employment site determine the total number of available spaces, usually within a range of 5–12 (Rutkowski et al., 2006; Rutkoswki & Riehle, 2009). Documentation of disabilities and assessment data must be evident in their Transition IEPs, and candidates must have completed IEP goals and graduation requirements. All accepted interns must agree in writing or by proxy to use the year as a post-graduate training experience. The program commences during the summer, when the students obtain criminal background checks, immunizations and orientation to the business site. Virginia’s Project SEARCH sites routinely use hospitals as employment sites. Rural school divisions in Virginia routinely begin their academic calendars in early to mid-August and finish the year in May; Project SEARCH follows the school division calendars.

Students enroll in August and experience a hospital orientation. In between each placement, interns return to the Project SEARCH classroom for one week

workshops. Prior to graduation, the goal is for 100% of interns to obtain employment.

There are currently 11 Project SEARCH sites in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Five sites receive funding through the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) to supplement some costs for services. For example, there are fees for a licensing agreement, technical assistance from a Project SEARCH lead team member from Cincinnati, materials and documents. Virginia Commonwealth University's Rehabilitation Research Training Center (VCU-RRRTC) staff provides technical assistance to the VDOE sites as well.

4. Project SEARCH in rural Southwest Virginia

Two school divisions in Southwest Virginia, one with a student population of 6500 and the other with 10,000 students, began implementing Project SEARCH during the past two years (Virginia Department of Education, 2011). Each school division partnered with the DRS, an Employment Services Organization (ESO) to provide job coaching, a local hospital or medical center, and university faculty. Technical assistance was provided by Virginia Commonwealth University's Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (VCU-RRRTC) and was funded through the VDOE. The Project SEARCH teams met regularly to develop an internal structure for the model in respective school divisions. Through VDOE funds, national Project SEARCH co-directors traveled to the hospitals to pitch the projects. Within six months interns were performing work tasks in hospital departments under the supervision of job coaches and Project SEARCH teachers.

Most of Southwest Virginia's citizens possess strong work ethics and religious affiliations. Education is highly valued; 78% of students in one county, 68% in the other county profiled in this article completed high school (Virginia Department of Education, 2011). School sporting events are well attended; football stadiums are relatively large for the many fans. As one of the Project SEARCH sites began, student interns from each of one county's three high schools vigorously defended their respective alma mater's teams. The loyalties also ran deep among hospital staff, vendors and Project SEARCH team members; one intern, Darren, proudly retained his job as an assistant for football games. The hospital hosted a high school football appreciation day in which employees, interns and guests wore their home team's colors or jerseys. The interns learned

about coworker alumni and were recognized for their high school affiliations; the social camaraderie strengthened their relationships with hospital staff that day.

A vibrant arts and music culture is available in Southwest Virginia. Artisans and country/bluegrass musicians utilize Heartwood, a large cultural arts center in Abingdon (Heartwood, 2011). One intern routinely participated in his family's bluegrass band, singing and playing a harmonica. Some hospital staff attended one of the family's concerts to show support. This connection reinforced his social relationships.

According to the Virginia Economic Development Partnership (2011), hospitals and colleges represent two of the largest employers in rural Virginia. The region has a per capita income of \$29,781. According to Southwest Virginia online sources, the highest wage earners are in the natural resources/mining, manufacturing, professional and business services information, and public administration sectors (Southwest Virginia Online, 2011).

The Southwest Virginia region experiences a higher rate of illicit drug dependence and nonmedical use of pain relievers (5.51%) than the state (4.42%) or national rates (4.89%) (Virginia Department of Behavioral and Developmental Services, 2009). One intern's family was devastated by illicit drug use; after her parents were incarcerated, she was placed with maternal relatives during middle school. Her Project SEARCH instructor provided encouragement and resources about drug abuse prevention. This intern eventually participated in a hospital-sponsored support group for families affected by substance abuse.

Project SEARCH implementation in rural localities presents myriad issues surrounding transportation. Mass transit is either sparse or nonexistent due to the low population level, topography and weather. Some Project SEARCH interns live on mountains or in valleys 40 miles from the host hospital. The two lane roads offer beautiful scenery and time consuming commutes. One school division has a regional transportation system available in which a bus travels from a fire station at one end of the county to a community college 65 miles away. Many student interns live in the middle of the county; carpooling or parental transportation are not available for all. An agreement was reached to create new stops. One new bus stop was at a big-box retail establishment to which the interns obtained transportation, and the other was at the local medical center. In another rural site, the school division offered modified bus service. Student interns had to obtain transportation to a series of common bus stops where a school

division's unmarked van drove them to the local hospital's Project SEARCH site. Families and interns readily agreed to this compromised transportation system; no large yellow buses dropped the students off at the hospital. Once employment offers were accepted, the interns arranged their own transportation through family, co-workers or other means.

4.1. Profile # 2: Mark

Apprehensive and shy were two of Mark's descriptors before he entered Project SEARCH. As a student with an intellectual disability, the majority of Mark's early public school education was focused on academics and social skills in inclusive classrooms with typical peers. In high school, his course of study centered on functional academics and community based instruction. Mark was not enrolled in career and technical education courses. He had a strong social life with his family, actively participating in his family's bluegrass band by playing the harmonica and singing. With peers and other adults, Mark remained extremely shy. After graduating from secondary school with a special education diploma at the age of eighteen, Mark spent three years in his school division's sponsored transition program located on a university campus. He audited college classes, worked a variety of campus jobs, participated in recreation activities and learned skills related to independent living and community involvement. Like many students his age, Mark loved his college experience and was reluctant to leave his student life and transition into his adult life.

Mark appeared reserved and defensive as he began his first internship rotation in the hospital's central sterile department. His responsibilities included inventorying and sterilizing surgical instruments, organizing shelves, stocking supplies and delivering materials throughout the hospital. Mark selected this rotation based on his interests and preferences, but met with limited success due to both his reluctance to seek assistance when needed and the complexity of the job's tasks. To those working with this intern, it appeared that he lacked initiative and the desire to work. In the classroom, Mark's participation was minimal, supporting the assumptions about his poor work ethic and attitude.

Mark's second internship was in the hospital's printing department where he met and worked with the mentor who helped reverse his entire Project SEARCH experience. Mrs. Hill carefully worked with the job coach to set up tasks that would ensure a successful rotation for Mark. At first, Mark was given tasks

that required him to follow no more than three steps using the department's simplest copier. As his success with tasks grew, so did his confidence and openness to new experiences. During the twelve week rotation Mark learned to operate more complex copiers, collate, perform simple service jobs on copiers, laminate and organize the workspace environment. The young man who was initially perceived as a person who lacked the desire to work was viewed as a skilled and valuable staff member. He was even asked to work independently in the department on days when Mrs. Hill was absent.

During this second rotation Mark's behaviors also changed in the classroom. He began participating more and asking questions. His teacher noted that he often referred to something she had taught commenting, "I see now what you meant when you said . . ." Before his second rotation, Mark did not seek out assistance from his teacher, job coach or hospital coworkers; instead he would go home to his family and complain that he didn't understand. After establishing a trusting relationship with Mrs. Hill, Mark opened up to his fellow students and other support staff. He became his own self-advocate, asking for clarification and additional assistance when needed. He also began to relate his Project SEARCH experience to his future. He began to envision a future for himself that included full time employment and a life of greater independence.

Mark reluctantly left the printing department to rotate to his third internship. His final rotation provided him with experience working in the hospital's largest and most varied department—environmental services. Mark learned skills needed for those working in the commercial custodial field. Using industrial equipment, he swept, mopped and dried the hospital's floors. Mark's increased confidence and desire to prove himself as a valued worker enhanced his job performance. He quickly impressed the head of this department, which led to a competitive job working for the hospital as a floor care specialist. Like many other peers typical in their development, Mark was hired on a part-time basis (28–32 hours weekly). After a probationary period, his hours were increased to full-time status and he began receiving employee benefits.

Mark had to face several obstacles in his quest for employment that are unique to rural or smaller communities. First, Mark did not have his driver's license, nor did he live in an area with public transportation. With an understanding that the student and his family were responsible for transportation when the student gained employment, Mark's school system provided van service for the students in this program. When Mark was

hired by the hospital his family assumed the duty of providing transportation. Next, Mark lived in a culture of reticence. He learned to be polite with strangers and saved all questions and comments for his family. As time went on Mark learned self-advocacy skills and his value as a contributing member of Project SEARCH. His work ethic was strengthened; he has earned two monthly awards at the medical center for attendance and contributions.

5. Challenges and successes implementing project SEARCH

Interns in rural or smaller Project SEARCH sites sometimes experience narrow choices, variety and availability of internship experiences. For example, Mark's hospital contracted with a vendor to prepare meals offsite and deliver to the hospital. This limited the variety of experiences for students interested in a career in food service. Likewise, the majority of lab work needed by patients in this hospital was outsourced.

Furthermore, smaller communities are more limited than larger metropolitan areas in the availability of jobs within the larger community. In Mark's surrounding county, there are three private and two state government businesses employing more than 1,000 workers. There are only three additional medium sized employers (with 500 to 999 workers) in the county's borders (Virginia Economic Development Partnership, 2011). Students participating in rural Project SEARCH programs are provided with valuable work experiences and references that can give them an advantage in a highly competitive and limited job market.

Mark had to overcome barriers that were not necessarily unique to a rural setting. Mark entered the program with limited expectations. Although he had participated in a variety of community-based jobs, these experiences were much shorter (usually fewer than three hours a day) and less demanding. Project SEARCH provided Mark with authentic job tasks within the hospital environment. He was expected to have the same stamina and accuracy level as his coworkers. At Mark's previous work sites, he was viewed as a person with a disability trying to do the job and was often provided too many supports and accommodations. At the hospital he was eventually viewed as a competent worker adding value to the business.

Five of the 11 Project SEARCH interns referenced in this article had graduated with a special education certificate at least one year prior to applying to the pro-

gram. All were unemployed; their daily activities were related to family. The vocational rehabilitation counselors assigned to those counties worked in tandem with the school divisions to convince the graduates and families to consider Project SEARCH. It took meetings in which meals were offered and home visits to build the trust and interest in the project.

Each Project SEARCH site developed a business advisory council (BAC). As these councils were being formed it became clear that strong bonds existed in each county among business personnel. Many knew one another through familial or religious affiliations. Trainor, Carter, Swedeen, and Pickett (2012) recommended community conversations with employers to heighten awareness regarding building capacity and expanding employment opportunities for youth with disabilities. Each Project SEARCH site now has a strong BAC that meets at least once per semester. Members attended each graduation; in one site various BAC members gave gifts to each graduating intern.

6. Why is employment training important for students with disabilities?

The Current Population Survey (January 2011) described inequitable employment opportunities for people with disabilities; 17.8% of the U.S. population is unemployed, and 63.6% of people with disabilities are unemployed (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). Unger (2007) described public-private partnerships developed through Project SEARCH as essential to its success. When this model commenced in the mid 1990s the Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center (CCHMC) worked with local Developmental Disabilities councils, school divisions and career and technical education centers. This partnership was based on the business needs of CCHMC, not on the traditional supported employment model for persons with disabilities. Every implementation effort replicates the Project SEARCH model; the employer hosts the site and the partnerships exist to benefit the employment site.

Lindstrom, Doren, and Miesch (2011) studied the process of career development for youth with disabilities (YWD) using a case study approach. They concluded that the current federal and state policy efforts on increasing academic rigor resulted in a loss of career education options for YWD. The authors suggested that an array of general education options to include ongoing opportunities to practice employment skills be offered in order for YWD to earn a living wage.

Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Levine, and Marder (2003) indicated that students with intellectual or other co-occurring disabilities were the sole disability group to participate in career education and life skills instruction within special education settings. Project SEARCH interns in the rural sites experienced no formal career/technical education training prior to joining the program. In each site interns participated in community based employment exploration offered by special education teachers and paraprofessionals. Their time on employment sites was restricted to as few as 45 minutes a day to 2 hours per day and always with groups of peers with disabilities. Upon immersion into Project SEARCH all interns complained about fatigue; none had experienced a full day of employment during high school or summer breaks. The long commute to the hospital added to the exhaustion. The Project SEARCH staff assisted the interns to build stamina by slowly increasing tasks and time in departments. By the end of the first month all interns were energized and their stamina had increased.

West (2011) suggested that interventions during high school may lead to improved postsecondary employment outcomes for youth with disabilities. His research highlights risk factors for poor post-school employment outcomes and identifies factors to alter at the school level to improve employment outcomes. The rural sites involved in Project SEARCH have begun examining their school to work transition efforts. They plan to increase opportunities for youth with disabilities in their communities, on job sites and even in the school settings. Carter, Austin, and Trainor (2012) suggested predictors of post school employment outcomes for young adults with severe disabilities. Their research implied that paid work experiences during high school were associated with positive post high school work status two years after graduation. The authors suggest that future Project SEARCH interns might enter their rotations with a better understanding of work for pay with this type of curriculum. Federal funding for school-to-work programs ended when the School to Work Opportunities Act of 1994 terminated in 2002 (Guy, Sitlington, Larsen, & Frank, 2012). Special educators look to models such as Project SEARCH to provide intense on the job training.

The Project SEARCH model moves instruction from a high school setting to the employment site. Students learn practical functional skills in a classroom each morning and afternoon with a certified special education teacher (Rutkowski et al., 2006). They rotate through three internships within the employment

site under the supervision of the special educator, an employment specialist, and the staff of the employment site. Each student intern must adhere to safety regulations, attend employee orientation and receive immunizations in order to take participate (Rutkowski et al., 2006; Rutkowski & Riehle, 2009).

Profile #3: Sally

Sally is an 18 year old female student with an intellectual disability who reads and writes on a third grade level. She grew up in the mountainous terrain of the Appalachian plateau. Her family experiences deep poverty and has often relied on assistance from agencies, churches and neighbors. Sally's natural parents were remanded to a state correctional facility for their chronic drug and burglary offenses. A maternal aunt adopted Sally when she was ten years old. Very few family members worked; her familial culture lacked a strong work ethic.

She was in self-contained classes throughout most of high school and participated in no extracurricular activities. Prior to entering Project SEARCH Sally was preparing to begin her final or senior year of high school. Sally indicated through transition assessments an interest in helping people.

Often in rural communities, older children are expected to assist with any sick, elderly and younger family members. Outside help is often not sought due to financial issues and cultural beliefs of family caring for family. Sally struggled to juggle her schedule with Project SEARCH and the demands at home. While Sally received some family support to participate in this employment model, her responsibilities were time consuming. The instructor, job coach and her DRS counselor intervened on her behalf. Bi-weekly family meetings became an integral part of Sally's success with Project SEARCH.

Because Sally is rather shy and reserved, the Project SEARCH team determined that her first internship should be on a quiet floor. After touring all departments Sally and her team selected the skilled nursing unit. She began her internship and was immediately taken under the wing of several floor nurses. Sally had a natural talent for taking care of others as she had done with her family. She learned many basic nursing skills and began practicing her bedside manner in the classroom with the instructor, job coach and even peers. As she learned more and more skills and observed others performing similar tasks, Sally began to appreciate the world of work. She understood the concept of using her

new skills and receiving wages for her efforts. When the first internship ended Sally expressed a desire to pursue nursing as a possible career. In order to achieve this goal, Sally would require further postsecondary education and training. Her DRS counselor financially assisted Sally to enroll at the local community college classes to become a certified nursing assistant.

Sally's academic skills were far below college level. Her DRS counselor provided Sally a digital recorder to listen to lectures instead of reading. Sally practiced with her Project SEARCH instructor self determination skills to request accommodations on campus. DRS also provided a tutor for extra assistance with her class. She took quizzes and studied vocabulary with the assistance of text to speech technology. The Project SEARCH team also assisted Sally with transportation to class two days a week and for her clinical practice internship at a local retirement facility 25 miles away from her home. Sally earned a learner's permit and driver's license with the help of tutoring from DRS. She carpooled and occasionally borrowed a family member's car; DRS provided financial assistance for gas.

After six weeks of class and clinical rotations, Sally passed her Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) final exams. With this certification Sally was able to secure a position with a local agency providing in-home health care. This full time position provides Sally \$10.00 per hour, well over minimum wage. Due to Project SEARCH's interventions Sally has received job training, created excellent job references, successfully completed a college course, received her driver's license, and is now gainfully employed as an in-home health care aide. Sally was beginning to break a long cycle of chronic poverty and low expectations in her family.

7. Conclusion

Project SEARCH has been implemented with great success in rural regions of Southwest Virginia. The case scenarios illustrate cultural, familial and transportation issues that were identified and overcome. To date, one school division is entering its third year of the project, and the other its second. The majority of interns have been employed at least part time. Applications have increased steadily since implementation began. In the future, access to career and technical education programs may improve students' outcomes. One student earned a Certified Nursing Assistant certificate while enrolled in Project SEARCH. Perhaps others will ben-

efit from training and education prior to enrollment in this model.

Various challenges faced by Project SEARCH participants were problem solved by the team members. Transportation represented a significant barrier in each county. Building stamina was another key issue in each program. Most of the students with disabilities had observed employment sites; others volunteered or watched films about employment in their communities. They all experienced extreme fatigue when Project SEARCH commenced. School divisions must consider community integrated employment training by age 16 to build transition portfolios, increase awareness and use for transition assessment purposes.

Wehman (2011) suggests reasons that all people, not just people with disabilities, like to work. Employment is part of the national fabric of the United States, boosting skills such as socializing, academics, health, communication and self-esteem. The authors observed Project SEARCH participants moving from quiet, shy and apprehensive in late August to confident, chatty and ebullient in May. Their collective experiences enhanced most, if not all aspects of their lives.

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