

THE CLASS OF 1964 POLICY RESEARCH SHOP IMPROVING SPECIAL EDUCATION TRANSITION SERVICES IN NEW HAMPSHIRE



PRESENTED TO THE SENATE EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE
DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Senator Jay Kahn, Chairman

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The transition from special education to adult services for students with disabilities can be abrupt and is often undertaken without full consideration of the needs, aspirations, and abilities of students. This report to the Education and Workforce Development Committee of the New Hampshire Senate explores ways to enhance transition programming in the state. More specifically, we first conduct a thorough review of transition literature, which primarily deals with predictors of post-school success. We then conduct case studies of Project Search, a transition program with particularly high rates of post-school success, in order to examine best practices in transition programming. Finally, we explore how successful transition programming may be expanded in New Hampshire.

1 INTRODUCTION

Life is characterized by a series of transitions, many of which are concentrated in the first two decades of growth and development. From daycare to preschool, elementary school to middle school, middle to high school, and high school into the postsecondary world, transitions form an integral part of most Americans' schooling. Arguably, the most important transition, however, is from high school into further schooling or a career. While many students make this transition every year, it can be especially difficult for students with disabilities.

Americans with disabilities already face tremendous obstacles to success. As of 2019, the employment gap between New Hampshire residents with disabilities and those without was 40.2 percentage points.¹ The college graduation gap was 19.2 percentage points. It is true that some individuals with disabilities may simply be unable to work or attend college. Nonetheless, with more effective programs in place to ease the transition out of high school, post-school outcomes for students with disabilities may be improved.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) guarantees a “free and appropriate public education” for all students with disabilities and governs their education alongside state policy.² Given the significant achievement gap between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers, a 1994 revision of IDEA required that each special education student’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP) address the transition out of high school. Specifically, transition planning must begin before a student turns 16, be tailored to each student, account for each student’s strengths, preferences, and interests, and include options for a student to develop functional skills for work and community life.³

While transition planning begins when students are in high school, special education formally ends for New Hampshire students on either their 21st birthday or their high school graduation. At that point, some combination of vocational rehabilitation centers, community mental health centers, and designated nonprofit area agencies (Area Agencies) assume the role of providing adult development services.⁴ An examination of this transition structure reveals avenues for the growth of work-based transition programs in New Hampshire.

2 PURPOSE STATEMENT

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the New Hampshire special education and transition planning services and programs, and examine how those services and programs might be improved. To this end, we first examine the state of special education in New Hampshire and discuss the merits of out-of-school work placement programs as a means of improving post-school outcomes for students with disabilities. We then examine some of those programs, both in-state and out-of-state, through a series of case studies. Finally, we examine ways in which these opportunities may be expanded in New Hampshire.

3 METHODOLOGY

Our methodology is composed of three parts. As background, we conduct a literature review of transition research. We also use IDEA data, interviews, and an analysis of recent legislative action to examine the current state of special education and transition programming in New Hampshire.

In the second part of our research, we explore school-to-work transition programs and their impact on improving post-school success. More specifically, we examine a particularly successful business-led school-to-work transition program, Project SEARCH, as a model for the potential expansion of school-to-work transition programs in the state. To do so, we conducted seven case studies, three on extant New Hampshire sites and four on out-of-state sites, in order to determine the factors that make the Project SEARCH model effective. Out-of-state sites were chosen based on high employment rates of program participants, the variety of settings of host businesses, and availability of data. Additionally, while all Project SEARCH sites in New Hampshire are located at hospitals, all out-of-state sites are at businesses in non-medical industries with a large variety of different internships for students to choose from (for example, hospitals have medical personnel but also kitchen staff, housekeeping, billing and accounting, storage and supplies, etc). Case studies demonstrate several factors that contribute to successful school-to-work transition programs.

In the third part of our research, we analyze the expandability of Project SEARCH and similar programs within the state. First, we conduct a case study on the State of Tennessee, which led a state-wide expansion of Project SEARCH, in order to determine the roles of key actors, and applicability to New Hampshire. Next, we examine state-specific challenges to work-based transition program expansion. We conclude this section by detailing potential strategic expansion points within New Hampshire.

4 BACKGROUND: WORKFORCE TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES AS AN ASPECT OF TRANSITION PLANNING

This section first provides an overview of the state of transition planning research, with special focus on the identification of empirically-based predictors of post-school success. Programs emphasizing

job- and workplace-based experiences tend to be effective for students and generally lead to high rates of postsecondary job success compared to students who participate in non-workplace-based programs, or who do not participate in transition programs at all.⁵ Next, this section provides an overview of the state of transition planning in New Hampshire.

4.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF WORK-BASED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

A number of studies identifying promising transition practices emerged in the mid-1980s, when researchers began to study the impact students' high school experiences had on post-school outcomes. For instance, Hasazi et al. (1985) found that part-time or summertime work during high school were predictors of the time employed after high school and wages. Several studies from the period found that taking vocational education classes, participating in paid job experiences, and participating in adult-focused transition programming were correlated with better post-school outcomes for special education students.⁶

While the broad findings of these early studies stood the test of time,⁷ inclusion of language in IDEA following 1990 revisions mandating transitions services led to an explosion of research on transitional programming, which identified new determinants of post-school success. For instance, Benitez et al. (2005) found that teaching self-determination skills in school was positively correlated with better post-school outcomes,⁸ while Wehmeyer and Palmer (2003) found that self-determination skills were significant predictors of post-school education and independent living success.⁹ Other studies uncovered six predictors of post-school success, including successful completion of instruction in relevant curricular areas; active participation in transition planning; student and parent satisfaction with instruction received by the student; and parent perception that the student no longer needed help in certain critical skill areas.¹⁰ These studies made headway in establishing a list of practices associated with improved school outcomes.

4.1.1 PREDICTORS OF POST-SCHOOL SUCCESS

Out of the descriptive and correlational studies of the 1980s came a more prescriptive literature replete with lists of “best practices” for transition programs targeting IEP students.¹¹ However, many such studies were designed to teach students specific transition-oriented skills without measuring the impact of such skills on post-school outcomes.¹² In 2009, Test et al. set out “to identify in-school predictors of improved post-school outcomes in the areas of education, employment, and/or independent living for students with disabilities” by conducting a study of transition-related correlational literature.¹³ The authors find that a number of factors predict positive post-school outcomes for IEP students. Among those are career awareness skills,¹⁴ out-of-school training from multiple, varied community organizations,¹⁵ in-school job and or internship experience,¹⁶ social skill development,¹⁷ and work study participation.¹⁸

4.1.2 IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL-TO-WORK TRANSITION PROGRAMS

It has been noted that participating in work experience while in high school is a predictor for positive post-school outcomes related to employment given that such participation entails a number of other predictors of post-school success.¹⁸ However, many methods of transitional school-to-work preparation may inadequately prepare youth for the workforce. The reason for this gap may be that many school-to-work programs are short-term in nature and do not include hands-on opportunities for learning in integrated settings.¹⁹

Only about one in three disabled Americans is employed (34.9 percent) compared to about 76 percent for non-disabled persons.²⁰ The employment gap may actually be wider—disabled persons are more likely to report underemployment, involuntary part-time or contingent employment, and lower than average salaries.²¹ The application of effective work-based transition programs, which are in line with predictors of post-school success, may offer a promising way to integrate disabled New Hampshire students into the workforce as they leave high school.

4.2 THE CURRENT STATE OF TRANSITION PLANNING IN NEW HAMPSHIRE

In this section, we examine the effectiveness of current transition planning apparatus through state outcomes data and implementation of special education statutes, which in turn affect which students receive FAPE and the cost to the school district of special education.

4.2.1 IDEA DATA

New Hampshire has struggled to hit its target graduation rate, generally graduating less than 75 percent of eligible students on IEPs each year, but its biggest issue is with the transition planning apparatus. Students are generally succeeding at staying in school, and those who finish school are able to find success. However, the relatively low rate for students 16 and older with transition planning included in their IEPs across the state—the lowest in the country for fiscal year 2018, at only 33 percent—shows that the state needs to provide more transitional opportunities for students. The stated goal to the Department of Education each year is that 100 percent of students with IEPs should have updated transition planning included in that IEP, including an annual meeting with the student, the parents, teachers, and representatives from the Area Agency to ensure that the plan is up to date. According to data submitted to the Department of Education, New Hampshire last met this goal in 2012—and has not come close since. From 2013 onward, transition planning rates have been well below 75 percent, with some years barely reaching above 50 percent. In 2018, the last year for which this data is publicly available, was New Hampshire's worst in the last decade. By comparison, the average statistic among all fifty states and Washington, D.C. is 88.7 percent, and the median is 93.9 percent.

4.2.2 AGE DISCREPANCY

On July 30, 2020, Governor Sununu signed into law House Bill 1558.²² That bill modified the definition of “child with a disability” to include persons of the age of 21. At least in theory, New Hampshire has joined twenty-two other states who ensure a free and appropriate (FAPE) education to disabled students until they reach the age of 22. The act was supposed to take effect by October 1, 2020, though language in the bill suggests that it might not take effect until fiscal year 2021.²³ As of February of 2021, this important change has not been implemented in New Hampshire. In fact, many social workers, public school teachers and transition program staff involved with the provision of special education are not at all aware of the change.²⁴ In addition, the Department of Education has made no mention of the change. This bill's implementation will have important implications on the provision of special education in New Hampshire.

4.2.2.1 Impact on the Number of Students Receiving FAPE

The fiscal note accompanying HB 1558, states that the effect of this bill is indeterminate because “the number of students receiving special education and the specifics of services needed is unknown.”²⁵ By analyzing the rate at which 20 year olds leave the special education system in four states (Arizona,

Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New Mexico) in which FAPE is guaranteed until age 22, it is estimated that around 63 percent of 20 year olds will remain in the special education system if given the opportunity. In New Hampshire, that would translate into about 92 21-year-olds remaining in the special education system per year. Based on trends in the aforementioned sample states, the students who remain in the special education system will likely occupy disability categories requiring more intensive resources including intellectual disabilities (ID), autism (AUD), developmental disabilities (DD), and specific learning disabilities (SLD).

4.2.2.2 *Financial Impact*

While per-pupil special education cost estimates are complicated by the differences in needs for each individual student, a rough estimate of the financial impact of the age extension is possible.

- Using an estimated average cost of \$37,936.63 per year to educate special needs students, a 92-student increase would result in a cost increase of \$3,490,169.96 in New Hampshire.
- Students who “age out” of special education and who have developmental disabilities (DD) are eligible for continuing services from the Bureau of Developmental Services (BDS).²⁶ Based on the rate at which 20-year-olds applied for services from the BDS upon graduating from the special education system in 2017, we assume that 35 fewer students will require BDS services per year.²⁷ Given that BDS spends about \$48,177 (as of 2017) per student served, we estimate that raising the special education provision age to 22 will lead to a cost avoidance of \$1,686,195 per year. It should be noted that in years past, BDS has had to implement a wait list for its services. By reducing the pool of potential applicants, capacity pressures will also likely diminish.
- Subtracting the cost avoidance for BDS from the cost increases for New Hampshire public schools, we estimate that implementing the new age policy will cost an additional \$1,803,974.96 per year.

5 PROJECT SEARCH AS A VIABLE MODEL TO INCREASE EMPLOYMENT

Project SEARCH was established in 1996 at the Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center, and has now been implemented in hundreds of locations across the country and around the world—including at five hospitals in New Hampshire. The program aims to help people with disabilities secure competitive employment by placing them in a year-long, real-life work experience based on interest and experiences, typically at an area hospital, meant to prepare them for future employment.²⁸ Project SEARCH typically works with special education students in their last year of high school eligibility, making them an ideal candidate for the state to partner with to enhance its transition planning. New Hampshire may look to school-to-work transition programs like Project SEARCH given that it incorporates many predictors of post-school success, including in-school internship experience, social skill development, and inter-community cooperation.

In general, the eligibility requirements for Project SEARCH are that the student has some type of disability, an effective means of communication, a reliable mode of transportation, and can work independently without behavioral issues.²⁹ Tuition for Project SEARCH—between \$15,000 and \$30,000 per student based on the number of program participants and staffing needs—is covered by the school district and the Department of Vocational Rehab (VR) through its Area Agencies for

students still in the special education system. A combination of funds from area developmental services agencies and VR are provided for students who have transitioned out of high school.³⁰

There are Project SEARCH sites throughout the world in businesses and other institutions, including hotels, military bases, college campuses, and smaller private businesses. In New Hampshire, Project SEARCH sites exist only in hospitals. Host businesses must be large enough to accommodate several different types of entry-level jobs in order to successfully host a Project SEARCH site. Project SEARCH host-sites must generally have at least 250 employees per location.³¹

At each program, students get a two-to-three week orientation to Project SEARCH and then complete three 10-12 week internships at the business. Between each internship, each student has an individual employment meeting at which the student may discuss his or her skills, interests, and future employment plans with program coordinators and vocational trainers.

The goal of each Project SEARCH program is to give participants a better chance of finding competitive employment as defined by the organization: year-round work for at least 16 hours per week for a prevailing wage, which takes place in an integrated setting (i.e., some coworkers have disabilities and some do not).³²

Of the thirteen disability categories New Hampshire recognizes, almost every Project SEARCH participant comes from one of three categories: Autism (AUT), Multiple Disabilities, and Intellectual Disabilities (ID). Our analysis suggests that per pupil spending for children with MD and AUT rank first and second respectively in terms of per pupil spending by disability category. Per pupil spending for students with ID ranks fifth.³³

Project SEARCH in New Hampshire only reaches about 40 individuals a year, some of whom have already left the public school system and are covered by the adult system. As of the 2018-2019 school year, which is the last year for which data is available, there were a total of 471 students enrolled in New Hampshire public schools with either AUT, MD, or ID of “transition age” (between 18 and 20), suggesting room for significant program expansion.³⁴

5.1 CASE STUDIES OF PROJECT SEARCH SITES

We conducted seven case studies of Project SEARCH programs, three at New Hampshire hospitals and four at out-of-state non-medical sites, in order to determine the fundamental factors that make Project SEARCH successful, evaluate the impact of the program on post-school outcomes, and determine whether similar programs can be implemented in different contexts within New Hampshire. We also examined four out-of-state sites—one program in the hospitality industry, one in a municipal government, one at an institution of higher education, and one in a corporate environment—in order to examine Project SEARCH in a variety of settings.

5.1.1 DARTMOUTH-HITCHCOCK MEDICAL CENTER, LEBANON, NH

The Project SEARCH program at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center was established in 2011. It is run with New Hampshire Vocational Rehabilitation, Vermont Vocational Rehabilitation, the Hartford School District, and area developmental services agency Lincoln Street, Inc.³⁵ Notably, according to instructor and program coordinator Kathleen MacLean, this Project SEARCH site is the

only one in the nation that has partners from two different states on its governing board.³⁶ The program serves students from both New Hampshire and Vermont, many in the Hartford and Lebanon school districts. The Hartford school district serves roughly 1,800 students, about 26 percent of whom receive special education services.³⁷ The Lebanon school district serves about 16,000 students roughly 14 percent of whom are on IEPs.³⁸ This Project SEARCH site accommodates up to ten students per year, aged 18 to 29; however, students coming from New Hampshire school districts generally are between the ages of 18 and 21.³⁹

Students arrive in the classroom each day at 8:00am, at which time they receive an hour of vocational skills training from Project SEARCH licensed instructors. Students then proceed to their hospital internships for several hours before briefly returning to the classroom to debrief at the end of the day. The hospital offers a wide array of internships for students, including in the mail room, working at the blood bank, food and nutrition, housekeeping, human resources, and several different medical departments—general internal medicine, audiology, endoscopy, nursing, the cancer center, gastroenterology, ophthalmology, surgical services, and pediatrics.⁴⁰

According to MacLean, the program has seen between 70 and 100 percent of participants find competitive employment every year since its establishment, and many program participants have been hired by the hospital.

5.1.2 CHESHIRE MEDICAL CENTER, KEENE, NH

Since 2010, this Project SEARCH site—the first in New Hampshire—has worked with Monadnock Developmental Services, the state-designated area disability aid agency.⁴¹ The program has served nearly 100 students in the Keene school district, in which just over 20 percent of the roughly 3,300 students have a disability.⁴² It serves a maximum of eight applicants per year between the ages of 18 and 34, some of whom are still in high school and some of whom have already left the special education system. All students must be working with Monadnock Developmental Services and be working with or actively applying to work with New Hampshire Vocational Rehabilitation Services to qualify for the program; they must also have Medicaid and qualify for the Developmental Disability Waiver. Applicants must also pass an extensive background check, a drug test, and receive certain immunizations upon acceptance to the program.⁴³

The program offers a wide range of internships based on applicant interest: “everything from stocking to housekeeping to food service to office tasks.”⁴⁴ Students attend the program for a full school year, from September until June, each weekday from 8:00 am until 2:30 pm. The day begins with a half hour of discussing goal setting in the classroom, after which students get a fifteen minute break and then go to their internship sites for four hours and fifteen minutes. Students have a thirty-minute lunch break while at their internship sites. The remaining hour is spent in the classroom discussing employability and soft skills.⁴⁵

Program staff also support students who are hoping to find employment after graduation from Project SEARCH by offering career development services. The program provides support in resume preparation, interview skill development, outreach to employers to secure employment opportunities for program participants, and ongoing support of program graduates to ensure that the job is a good fit.

The program has an overall post-graduation employment rate of about 85 percent, with participants now working in a variety of jobs such as corporate positions, retail, manufacturing, environmental services, food service, and recreation.⁴⁶ These workers work an average of 18 hours per week and make an average wage of \$10.99 per hour.⁴⁷

5.1.3 PORTSMOUTH REGIONAL HOSPITAL, PORTSMOUTH, NH

This Project SEARCH site, located at a major New Hampshire hospital, was established in 2011, and works in partnership with Great Bay Community College, New Hampshire Vocational Rehabilitation, and Community Partners of Dover, the area developmental service agency.⁴⁸ The program site can host up to nine students per year from the Portsmouth school district, comprising roughly 2,700 students of which 17.44 percent have a developmental disability.⁴⁹ Applicants must be between the ages of 18 and 29, and have usually finished the high school curriculum. If the student is still in high school, the student must agree that this will be the final year in the special education system and that the student will accept a diploma at the end of the school year. Alternatively, a high school student may participate in the program if the host school agrees that special education services will continue until age 21 and the school will fund employment support services during that time.⁵⁰ Students must also meet similar Medicaid, background check and independence requirements as at the Cheshire Medical Center site.

The program offers internships in facilities management, food and nutrition, the hospital gift shop, the clerical office, housekeeping, and operating room support, among others.⁵¹ Students participate in interviews with program staff to determine which internships would be best suited to their interests and abilities, and work one-on-one with a career trainer until they are able to execute the tasks of their internship independently.⁵²

The program runs from September until May, Monday through Friday from 9:00 am until 3:00 pm, and follows the same three-internship structure as the Cheshire Medical Center site. Students begin each day with an hour-and-a-half in the classroom, and then go to their internships for four hours. They end the day with a debrief with teachers back in the classroom, during which they discuss the status of each student in their particular internship.⁵³

Between 70 and 100 percent of program graduates become employed each year, some of whom are hired by the hospital itself.⁵⁴ Others may find employment at other local businesses that partner with the program, such as area hotels or even Great Bay Community College.⁵⁵

5.1.4 RENAISSANCE WORLD GOLF VILLAGE RESORT, ST. AUGUSTINE, FL

Florida has the most Project SEARCH sites of any state, many at hospitality centers and resorts. Of those, this program, established in 2017, has been one of the most successful in terms of post-program employment rates. The program is run with Project 10 Transition Education Network, the Florida Agency for Persons with Disabilities, Florida Vocational Rehabilitation Services, a developmental disability support agency, The Arc of the St. Johns, and the St. Johns County School district.⁵⁶ The school district serves close to 42,000 students, about 16 percent of whom are on IEPs.⁵⁷ Participants in the program must be between 18 and 22 years old and must have completed all credits necessary to graduate from high school before becoming eligible for Project SEARCH.

The program accommodates about 12 students per year, who are on site from 8:00 am until 2:30 pm, Monday through Friday. The day starts in the classroom with an hour of employability skills curriculum, and students then go to their internships for about five hours. They reconvene in the classroom for half an hour at the end of the day to journal and review the day as a group.⁵⁸ Students can choose between 20 different internships at the hotel, including working at the hotel restaurant, banquet setup in the conference center, housekeeping, accounting, working at the resort Starbucks or gift shop, and working at the front desk to help check in hotel guests.⁵⁹

Almost all program participants find post-program employment each year, and about a third of participants are hired by the hotel itself. The site has been awarded by the State of Florida for its commitment to employing individuals with disabilities, and it has been honored and awarded by Project SEARCH at its Employment Outcome Awards each year since its establishment for its exemplary rates of post-program success.⁶⁰

5.1.5 CITY OF LEWISVILLE, TX

Beginning in 2015, Project SEARCH established a program with the government of the City of Lewisville run with the Lewisville Independent School District and the Texas Department of Assistive and Rehabilitation Services.⁶¹ The school district serves roughly 52,200 students, about 12 percent of whom are on IEPs.⁶² Program participants must be 18 or older and must have completed or be actively in the process of completing all credits and requirements necessary to obtain their high school diploma.

The City program was implemented after a staff member at the Medical Center of Lewisville, who had been working with a Project SEARCH site at the hospital established two years earlier, worked with the City to establish another site in the city government. The two programs together are able to accommodate up to 20 students per year.

The students work at their internships for five hours each weekday, then end the day with an hour in the classroom in a vocational skills class. Students are also able to meet with job coaches and Project SEARCH staff at the end of each day to receive feedback from their internship manager and identify any areas of concern to get help with finding potential solutions to workplace conflicts. Students who participate in the municipal Project SEARCH program have the opportunity to complete internships in the city's police, fire, parks and public services departments. Within these departments students perform different technical or administrative jobs, such as records management for the general municipal government database, filing police reports, coordinating local public sports leagues, or working on the fire department's public education programs.⁶³

Though it is a relatively new Project SEARCH program, the City of Lewisville's wide array of offerings for students has proven beneficial. The program boasts employment rates of 80-90 percent, and has been an honoree of Project SEARCH annual Employment Outcome Awards for its outstanding performance during the 2018-2019 school year.⁶⁴

5.1.6 DREXEL UNIVERSITY, PHILADELPHIA, PA

Project SEARCH came to Drexel University's A.J. Drexel Autism Institute in 2016, and also partners with Pennsylvania Vocational Rehabilitation, disability employment services agency Community Integrated Services, the Pennsylvania Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility

Services, and the Philadelphia School District.⁶⁵ The school district educates nearly 203,000 students, of whom roughly 15 percent are on an IEP.⁶⁶ The program accommodates eight students per year. Program participants must be in their last year of high school, meaning that the cost of the program is covered by the school district. Additionally, because the program is run through Drexel's Autism Institute, applicants must be diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder or an intellectual disability in order to be eligible for participation.⁶⁷

It is important to note that although this Project SEARCH program is hosted by a university, participants are not taking college-level classes. Instead, Drexel offers internships at a Barnes and Noble that serves as the school bookstore, DragonCard ID, event and conference planning, parking services, student operations, and many more.⁶⁸ Students are also supported by two job coaches, in addition to the regular special education teacher, job mentor, and site supervisor.

Students begin the day with an hour in the classroom, then proceed to their internships for several hours. They then finish the day back in the classroom to complete any necessary paperwork and discuss their internship with the instructor and job coaches. Job coaches become less and less present as students gain skills in their internships.

Drexel's Project SEARCH program has high post-program employment rates. Seven of the eight participants in the first year of the program found employment, and all eight of the participants in the 2019 program are currently competitively employed.⁶⁹ On average, employed graduates of the program are employed for 30 hours per week, making an average wage of \$11.40 per hour.⁷⁰

5.1.7 FIFTH THIRD BANK, MADISONVILLE, OH; CINCINNATI, OH; GRAND RAPIDS, MI

Fifth Third Bank has a longstanding relationship with Project SEARCH, as it was the first site located at a non-medical site and remains the only bank with a Project SEARCH program.⁷¹ The Madisonville site, located at the bank's operations center, opened in 2005, the Cincinnati site, located at the bank's corporate headquarters, opened in 2007, and the Grand Rapids site opened in 2008.⁷² Fifth Third also holds an annual golf event to raise funds for Project SEARCH; as of 2017, the bank had raised over \$1.3 million for the organization.⁷³ The bank can accommodate about 24 students between 18 and 22 per year across the three different sites, and students may only attend the site in their district.

The sites work with Ohio and Michigan Vocational Rehabilitation, as well as job coaches from Jewish Vocational Services and other support from organizations like the Ohio Rehabilitation Services Commission and Hamilton County Developmental Disabilities services.⁷⁴

The programs offer a substantial number of internship opportunities, which are related to banking or business management. Examples include vehicle title processing, telephone verification in the call center, processing online loan applications, mail or file clerks, administrative assistant, case preparation, or consumer loss mitigation, among others.⁷⁵

The Fifth Third Project SEARCH sites run from August until May, Monday through Friday, from 8:00 am until 2:45 pm. Students spend the first hour of the day in the classroom in employability skills class, which covers interview skills, resume writing, and money management. Students then go to their internships until 2:00 pm, when they return to their classrooms to journal and reflect about the day's work.⁷⁶

Since the beginning of the Madisonville program in 2005, Fifth Third has accommodated 352 students in its Project SEARCH programs; of those students, 33 are currently employed by the bank, and they are all either meeting or exceeding company performance standards.⁷⁷ Fifth Third has an overall post-program employment rate of 72.1 percent between the three program sites, and notably, the 2019 participants at the Cincinnati site all found competitive employment within a year of graduating from the program.⁷⁸

5.2 CASE STUDY CONCLUSIONS: FACTORS THAT MAKE PROJECT SEARCH SUCCESSFUL

Project SEARCH is highly successful in securing employment for students with disabilities. In the studied sites, post-program employment ranged from 70 to 100 percent. Nationwide, Project SEARCH reports that 77.3 percent of participants find employment upon program completion, while 67.1 percent of participants found employment that met the following criteria:⁷⁹

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

This is significantly higher than the nationwide employment rate for people with disabilities, which is only 17.9 percent.⁸⁰ We have identified several factors that are integral to Project SEARCH and contribute to its success in transitioning students with disabilities into the workforce.

5.2.1 HARD SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Full workplace immersion means that Project SEARCH interns learn marketable skills required for many entry-level jobs. A selection of jobs performed by interns in case study sites range from basic (filing, telephone verification, retail, housekeeping, foodservice) to more advanced (processing loan applications, consumer loss mitigation, clerkship, case preparation, community outreach, and accounting). Given that managers consistently report that their major concern in hiring people with disabilities is an inability to attract qualified applicants, the development of tangible job skills during Project SEARCH internships represents an important step in increasing the employability of special education students.⁸¹ Students also learn a broad variety of marketable skills during program participation. That is, it is important to note that none of the jobs listed above are performed for the whole of the internship experience. Upon satisfactory participation in a department, interns are moved to a different department within the same organization, leaving graduates with a diverse set of skills. A 2014 study found that program participants demonstrated “significant growth in a majority of specific entry-level job skills and workplace behaviors.”⁸²

5.2.2 SOFT SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Interns also learn key soft skills necessary for employment. The relationship between social skills and employability is widely acknowledged.⁸³ But, key social skills are often overlooked in high school transition programs.⁸⁴ Employers frequently voice that employees should enter employment with “job-ready” social skills so that supervisors can focus on training, so the development of such skills

before employment is critical for students with disabilities.⁸⁵ The Project SEARCH curricula heavily emphasize soft and social skill development during classroom portions of the internship. For instance, every intern is taught professional courtesies, personal hygiene, and how to take public transportation, among other valuable life skills likely to be expected by any supervisor.

5.2.3 CAREER DEVELOPMENT

In every case study site, the last few months emphasize individualized job development based on intern skills, weaknesses, and interests. Interns are taught career skills such as interview skills, resume writing, and money management in every case study site examined. Upon program completion, interns receive career portfolios, which include resumes, letters of recommendation, and competency profiles.⁸⁶ These specific actions ensure that interns possess the skills necessary for job searches and are prepared to enter fields based on their skill and interest.

5.2.4 PRESENCE OF COACHES AND MENTORS

Career development and skills training is enhanced by the presence of a committed staff of mentors and coaches within each site. In every site examined, each intern worked closely with a departmental mentor, classroom instructor, and skills trainer. The presence of mentors has a number of benefits.

First, interns are able to learn and make mistakes in a relatively sheltered environment. A major concern of potential employers of disabled workers is complicated accommodations, but Project SEARCH staff work with employers to simplify this process. Students are guided through the workday and mistakes are corrected without the threat of lost employment.⁸⁷

A second key function the Project SEARCH staff serves is to help interns secure future employment. In every site examined, staff kept contact with interns after program completion. More fundamentally, staff members are well acquainted with student strengths and weaknesses. The close relationship developed over a year-long internship allowed them to guide interns toward jobs that match well with their skills and interests.

5.2.5 PIPELINE TO EMPLOYMENT

In addition to preparing interns for employment, Project SEARCH is itself a vehicle for employment through two channels. First, host businesses often hire former Project SEARCH interns. In the sites studied, the percentage of students hired each year by the host businesses was as high as a third of participants. A number of factors explain this. A 2018 study found consistently high levels of employer satisfaction with Project SEARCH interns, suggesting viability as a means of recruiting and reducing turnover for entry-level positions.⁸⁸ Conversations with representatives at host sites suggests a more intuitive reason for hiring former interns: they have deep knowledge of business culture, experience performing a variety of organizational jobs, and have been evaluated closely by hiring managers throughout the process. On a social level, interns often become an integral part of the business culture.

The second way Project SEARCH acts as a pipeline to future employment is through the employment networks interns enter as part of the program. Hiring managers often stereotype potential employees as lacking general skills.⁸⁹ Direct experience working with interns allows vocational rehabilitation partners to better advocate for interns in jobs within the community. Interns are also more likely to find jobs in their communities that are good fits because mentors, vocational rehabilitation

representatives, and other Project SEARCH representatives are well acquainted with their needs, skills, and goals.

5.2.6 CROSS-AGENCY COLLABORATION

In each of the studied sites, strong collaborative partnerships between Vocational Rehabilitation agencies, Community Development Agencies, school districts, and host businesses was evident. In addition to being a key predictor of post-school success for students with disabilities,⁹⁰ the partnerships Project SEARCH creates organically spawn informal networking possibilities. The following table details the actors involved in every Project SEARCH site.⁹¹

Table 5.2.6.1 Actors Involved in Project SEARCH Sites

Organization	Role
Host Business	In addition to jobs, provides indirect benefits including limited staff time (supervisory and training roles), space, and utilities, including internet access; provides a business liaison; provides department managers to participate in employee evaluations and feedback as well as task development.
School District	Identifies potential participants; provides a classroom instructor.
Community Agency	Knows and communicates intern needs to program staff; provides a job developer and/or skills trainer to take the lead in job preparation and post-program job search.
Vocational Rehabilitation	Provides long-term employment support and identifies participant strengths and weaknesses.

6 EXPANSION OF WORK-BASED TRANSITION PROGRAMS: CONSIDERATIONS

New Hampshire has significant room for the expansion of work-based transition programs. The factors that make Project SEARCH successful are replicable in both new Project SEARCH sites and in similar work-based transition programs. Given Project SEARCH's high rate of post-program employment, we analyze the considerations necessary for expansion of similar programs.

6.1 CHALLENGES TO EXPANSION

Though Project SEARCH provides important, demonstrable services for transitioning students at a relatively low cost, expanding the number of program sites in New Hampshire would not come without additional challenges. Specifically, cost, age cutoffs for special education services, school district opposition, and transportation to sites are all potential issues to address if work-based transition programs are to expand in New Hampshire.

6.1.1 COST

In most Project SEARCH sites, the skills trainer is paid by the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, through Area Agencies. The on-site special education teacher is paid by individual school districts. The additional funding required to start a Project SEARCH site varies. One skills trainer is generally required for every five interns (though the Dartmouth-Hitchcock site only uses one). In some cases, Area Agencies can simply relocate an employee to a Project SEARCH site. In others, they hire an additional provider, which costs about \$40,000.⁹²

In almost every case analyzed, school districts hire an additional special education teacher to serve a new Project SEARCH site. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average salary for a high-school level special education instructor is \$61,030.⁹³

In addition to staffing costs, a new site must pay a \$16,000 licensing fee, which covers training and other start-up costs. Licensing fees are covered by the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation through Area Agencies. However, as detailed in Section 7.2, this cost may be used to cover the start-up costs of multiple sites if more than one is established in a year. For example, if two sites were established in 2021, the licensing cost for each would be \$8,000.

Finally, each site must pay a \$300 fee every year to cover on-demand support and other training resources. The average per student cost, not including the initial start-up fee, is presented in Table 6.1.1.1 for a site with eight interns per year in comparison to the average cost of educating students in the disability categories represented by Project SEARCH participants.⁹⁴

Table 6.1.1.1 Per Pupil Costs

	Estimated Cost of Education
Autism	\$46,850
Intellectual Disability	\$37,500
Multiple Disabilities	\$50,104
Project SEARCH Tuition	\$17,667

When interviewing special educators, the most common concern about Project SEARCH was a lack of budget space. Our research suggests that the addition of a Project SEARCH site would cost districts no more than they already spend on special education transition programs on a per-pupil basis.

However, the added cost of hiring new personnel could pose budgetary issues, especially for school districts. Moreover, the \$16,000 licensing fee might serve as a prohibitive initial investment.

6.1.2 AGE CUTOFF

Before last year, New Hampshire students receiving special education services were only able to receive those services until their twenty-first birthday, at which point they would be removed from the special education system. As of July 2020, New Hampshire special education statutes have been updated to reflect the IDEA requirement that students remain eligible to receive these services until age 22. However, through talking to Project SEARCH staff members and program administrators, we have discovered that the new statute has not actually taken effect in practice (see section 5.2). Kathleen MacLean from the Project SEARCH site at DHMC said that she had not even heard of the change, and that one of her participants who turned 21 during the program was forced to drop out because the school district would no longer pay his tuition.

The new law, when fully implemented, will benefit special education students with an extra year to complete high school and to take advantage of beneficial transition programs.

6.1.3 SCHOOL DISTRICT OPPOSITION

Despite Project SEARCH's proven benefits, steps towards opening new program sites may potentially be met with resistance from school districts as well as special education teachers and staff in schools. Conversations with these teachers suggest that fears focus on a lack of understanding or fear that the program will take over all transition activities for students, thereby making special education teachers unnecessary in the transition process and potentially putting their jobs at risk. Administrator concerns are largely directed at staffing and cost.

Our analysis suggests, however, that most of these fears are unfounded. First, students are not generally eligible for Project SEARCH until the year that they plan to graduate from high school, meaning that a significant amount of transition work will be performed by school district employees. Second, while Project SEARCH does provide participating students with the opportunity to gain work experience and social skills, special education teachers provide an important basis for these skills through their work with students, helping them to gain the skills to socialize with their peers before they learn the different types of interactions one encounters in the workplace. In other words, special education teachers have a permanent staff position in every Project SEARCH site. Their presence suggests that school districts may only need to reorganize resources rather than add expenses. Finally, and most importantly, Project SEARCH does not replace the important work that special education staff does in helping plan student IEPs and putting transition programming in place.

By publicizing the work and mission of Project SEARCH, the state may be able to show New Hampshire special education teachers that the program exists as a *complement* to in-school transition learning, and will not serve as a replacement.

6.1.4 TRANSPORTATION LAWS

Most Project SEARCH sites require that students have their own means of transportation to and from the program site each day. However, this may make Project SEARCH and similar work-based transition programs inaccessible for those students who are unable to obtain a driver's license, especially given that New Hampshire's program sites serve students living in rural areas. While the adult services system only requires drivers of disabled people to have insurance and a driving record check by the Area Agency, any student still in the special education system must either be transported by a family arrangement or by a licensed school bus driver.

New Hampshire law does allow special education students to be transported in "mixed-use" school buses, or a vehicle driven by a licensed school bus driver that also serves as that driver's public vehicle. This is a less restrictive way to safely transport students to programs in accordance with state law. However, in some cases, mixed-use school buses must be owned or leased by the school district and can only be driven by school employees.

Moreover, the actual acquisition of school-bus licensure is often prohibitively difficult for non-school-bus companies. According to RSA 266:7, only the Director of Transportation or one of his "duly authorized agents" has the authority to approve school buses for safety. However, from conversations with outside vendors, it has become clear that the few certifying agencies that exist in the state are usually appendages of larger school bus companies (e.g., Student First), and refuse to train employees that are not their own. This can prove difficult for private transition service agencies to arrange student transportation.

6.2 EXPANSION OF WORK-BASED TRANSITION PROGRAMS: TENNESSEE CASE STUDY

The State of Tennessee, through its Council on Developmental Disabilities, led a statewide expansion of Project SEARCH programs. Beginning with one site at the Vanderbilt University Children's Hospital, the program has expanded to include 17 sites at hospital, college, and business settings through centralized government action.

6.2.1 THE EXPANSION PROCESS

The first Project SEARCH site in Tennessee opened, as with New Hampshire sites, on an ad hoc, business-led basis. That is, hospital administrators, through communication channels established during treatment, heard from family members of children with disabilities that internship options were limited. After initial post-program hire rates of 100 percent, the state Council on Developmental Disabilities began an aggressive statewide program expansion.

The first step was a two-day seminar wherein representatives from school districts, community agencies (the equivalent of Area Agencies in New Hampshire), the Department of Education, and Vocational Rehabilitation, were invited. The seminar served three key purposes which allowed for the eventual spread of Project SEARCH sites in the state. First, it fostered a pattern of cross-agency collaboration crucial for the success of multi-partner programs like Project SEARCH. Second, it empowered local representatives, through community agencies and school districts, to approach local businesses with requests for site establishment. In New Hampshire and in Tennessee, local

representatives play a pivotal role in expanding community transition programs because they possess the soft community connections necessary to approach local businesses. The seminar, and the state-level support implicit in it, gave local representatives the knowledge and support necessary to approach local businesses. Finally, the seminar served to alleviate the tension inherent in a school system in which local school districts exercise significant control over resource allocation.

Using cost figures covered in Section 6.1.1, the Council on Developmental Disabilities was able to demonstrate to school districts that the establishment of a Project SEARCH site entails only a reallocation of resources. Schools already have special education teachers in charge of transition. Some schools in New Hampshire have staff members specifically in charge of transition. By pooling the resources of all schools within a district, some districts only needed to move one special education instructor into a Project SEARCH site and they had a new transition program without incurring any additional costs.

Following the seminar, a pilot program was announced as a cross-agency endeavor between the Department of Education, Vocational Rehab, and the Council on Developmental Disabilities. The success of that pilot program served as a catalyst for state expansion.

6.2.2 ROLE OF THE COUNCIL ON DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

The Council, in addition to sponsoring and organizing the initial seminar, served as a liaison and facilitator for collaboration between school districts, the Department of Education, and Vocational Rehabilitation. The Council established communication channels, organized meetings, and established relationships between key stakeholders. In addition, it provided early funding and training for program administrators.

6.2.3 ROLE OF THE DEPARTMENT OF VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION

Vocational Rehabilitation assumed control of the state Project SEARCH Network a year after the first pilot program. It added a staff person devoted to program coordination and oversaw rapid expansion: 12 sites were established between 2014 and 2016. In addition, the Department entered into a contract with Project SEARCH, which in addition to guaranteeing ongoing support, hands-on training, and on-demand troubleshooting, allows the Department to consolidate initial licensing fees and use the \$16,000 per site licensing fee to cover multiple sites if they are established in the same year.

6.2.4 APPLICABILITY TO NEW HAMPSHIRE

The key stakeholders present in the expansion of Project SEARCH in Tennessee are all present in New Hampshire. New Hampshire also has the advantage of having five functioning sites with the success metrics to demonstrate viability. If the state were to decide to expand Project SEARCH or similarly structured programs, the Council on Developmental Disabilities is well-positioned to coordinate the necessary partnerships. The significant control school districts exert over planning and budget matters necessitates an expansive network wherein district administrators and Area Agencies are apprised of staff reorganization requirements and potential costs.

6.3 OPPORTUNITIES FOR SCHOOL-TO-WORK TRANSITION PROGRAM EXPANSION IN NEW HAMPSHIRE

Project SEARCH already operates successfully at five medical facilities in New Hampshire, but there are two notable ways in which the program could expand in the state. First, the program could expand in terms of the different industry internship opportunities offered to students. Currently, the sites in New Hampshire are all in medical settings, but Project SEARCH programs in municipal governments and in hospitality, corporate, and higher education settings have worked well in other states, and could be similarly successful in New Hampshire. For example, a Project SEARCH site at the Statehouse might give participants insight into how they could become advocates for other special education students, and could also allow members of the state legislature to see their votes pay off in terms of benefits to students. Second, the program has a great potential to expand geographically across the state. As of right now, Project SEARCH sites are clustered in the southern half of the state; the site farthest north is DHMC in Lebanon, though it also serves the Hartford School District in Vermont.⁹⁵ The northern counties, which tend to be more rural with lower median incomes and higher rates of disabilities, could benefit from additional Project SEARCH sites.

Table 6.3.1, below, compares the ten New Hampshire school districts with the highest number of students with disabilities with the number of potential suitable host businesses—defined as having more than 250 employees—in the area. All business data is from the 2017-2018 County Business Patterns report.⁹⁶ All school district data is from the New Hampshire Department of Education.⁹⁷

Table 6.3.1 Potential Expansion Points

District	# of Students with Disabilities	Potential Suitable Project SEARCH Host Businesses in County	Project SEARCH Site in Existence (Y/N)
Manchester	2723	32	No
Nashua	2049	32	Yes
Rochester	829	3	No
Derry	779	10	No
Timberlane	779	10	No
Dover	766	3	No
Concord	751	4	Yes
Londonderry	726	10	No
Merrimack	702	10	No
Keene	690	10	Yes

7 CONCLUSIONS: FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

Work-based transition programs are beneficial for students and lead to a high rate of post-program success at achieving postsecondary goals in comparison to the success rates of peers who do not participate in these programs. While generally a relatively small number of students on IEPs find competitive postsecondary employment, over 70 percent of Project SEARCH participants nationwide meet this benchmark within just one year of completing the program.⁹⁸

Over the course of this project, we have interviewed special education experts, reviewed Department of Education data from all fifty states, and examined work-based transition programs all over the country to determine their efficacy. Through this research, we have found that there is both room and precedent for New Hampshire to effectively collaborate with partner organizations to expand transition planning services and include more work-based transition programs.

Though there are some potential challenges to implementing Project SEARCH or similar programs in New Hampshire, offering work-based transition programs in a variety of industries and in a larger geographic area that serves more of the state's most vulnerable populations could greatly benefit special education students across the state.

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