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Project Search Continues To Help Preble County Students

Eaton, Ohio – In previous articles it has been shared the great efforts being done in Preble County between the Miami Valley Career Technology Center (MVCTC), Preble County Educational Service Center (PCEC), the Ohio Rehabilitation Services Commission (ORSC), and the Preble County Board of Developmental Disabilities (PCBDD). Each of these organizations has come together in a partnership to try to create a Project SEARCH model and/or similar opportunities in Preble County by the fall of 2013.

Project SEARCH is an international model with over 200 sites across the United States and Canada, England, Scotland, and Australia. Project SEARCH's primary objective is to secure competitive employment for people with disabilities.”

The Preble County Project SEARCH partnership was started when a need for such a program was discovered in the area. Preble County students had been accepted to the Butler Tech Project SEARCH class at Miami University and there were issues with how to transport the students to Oxford. The Preble County Board of Developmental Disabilities Transportation Department offered their services. The benefits of Project SEARCH were discovered and the desire to start a similar program in Preble County started.

A recent success story for Project SEARCH in Preble County is Eric Sturgill. Eric attended the Preble County ESC Special Needs classrooms since preschool. During his high school career, he worked part of the day in the cafeteria, where he learned dishwashing, drying, and putting away of utensils and dishes. According to Connie Sturgill, Eric’s mother, “There were no other options for learning new job skills. I could tell that he was getting tired of that same routine. He wasn’t improving much in the way of traditional academics and it was even harder to get him motivated enough to get out of bed to go to school.”

Enter Project SEARCH. Mrs. Karen Couch, Eric's high school teacher, gave him the opportunity to apply for a position with the Project SEARCH program at Butler Tech, in 2011. Connie shared, "Without this program, Eric would just be sitting around waiting for something to happen and lose all of the academic skills that he learned in high school, which wouldn't prepare him very well for the real world of working to support himself, and maybe even a family in the future."

"Starting with day one of Project SEARCH, Eric woke up early, got himself ready, and drove himself to Miami University, arriving early in order to prepare for the day ahead. Each and every day after that, he was actually excited to go to Miami to see what else he could learn," said Connie.

Connie also shared her experience working with Project SEARCH, "Project SEARCH is a wonderful program helping young people with disabilities transition from school to the scary world of employment. We all know how failure impacts our self-esteem. Instead of trying (and failing a lot) to obtain a job on their own, these young people are given the opportunity to receive specific training in skills that can be utilized at most any job. The job coaches are there to oversee the interns, coach them in their job responsibilities and help them learn to improve their skills. The staff works with each intern, identifying their weaknesses and strengths, and focuses on their unique learning styles. With help from his job coach and instructor, Eric mastered all of his IEP goals for his job rotations of Janitorial and Food Service at Miami University in Oxford. In fact, the supervisor at Haines Food Court at Miami encouraged Eric to continue the remainder of his job training rotations at Haines. She had a lot of confidence in him as a person, not a disabled person, that he could learn different aspects of the food service industry. He began with rotating the breakfast bar into the salad bar, keeping it replenished and clean. Then he progressed on to serving customers at the Pasta Bar, making and serving pizzas, deep-frying hash browns, and finally, cashiering at Tuffy's Coffee Shop. Cashiering was the one job rotation that, I have to admit, I was totally nervous about! I remember receiving a text message from his instructor that day that read, 'Eric totally rocks at Tuffy's' I was so relieved and amazed that, once again, Eric totally shocked me. I have always believed that with the right training, a patient supervisor, and Eric's desire to succeed, he can do anything!"

After the valuable experience Eric earned at the Miami University Project SEARCH location, he was offered a job working for the Kroger store in Eaton. He works 8-20 hours per week and during holidays he has worked close to 30-hours per week. Eric is responsible for bagging groceries, handling carts, helping

customers out with groceries, some cleaning, sweeping, and cleaning up spills. He helps with anything that needs done at the front of the store.

Cyndi Alder, Eaton Kroger Store Assistant Manager, shared, “Eric is really good at talking to customers, thanking them for shopping at Kroger’s and asking them if they need help out to their cars. He has grown a lot since he first started. There is a thought process that needs to go into bagging groceries and Eric does a great job with this.”

Jennifer Pittman, Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor for the Ohio Rehabilitation Services Commission (ORSC) explains her role in helping Eric in his position at Kroger as, “my role is to assist him in gaining independence through work in the community. We began this transition from high school to the world of work by providing him with personalized services to meet his individual goals. As his Counselor with ORSC, I funded his job coaching services before and after the program as well as coordinated other services that helped him to successfully work in the community. “

Jennifer also shared the growth she has seen in Eric since starting his position at Kroger, “Watching Eric’s confidence grow from the beginning has been the biggest difference. Getting your first job out of high school can be a bit scary and he continues to overcome challenges all the while having a positive attitude each day. Eric is walking away with a better understanding of his strengths, limitations and what he can bring to the table.”

Connie Sturgill explains it best, “Project SEARCH gives young people who have a great desire to work in the real world the opportunity to be treated just like any other worker. They coach, mentor, and push them to their greatest abilities. The support team works with the interns to build upon their strengths and help them obtain a job that they will enjoy doing, in a very competitive work world. When someone enjoys what they’re doing, the quality shines through. This program is just what my son, Eric, needed to make him successful in life. He seems to have a lot more confidence in himself, is not afraid to do something on his own, and he just loved being a part of this program. He said that if given the choice to go back in time to 2011, he would join Project SEARCH again in a heartbeat! I think whatever these young people set their minds on, they will achieve; especially with the help and support of Project SEARCH!”

For more information on the efforts to start a Project SEARCH in Preble County, please contact, Harold Niehaus at MVCTC 937-854-6674.

Photo: A recent success story for Project SEARCH in Preble County is Eric Sturgill, employee at the Eaton Kroger store.
