

Project Search Graduation

September 25, 2020

Lauderdale County School System and Florence City Schools



Celebrating six graduates of the 2020 class of Project Search in the Lauderdale County School System and Florence City Schools, they are the first class of interns completing the work. Project Search in LCSS and FCS is one of 16 Project Search programs in the State of Alabama. Welcoming the graduates, their families, and partner guests, Project Search teacher from LCSS, Suzanne Mauldin, and skills trainers, Donna Akers and Cindy Vandiver, Easter Seals, opened with students engaging in the pop-song, “We’re all in this together,” which has become their class song. Adopting a Project Search class color, teal, and a mascot, a bulldog, the students have gained confidence, learned valuable life skills, and have successfully prepared to enter the workforce.

Leading the attendees in the Pledge of Allegiance was program graduate, Brandon Bone of Florence High School.

LCSS administrators, staff, as well as partner agencies, spoke of the power of engagement of a program like Project Search. Read their words:

Kayla, Project Search Graduate—the highlight of today’s focus was on the students and Kayla spoke to a room filled with individuals like her, their parents, and these teachers and other professionals who have mentored and invested in their lives. When Kayla began to speak, the room became very still and silent, listening to her big words.

“People with disabilities have big goals. I have big goals for my life. With hard work, we can accomplish anything. I would not change anything about my life.

I’m proud to be who I am. God made us the way we are.”

Jon Hatton, Superintendent, Lauderdale County School System

“Thank you to North Alabama Medical Center, first and foremost,” said Jon Hatton, Superintendent, Lauderdale County School System. “This program would not be possible without them. Dr. Jimmy Shaw, Superintendent, Florence City Schools, could not be with us today, so I speak for him and FCS as well.” Congratulating the students on their achievements, Mr. Hatton also thanked the commitment and hard work of the staff, particularly Suzanne Mauldin, lead teacher, and skills trainers, Donna Akers and Cindy Vandiver.

Suzanne Mauldin, Project Search Instructor

“I cannot say enough good things about our students, the staff, and all our partners. We have worked so hard to make all of this happen and today, the hard work has paid off. I especially want to thank the skills trainers, Donna and Cindy. I could not have made it through the year without them. Students, we are so proud of you.” Ms. Mauldin described some of the work in which the students were engaged, and how the program works. She highlighted one of the favorite things for the students was the Project Search “store.” Open today, too, during the event, students were able to spend dollars “earned” on donated prizes and useful items from technology, to personal hygiene, and fun things

like earbuds and candy bars. “Students are not paid, but they *earn* money to spend each week in the store. I promised them they would be able to shop today, too, and they have enjoyed that part of the program.”

Yolanda Spencer, Alabama Project Search Team Member, Department of Rehabilitation Services

“Everybody wants to be a part of Project Search. We are so glad that these students have been with us and are now completing this first year.” While the COVID pandemic has been a hold on many of the Alabama participating programs, Ms. Spencer is hopeful that all will be able to return to the active recruitment, engagement, and success stories like this one in Lauderdale County. “Skills workers make it happen, I will tell you,” she said, giving applause to our two workers, Donna and Cindy. “Without them, the students would not be where they are today.”

Penny South, Employment Specialist/Project Search Supervisor, Easter Seals

“I cannot say enough good things about all the work that has gone into making this day possible for our students.” Ms. South is responsible for making sure the students are prepared through mock job interviews, clothes shopping, preparing a resume, and getting prepared to be part of the workforce. “Finding the right skills teachers was key to this success,” she explained. “It took a while, but we definitely got the best in our skills teachers.”

Russell Pigg, Chief Executive Officer, North Alabama Medical Center

“We’re all in,” said North Alabama Medical Center’s Chief Executive Officer. “We know that the program is in a pause because of the pandemic, but we’re ready when you are to start it up again.” He described how the students have moved responsibility with his hospital staff and fit right in. “We have enjoyed having the students with us,” he said. He told his wife a story— “They are in a room close to my office and so every day after lunch, they come in, and go to the bathroom and freshen up.” He said that the skills teachers told him that is part of what they are instructed to do so they are ready to go back to work. “Maybe we should have our sons do that,” he said he told his wife. “This is a very special program, and we are in.”

Project Search in Lauderdale County

Beginning last fall, Lauderdale County students participated in Project Search giving students hands-on job experience in the health-care industry by interning at North Alabama Medical Center. Students were onsite each day at NAMC along with Project Search teacher from LCSS, Suzanne Mauldin, and skills trainers, Donna Akers and Cindy Vandiver, partners from Easter Seals.

One of the primary goals of Project Search is preparing students with disabilities an opportunity to transition to the workforce. Throughout the school year, interns work on employability and functional skills each day. According to the Project Search website program overview, the activities focus on team building, workplace safety, technology, maintaining employment, self-advocacy, financial literacy, health and wellness, and preparing for employment.

During the training, interns also acquire competitive, marketable, and transferable skills to enable them to join the workforce and be successful. Project Search is a unique, business-led program that is a workplace immersion experience for each young intern participant.

At NAMC, these departments made a place for the students to work and gain hands-on experience: Cath Lab, Food Services, Endoscopy, EVS, Linen Services, Medical Records, Radiology, Sterile Processing, and Surgical EVS.

Through the workplace immersion model, Project Search serves to provide young students a singular goal of competitive employment for every program graduate.

Partnering Agencies:

Lauderdale County School System

- Jon Hatton, Superintendent
- Willie Joiner, Assistant Superintendent
- Tim Tubbs, Assistant Superintendent
- Brooke Gilmer, Supervisor, Special Education
- Suzanne Mauldin, Teacher Instructor

Florence City Schools

- Dr. Jimmy Shaw, Superintendent
- Dr. Becky Odell, Director of Special Education

North Alabama Medical Center

- Russell Pigg, Chief Executive Officer
- Michael Howard, Chief Operating Officer
- Ms. Tammie Holt, Education Manager

Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services

- Yolanda Spencer, Alabama Project Search Team Member
- Sibylle Kipp, Counselor
- Tamara Robinson, Field Supervisor

Easter Seals

- Danny Prince, (now retired)
- Jerry Groce, Administrator
- Alan Lesley, Program Coordinator Northwest Alabama
- Penny South, Employment Specialist and Project Search Supervisor

Alabama Department of Mental Health, serving more than 200,000 Alabama residents

The Project Search Story in Brief

Project Search began in the heart and mind of Erin Riehle, then Director of Cincinnati Children's Emergency Department. In 1996, she felt that because the hospital served individuals with developmental disabilities, it would make sense that they should commit to hiring people in this group. Since its inception, Project Search has grown from a single program site to a large and continuously expanding international network of sites.

For more information, contact the Lauderdale County School System, Catherine Esary, Public Relations, 256-760-1300.

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