



# Remove system barriers to expand access and impact: Project SEARCH transition to work model for Ontario's youth with disabilities

## Policy Brief

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### Contacts:

#### Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital:

Carolyn McDougall [cmcdougall@hollandbloorview.ca](mailto:cmcdougall@hollandbloorview.ca) | Laura Bowman [bowman@hollandbloorview.ca](mailto:bowman@hollandbloorview.ca)

#### March of Dimes Canada:

Lesley Smith [lsmith@marchofdimes.ca](mailto:lsmith@marchofdimes.ca) | Jennifer Way [jway@marchofdimes.ca](mailto:jway@marchofdimes.ca)

#### Ontario Disability Employment Network (ODEN):

Amy Widdows [awiddows@odenetwork.com](mailto:awiddows@odenetwork.com) | Ingrid Muschta [imuschta@odenetwork.com](mailto:imuschta@odenetwork.com)

**Holland Bloorview**  
Kids Rehabilitation Hospital

 **MARCH  
OF DIMES  
CANADA** **LA MARCHÉ  
DES DIX SOUS  
DU CANADA**

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## Overview: Opportunity for impact - Project SEARCH model

This brief describes **why** and **how** to **increase access to the evidence-based Project SEARCH transition to work model**. Project SEARCH programs consistently achieve employment for 70%+ of graduates in complex, systematic roles paying above minimum wage.

Since 2021, Ontario's Ministry of Education has encouraged Ontario's school boards to explore the Project SEARCH model for Ontario high school students with disabilities. **As of the 2024/25 school year, there are 19 Project SEARCH programs in Ontario** <sup>[Appendix 1]</sup> and interest continues to grow **but communities struggle to start and sustain this effective program**.

Project SEARCH provides comprehensive workforce development training for students with disabilities and special education needs who are transitioning directly from their final year of high school to work.

It combines resources from both the education and employment sectors, including 1 teacher and 2 skills trainers for each cohort of 10 students. (The number of skills trainers is adjusted if a cohort is smaller than 10, maintaining a ratio of 1 staff for every 3-4 students.)

- A skills trainer <sup>[Appendix 2]</sup> or job coach is a paraprofessional role often filled by an individual with college credentials in developmental services or social services. The skills trainers work alongside employer mentors to teach in-demand technical skills tailored to the local labour market as well as employment-related life skills.
- There is no clear funding support stream for the skills trainer role when the individuals in training are full-time students. This gap limits access to the uniquely effective Project SEARCH model.

Resolving funding challenges so that more Ontario communities can start Project SEARCH programs will:

- Increase the employment outcomes of students with disabilities who are facing significant barriers to employment by more than **2.5x** (or **169%+**) <sup>[see page 6]</sup>
- Expand the labour pool of qualified employees available to Ontario businesses. A 2022 Ontario Chamber of Commerce survey revealed that **~50%** of Ontario businesses **face current and forecasted labour shortages**) <sup>[1]</sup>
- Decrease lifetime per person social assistance costs by **\$127K+** resulting in government cost savings <sup>[2,3]</sup>



**We ask** provincial ministries to engage with us to explore how we can **braid disability and/or employment support** with **education funding** during a final high school year to expand access to Project SEARCH and achieve this impact potential.

## Model targets underserved youth

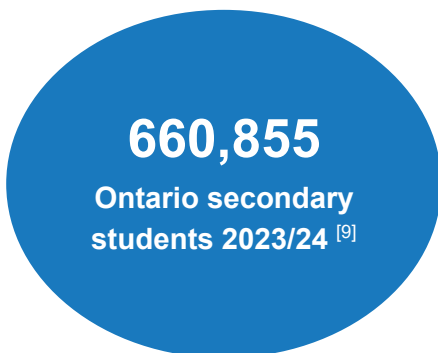
Canadian adults with disabilities have lower employment rates than those without disabilities. The employment rates of individuals with “very severe disabilities,” including developmental disabilities and autism are the lowest, reported at between 26% [5] and 29.9%. [4]

School to work transition programming is essential for **youth with disabilities and special education needs who are not earning credits in high school and will not be continuing to post-secondary for vocational training.**

Due to their learning profile, this group of youth need transition programming like the Project SEARCH model that integrates known best practice elements:

- On the job experience opportunities supported by job coaches
- Direct teaching of technical and employability skills
- Planning for transition out of high school
- Personalized employment preparation and job development with follow-along coaching for employee (youth) and employer. [7,8]

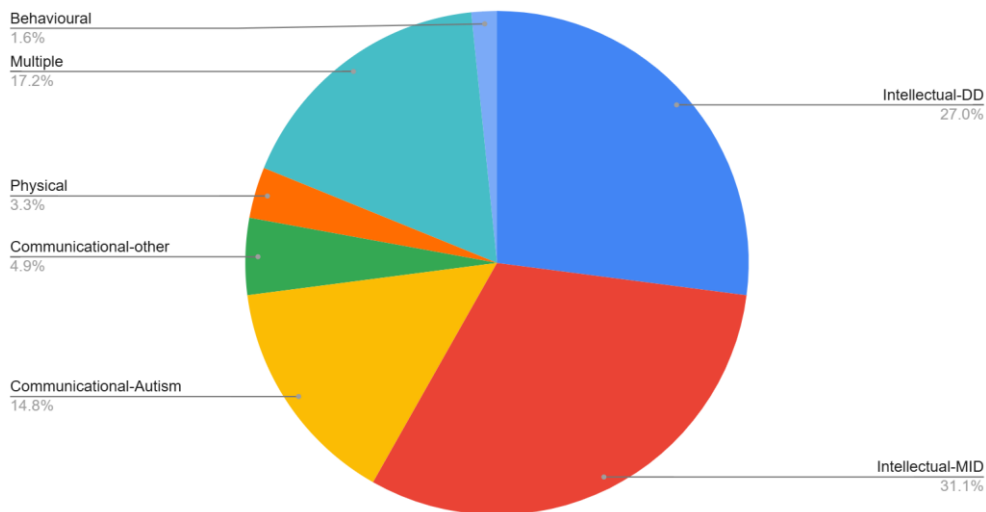
 <b>Employment rates</b>	
<b>2017 Canadian Survey on Disability (CSD):</b> [4]	
<b>77.8%</b>	persons without disability (ages 25-65)
<b>61.8%</b>	Persons with disability but only <b>29.9%</b> of Canadians with developmental disability or autism aged 15-64 [4,5- based on 2022 and 2017 CSD]
<b>2022 Labour Force Survey: (ages 16-64)</b> [6]	
<b>80.1%</b>	persons without disability (ages 25-65)
<b>65.1%</b>	<b>persons with disability – overall</b> <b>50.4%</b> persons with severe disability <b>28.8%</b> persons with very severe disability



\*Greater than 70% of students trained through Project SEARCH worldwide have these exceptionalities

### Project SEARCH 2023/24 exceptionalities (13 sites)

(95 students with 27 reporting more than 1 exceptionality)



## Current systemic barriers for youth with disabilities

Our organizations know that youth with disabilities such as developmental/intellectual disability and autism often:

- Have limited access to experiential learning programming during high school due to a need for 1:1 training or job coaching (which often is not an available resource)
- Cannot benefit from typical youth employment services to gain work experience during high school because resume/interview consultations and light touch job search supports such as job posting boards do not address their personalized job development and job coaching needs
- Have no or little work experience when they graduate high school and may not be considered by employment service agencies to have “job ready” soft skills
- Need a greater intensity/duration of personalized job coaching and job development support than may be available through Employment Ontario service providers following Ontario’s employment services transformation
- Face long wait lists after graduation for access to personalized employment supports through the developmental service agencies (MCCSS funded) <sup>[11]</sup>

**These are issues of equity and access that must be resolved.**

Education standards recommendations under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) target barriers and highlight the importance of transitions navigation support (recommendations 78/79) and access to experiential learning programming (recommendations 89/90) for youth with disabilities. [12]

The Education Technical Sub-Committee that focused on transitions specifically called for expanded access to existing and new experiential learning programming for all students who are transitioning directly from high school to work (recommendations 65,69,71). [13]

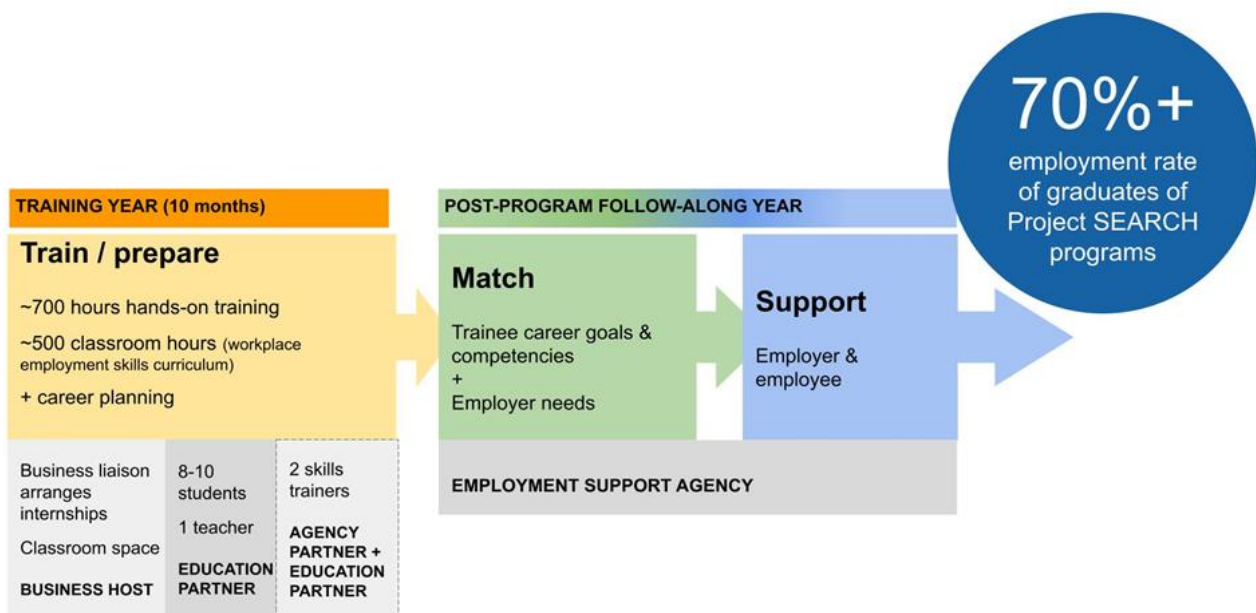


## Model is evidence-based and effective

Project SEARCH is an internationally successful workforce development model that trains young people with disabilities for complex, systematic roles in a wide range of industries so they transition smoothly from school to work [14-16].

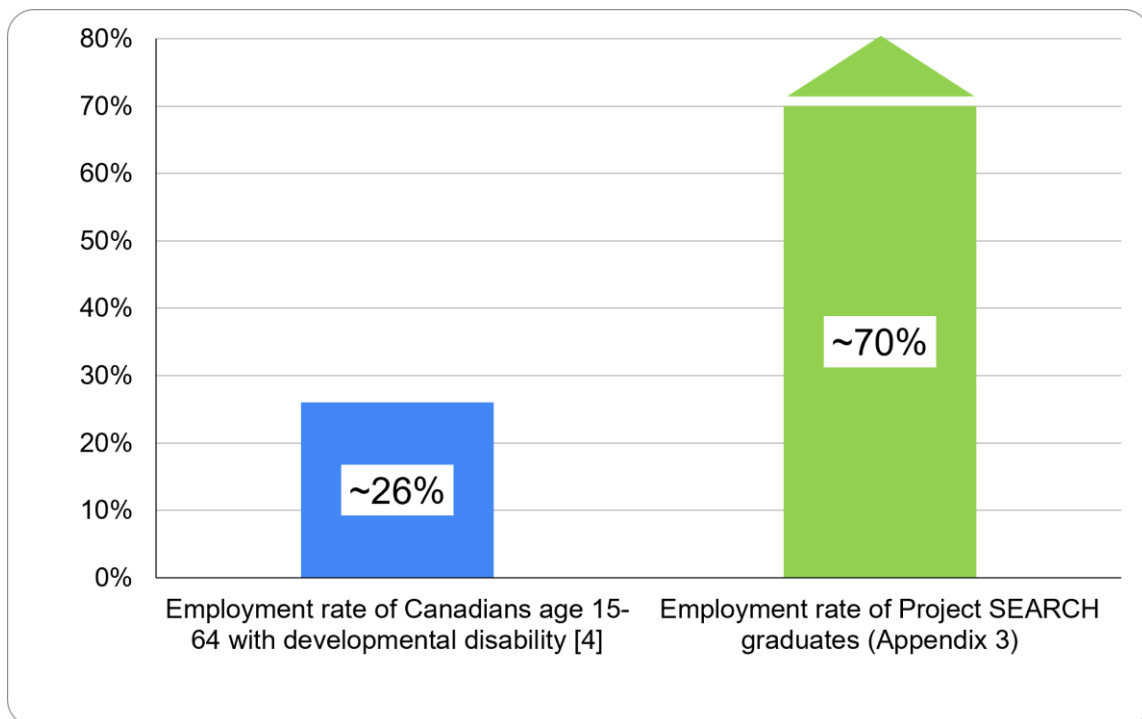
Project SEARCH started at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center (CCHMC) in 1996. There are now more than 750 Project SEARCH sites worldwide including the 19 in Ontario.

The Project SEARCH model combines transition best practice principles. During a 10-month training year, students are fully immersed with a leading employer, known as a “host business”. The students prepare for employment with job skills training through a combination of classroom instruction and hands-on career training. A local employment agency supports graduates and employers to start and maintain employment.



All Project SEARCH sites submit outcome data annually 9 months post-graduation to an international database. Project SEARCH has a rigorous definition of employment and publicly reports its employment outcomes for transparency and accountability.

**In a typical year, ~70% of Project SEARCH graduates find employment.** This is **2.5x higher** than the employment rate of Canadian adults with developmental disabilities and autism (or a 169% increase). In 2022/23, the employment rate for Project SEARCH graduates from all countries was 68.7% and from Canada 67.7%.<sup>[Appendix 3]</sup> Employment quality is reflected in hours of work and average wage – the 2022/23 Project SEARCH Canada data shows an average of 20.88 hours/week and an average wage of \$18.02.



International expert Dr. Paul Wehman and colleagues conducted a randomized clinical trial in the United States in which 73.6% of the treatment (Project SEARCH) group found employment at minimum wage or higher compared to 17% of the control group. At one-year post-graduation, employment treatment group participants worked an average of 21.2 hours per week.<sup>[16]</sup>



Mesfin works at a Toronto teaching hospital as an environmental aide earning more than \$21/hour.

Mesfin trained with Project SEARCH - learning both technical housekeeping skills such as dusting, mopping and waste removal - and employability skills such as how to communicate with supervisors.



[Watch video:](#) Canadian graduates and employers talk describe the Project SEARCH training program and its successful outcomes.

## Model aligns with Ontario disability inclusion strategy

Ontario's Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development has made significant investments to improve employment outcomes for people with disabilities through its Skills Development Fund, however, these investments target job seekers who are no longer in school.

Early intervention to support employment participation for people with disabilities relates to improvement in both the amount of time (number of years) that individuals access and participate in the workforce,<sup>[16,17]</sup> and also their attachment to the workforce.<sup>[18]</sup>

**Project SEARCH is an early intervention strategy that improves transitions out of school and into work, thereby boosting employment outcomes and promoting overall health and wellness across the lifespan - two key principles of the Ministry of Community & Social Services' vision Journey to Belonging: Choice & Inclusion.** This document's "Immediate actions" section calls for the reduction of service barriers through strategic collaboration.

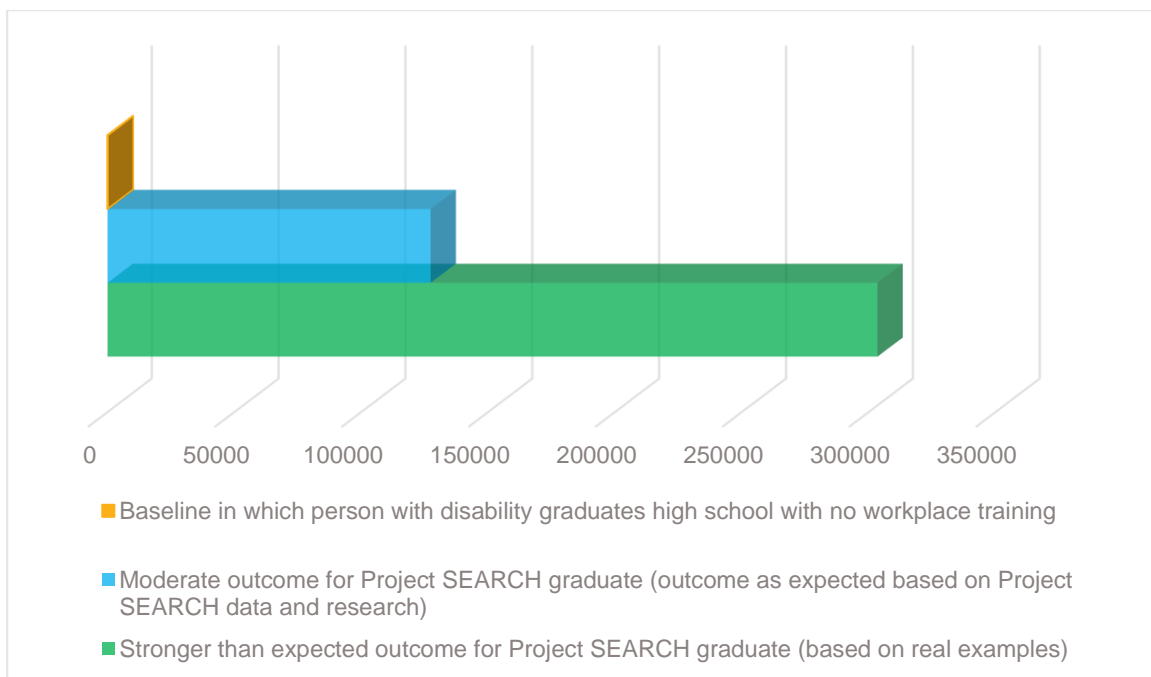
## Model addresses labour needs and results in net system cost savings

Project SEARCH prepares graduates for employment in complex and systematic roles in a range of industry sectors such as: health care and social assistance; accommodations and food service; wholesale and retail trade; transportation and warehousing; information, culture and recreation; and manufacturing<sup>[Appendix 4]</sup> This aligns with current and projected future in-demand occupational roles across Ontario's 5 regions, including those in retail, administration, customer service, cleaning, food preparation, and community service.<sup>[Appendix 4]</sup>

In a recent cost benefit analysis of early public investment in workforce development services in Ontario (compared to no investment), a theoretical lifetime savings to government was calculated per individual participating in Project SEARCH programs in Ontario.<sup>[2-3]</sup> Government savings were mainly calculated based on income tax paid and social service payments not paid based on individuals'

employed status. We explored the lifetime savings based on 'moderate outcomes' and 'strong outcomes'. Moderate outcomes were projected using Project SEARCH's standards based on outcome and research evidence that graduates obtain employment at 16 hours/week at minimum wage.

Based on these parameters, **a public investment of \$16,000 per high school student to cover the cost of 1 year of skills trainers** [see next section] **would realize an average government savings of at least \$127,338 per individual over their lifetime**, or 696% return (see blue in the below figure). That is compared to projected employment outcomes of a person with a similar disability who graduates high school with no workplace training (see yellow in the graphic below representing baseline or \$0 return). Strong outcomes (see green bar in the below figure) were developed based on the better-than-expected student outcomes seen in our own programs, which include higher wages and more hours per week than the minimum Project SEARCH expectation.



For an annual cohort of 100 students, with an investment of \$16,000 per student or \$1,600,000 for the whole cohort could result in net lifetime benefit to government of:

- Moderate outcome: \$8,913,694
- Strong outcome \$21,242,760

(assuming 70% of the 100 graduating students achieve employment).

This modelling does not take into account additional individual benefits of employment such as social inclusion and overall health and wellbeing. It also does not account for additional impacts on families (e.g., enhanced ability for caregivers to work) or employers (productivity enhancements stemming from greater workforce diversity and inclusion). These additional benefits might increase the projected societal impact.



A recent Scotiabank analysis underscores the potential macroeconomic impact of investment that leads to increased employment rates of individuals with disabilities.<sup>[19]</sup> Evidence shows that the benefits of increased workforce attachment for individuals with disabilities to the taxpaying public include decreased funds spent on social programming and decreased funds on social services (e.g., disability support funding, housing, etc.), and increased revenue from income taxes paid on salary.<sup>[20-22]</sup>

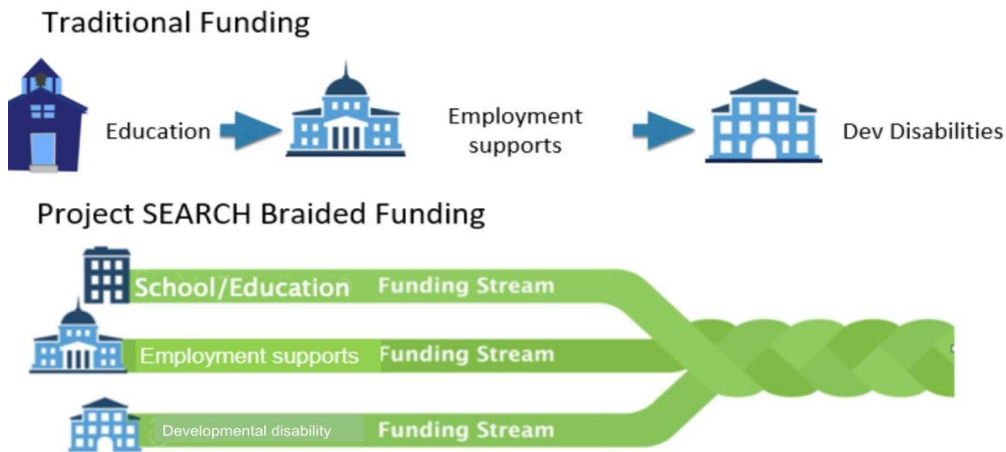
## Model ready to scale if Ontario unlocks funding formula

For a Project SEARCH site that trains cohorts of 10 students at a time, there is a staff complement of 1 teacher and 2 skills trainers. In Ontario, schools assign a teacher to Project SEARCH as is typical for a special education class - shown as an in-kind cost in this sample operating budget.

Project SEARCH site budget	Additional costs applicable to each Project SEARCH site	Costs covered by education and host business partners	Notes
Skills trainers (2.0 FTE)	\$134,316	\$0	Calculated at \$28/hour, 37.5 hours/week, 12 months + 23% MERCs
Management oversight for skills trainers (~0.2 FTE)	\$21,587	\$0	(estimated) Employment agency partner
Misc expenses for skills trainers	\$2,500	\$0	Cell phone, computer, mileage if applicable
Teacher (1.0 FTE)	\$0	\$110,000	(estimated) No variable cost - students either in regular class or Project SEARCH.
Management oversight for teacher (~0.1 FTE)	\$0	\$17,270	(estimated) School board covers
Misc expenses for teacher and/or classroom	\$2,500	\$0	Cell phone, computer, mileage if applicable, classroom supplies
Marketing/communication costs	\$800	\$0	
Business Liaison (0.2 FTE)	\$0	\$21,587	(estimated) Host business assigns role to existing staff (in kind)
Physical space in business (dedicated classroom)	\$0	\$16,000	(estimated) Host business covers
Steering Committee	\$0	\$0	Site partner organizations cover
Employment support services after training year	\$0	\$0	No variable cost - graduates are employment ready job seekers
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$161,703</b>	<b>\$164,857</b>	
<b>Cost per student</b>	<b>\$16,170</b>		

In Ontario, employment supports and developmental disability supports are delivered after a student exits the education system (see “traditional funding” illustration in diagram). There is **therefore currently no consistent mechanism for funding the skills trainer role** at a cost of ~ \$16,000 per student. This makes it very challenging for communities to start and sustain Project SEARCH programs and limits access. <sup>[Appendix 5]</sup>

In the US and UK, Project SEARCH is a regional workforce development strategy. **Increasing access across a region typically requires alignment or “braiding” of funding - rather than new investment.** This diagram shows how funding from the education, employment and developmental disability sectors should combine during the Project SEARCH training year (final year of high school) to provide an effective amount and duration of support and maximize impact.<sup>[23]</sup>



If a solution can be identified to fund the skills trainer role at a cost of ~\$16,000 per student, then access could be increased across Ontario by growing the number of sites. Projections are illustrated below. Over 5 years, this could deliver a net cost-benefit of \$88 million.

	Reference year 2024/25 (actuals)	2025/26 (projections)	2026/27 (projections)	2027/28 (projections)	2028/29 (projections)	2029/30 (projections)	Total funding required (5 years)
<b># sites</b> (growth to 25/26 actual, projected up to 4 new sites/year)	19	27	31	35	39	43	
<b># students</b> (projections based on 2024/25 median=7)	125	189	217	245	273	301	
<b>Estimated costs</b> for 1/2 sites requiring 1 skills trainer for cohort size 6 students or less (\$80,000)	n/a	\$1,080,000	\$1,240,000	\$1,400,000	\$1,560,000	\$1,720,000	
<b>Estimated costs</b> for 1/2 sites requiring 2 skills trainers for cohort of 7-10 students (\$160,000)	n/a	\$2,160,000	\$2,480,000	\$2,800,000	\$3,120,000	\$3,440,000	
<b>Total cost/year</b>	n/a	\$3,240,000	\$3,720,000	\$4,200,000	\$4,680,000	\$5,160,000	\$21,000,000
<b>Projected lifetime government cost savings</b> based on 70% graduates obtaining expected employment outcomes and cost benefit analysis	\$11,142,075	\$16,846,817	\$19,342,642	\$21,838,467	\$24,334,292	\$26,830,117	\$109,192,335
<b>Net benefit (cost savings)</b>		\$13,606,817	\$15,622,642	\$17,638,467	\$19,654,292	\$21,670,117	\$88,192,335

## Action steps

We request that the Ministries of:

- Children, Community & Social Services
- Labour, Immigration, Training & Skills Development
- Education
- Seniors & Accessibility

assign senior level staff to participate in discussions to determine how to **braid disability and/or employment support with education funding** during a final high school year so there is a clear, sustainable mechanism to fund skills trainers for a Project SEARCH program for any Ontario community that is operating a Project SEARCH site now or wishes to implement this effective model.

Funding may be in the form of an identified allocation per student (approximately \$16,000/student) or a mechanism whereby Project SEARCH sites can access annual funding.

Discussions will focus on adjustments to policies, procedures and systems and identification of multiple potential funding options. An inter-ministerial combination of funding streams may be involved.

**Examples** of such adjustments might include:

- **Waitlist prioritization:** Students accepted to a Project SEARCH program who are already on the Developmental Services Ontario (DSO) waitlist are prioritized for at least 19 months of employment participation support that begins when they start the project SEARCH program (10-month training year + 9 months of post-graduation employment support) so they never need to access day program supports.
- **Special Passport allocation:** Students accepted to a Project SEARCH program who are already approved for DSO support and Passport funding access a special one-time enhanced Passport allocation which is then dedicated to funding their portion of the cost of a skills trainer at their Project SEARCH site. (Student's base Passport allocation would remain available for them to direct their community participation support.)
- **Eligibility and payment schedule adjustment:** Students of Project SEARCH could simultaneously be students of the school board and Stream C clients of Employment Ontario funded employment services if there could be an adjusted employment outcome measurement timeframe and payment schedule.

## Support for Project SEARCH

“Project Search was invaluable in connecting Hannah and her caregiver (myself) to services. Without Project Search I believe Hannah may have volunteered in the community but I do not believe she would have received paying employment. Not only would this impact Hannah’s emotional well being and mental health but also her financial well being. With limited financial resources and without parent support Hannah would ultimately live in poverty.”

***Angie Sirkka, Parent of Project SEARCH Sudbury graduate***

“Project SEARCH is an initiative that challenges outdated barriers and aims to help create a more inclusive society and we are proud to be part of this partnership.”

***Mark Hartman, Interim CEO for Health Sciences North***

“Ontario Health North East and North West has been working in collaboration with the March of Dimes Canada to promote Project SEARCH across our northern communities. Project SEARCH has proven to be successful at Health Sciences North in Sudbury, Ontario, where they are currently experiencing staffing shortages. We understand the value of improving connections, increasing peer support and assisting with transition to increase access to employment for youth with disabilities. We will be working in partnership with the March of Dimes to share knowledge regarding this program, with a goal of providing communities with a workforce solution to assist with staffing shortages across the North East and North West Regions of Ontario.”

***Ontario Health October 30, 2023***

“Community Living Oakville has been a Project SEARCH partner with Halton Healthcare and Halton District School Board since 2019. Project SEARCH students graduate the program with employable and transferable skills which better prepares them for future employment. The hospital has hired many graduates of the training program and other Community Living Oakville supported candidates as well. We now have a strong relationship between our organizations to meet the hospital’s needs for talent and benefit our job seekers.”

***Andrea Lee, (formerly) Manager, XPlore Employment, Community Living Oakville***

“Toronto District School Board partners with Community Living Toronto and host businesses UHN-Toronto Rehab and Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital to offer Project SEARCH to our students. In addition to the strong student employment outcomes for the graduates of the program, our collaboration has sparked other curriculum initiatives to drive employment readiness and student success across other parts of our system.”

***Wendy Terro, (formerly) Centrally Assigned Principal, Special Education & Inclusion, Instructional Innovation and Equitable Outcomes, Toronto District School Board***

“ United Way Greater Toronto has supported Project Search Toronto since its inception because we know the importance of empowering youth. This program, providing vital workforce development interventions, enables youth to unlock their full potential. Through our partnership with Community Living Toronto, TDSB, Holland Bloorview and UHN, we have witnessed the inspiring success of the program in facilitating the transition of youth who have developmental or intellectual disabilities into meaningful and fulfilling employment opportunities.”

**Daniele Zanotti, President & CEO, United Way Greater Toronto**

## About the authoring organizations

Project SEARCH’s goal is high-quality competitive, integrated employment for individuals with disabilities. Our organizations support Project SEARCH because this model achieves:

- employment at a living wage or higher directly impacting individuals’ income, social connectedness, health and wellbeing;
- employment equity (just access to meaningful employment as envisioned in the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act);
- economic gains (supporting businesses in accessing high quality employees with demonstrated benefits to their workforces); and
- societal gains (increased individual contributions to income tax and decreased investment in income support programs).

**Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital** believes in creating a world where all youth and children belong. We are the only children’s rehabilitation hospital in Canada focused on combining world-class care, transformational research, and academic leadership in child and youth rehabilitation and disability. **Holland Bloorview is guided by a goal to lead and model social change. Holland Bloorview acts as a coordinating organization for Project SEARCH in Canada**, linking existing Project SEARCH sites in a community of practice, helping new communities explore the Project SEARCH model and engaging in awareness building and knowledge translation initiatives.

The **Ontario Disability Employment Network (ODEN)** is a province-wide organization that brings together businesses and employment service providers to increase employment opportunities for job seekers who have a disability. **ODEN introduced Project SEARCH to Ontario in 2017 and undertakes communications activities to promote spread and sustainability of this model.**

**March of Dimes Canada** is a leading national charity committed to championing equity, empowering ability, and creating real change that will help the more than six million people living with disabilities across the country unlock the richness of their lives. We serve, connect, and empower people living with disabilities to participate fully in life— on their own terms. Our work is grounded in the voices of the people we serve, built on a foundation of service, and backed by a 70-year history of success. Purpose: Champion equity. Empower ability. Vision: An inclusive, barrier-free society for people with disabilities. Mission: To be Canada’s leading service provider, resource and advocate, empowering people with disabilities to live and thrive in communities nationwide. **March of Dimes provides skills training and employment support services for several current Project SEARCH sites in Ontario.**

## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Project SEARCH site/partner listing

Start year	Business partner	School board	Employment agency partner
2011	Government of Manitoba/Manitoba Hydro	All local school boards	SCE LifeWorks
2016	Health Sciences Centre (Winnipeg Manitoba)		
2019	Halton Healthcare	Halton District School Board	Community Living Oakville
2019	University Health Network & Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital	Toronto District School Board	Community Living Toronto
2020	Ron Joyce Children's Health Centre (site host as of 2023)	Hamilton Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB) (2020-2022 site host as well as education partner)	March of Dimes Canada
2021	Halton Healthcare	Halton Catholic District School Board	Community Living North Halton
2022	Queen Elizabeth Hospital (Charlottetown, PEI)		TR Employ
2022	Hamilton YMCA/YWCA	HWDSB	March of Dimes Canada
2022	St. Joseph's Lifecare Centre	Grand Erie District School Board	Community Living Brant
2022	St. Mary's Hospital	Waterloo Catholic District School Board	KW Habilitation
2022	St. Joseph's Healthcare	Thames Valley District School Board	March of Dimes Canada (formerly Hutton House)
2022	Health Sciences North	Rainbow District School Board	March of Dimes Canada
2023	Niagara Health	CSC Mon Avenir	March of Dimes Canada
2023	Norfolk County Hospital	Grand Erie District School Board	Norfolk Association for Community Living
2023	Regional Municipality of Durham	Durham Catholic District School Board	Abilities Centre
2023	Sault Area Hospital	Algoma District School Board	Community Living Algoma

Start year	Business partner	School board	Employment agency partner
2024	University of Guelph	Wellington Catholic DSB with Upper Grand DSB	March of Dimes Canada
2024	YMCA of Three Rivers Guelph	Upper Grand DSB	March of Dimes Canada
2024	Jerry McCaw Family Centre YMCA	St. Clair Catholic DSB	Goodwill Industries
2024	Hamilton Wentworth DSB Education Centre	Hamilton Wentworth DSB	March of Dimes Canada
2024	Cambridge Memorial Hospital	Waterloo Catholic DSB	KW Habilitation
2024	City of Greater Sudbury Pioneer Manor	Rainbow District School Board	March of Dimes

## Appendix 2: Skills trainer role

The Project SEARCH skills trainers work with the Project SEARCH teacher and in collaboration with employer (host business) mentors to teach in-demand technical skills tailored to the local labour market as well as employment-related life skills.

Across the 3 layered internships during the Project SEARCH training year, skills trainers:

- Learn skills, routines, standards alongside the student in the role/internship to which the student is matched based on their interests and strengths (using a functional abilities assessment tool)
- Apply task/environment/person observation/analysis and systematic teaching/learning strategies to promote student skill acquisition and progress toward meeting workplace behaviour, quality and quantity standards
- Consult about accommodations if needed
- Model communication and feedback strategies to student and workplace managers/mentors
- Fade as student gains independence and manager/mentors gain confidence in their training and supervision techniques but re-engage regularly to support additional learning of new skills
- Monitor student performance on the job and integrate with program curriculum activities and employment/career planning together with the Project SEARCH teacher

Overall the skills trainers support and drive student progress and readiness to be independent at work in complex, systematic roles.

A skills trainer or job coach is a paraprofessional role often filled by an individual with college credentials in developmental services or social services.

## Appendix 3: Project SEARCH multi-year<sup>2</sup> outcomes

	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22		2022/23	
	All countries	All countries	All countries	All countries	Canada (6 sites)	All countries	Canada (12 sites)
# Completed	3868	4011	3049	3551	47	3935	96
# Employed	2907	2177	2233	2614	40	2703	65
% Employed (all jobs)	75.2%	54.4%	73.2%	73.6%	85.1%	68.7%	67.7%
Average wage/hour (Canada only)					\$15.80		\$18.02
% Employed (meeting PS criteria <sup>1</sup> )	65.2%	46.1%	63.6%	67.0%	70.2%	60.7%	52.1%

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup>Project SEARCH definition/criteria for employment:

- Competitive employment in an integrated setting (co-workers with and without disabilities)
- Year-round, non-seasonal employment
- 16 hours a week or more
- Minimum wage or higher

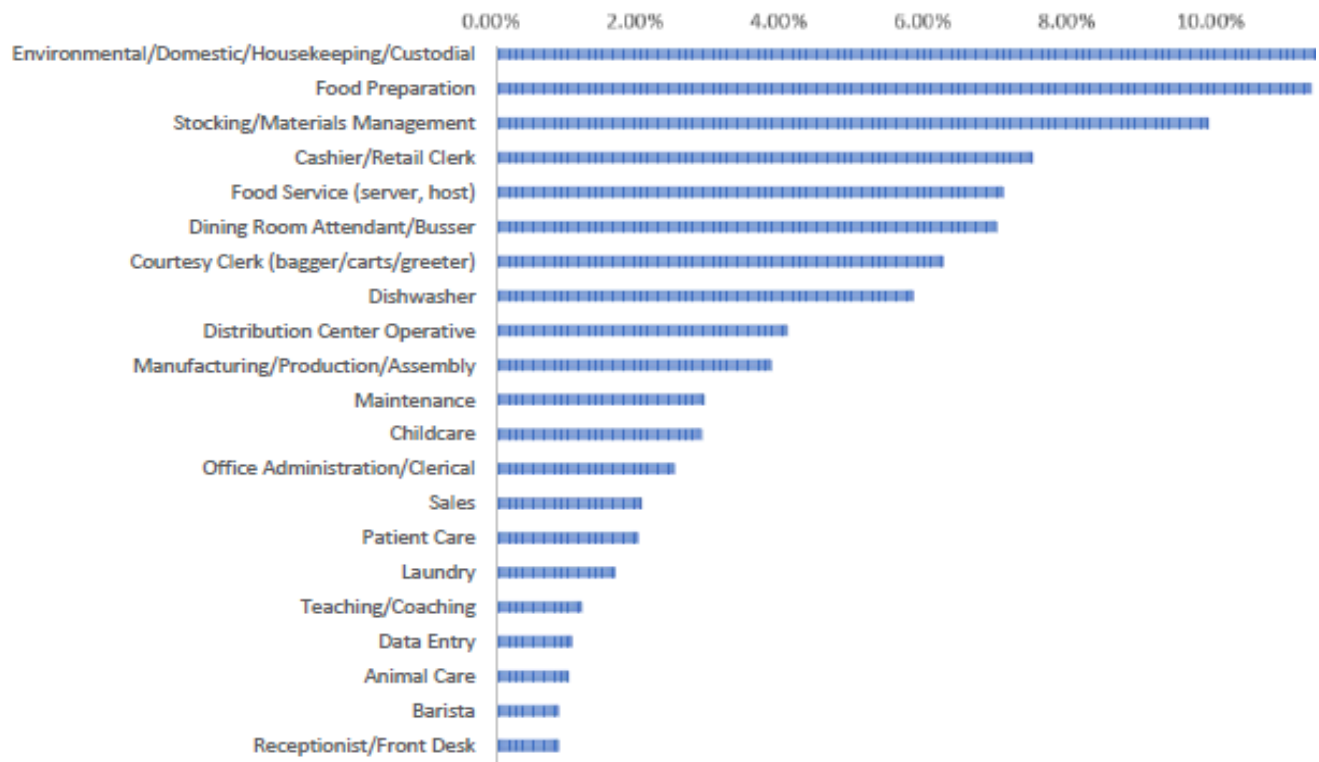
<sup>2</sup>Data from 2018 through 2022: Before COVID, employment outcomes were approximately 75% overall (meeting Project SEARCH criteria 67-70%). There was a decrease in 2020 for graduates who completed Project SEARCH at the start of the COVID pandemic. In 2021 and 2022, we saw a return to near pre-pandemic rates of employment. Based on outcome reporting by 93-98% of Project SEARCH program sites. 2022/23 data: 23% of interns graduated from international programs (outside US, majority DFN UK) and outcomes were lower for international programs. US sites' outcomes for 2022/23 were similar to 2021/22.



## Appendix 4: Project SEARCH job type outcomes

Figure 1 shows the most common job types attained by Project SEARCH 2022 graduates worldwide (as reported March 2023). Project SEARCH job/industry outcomes align closely with Ontario's labour market demands.

**Figure 1: Top 21 Job Types**



## Ontario's Labour Market by Region: Current and Projected (5-year) In-Demand Jobs

Jobs currently in demand in this region					
	GTA	Central	Northern	Eastern	Southwest
Retail salesperson	x	x	x		x
Customer and information service reps		x	x	x	x
Specialized cleaners			x		
Jobs in future demand in this region					
	GTA	Central	Northern	Eastern	Southwest
Cooks	x				
Dry cleaning and laundry related	x	x		x	
Medical administrative assistants		x			x

Source: <https://www.services.labour.gov.on.ca/labourmarket/regions.xhtml?lang=en>

## Appendix 5: No consistent mechanism for funding skills trainer role(s) - 19 Ontario Project SEARCH sites in 2024/25

Skills trainers are currently funded in different ways by each Project SEARCH program. Many sites access grants and donations. The time-limited nature of such funding sources requires perpetual resource use to secure continued funding and this method limits staff retention and quality of programming - with ultimate impacts on program sustainability and outcomes.

# sites	Funding mechanism for skills trainers	Site names	Challenges
4.66	Donations/grants to employment agency	Sudbury HSN   City of Sudbury   University of Guelph   Niagara Health   UHN/Holland Bloorview (66%)	Precarious funding, often short-term, high administrative burden
6.5	Employment agency operating funds / grants	St. Mary's Hospital Kitchener   Cambridge Memorial Hospital   Norfolk General Hospital   St. Joseph's Lifecare Brantford   Sault Area Hospital   Region of Durham (50%)   YMCA Sarnia	6 of the 7 sites fully or partially funding this way are reporting increasing struggle to sustain
5.83	School board funding	HWDSB: 1-YMCA/YWCA, 2-Hamilton Health Sciences/Ron Joyce 3-HWDSB Education Centre   St. Joseph's Healthcare London (TVDSB)   Region of Durham (DCDSB) (50%)   Halton Healthcare (Oakville Trafalgar) (HDSB)   Halton Healthcare (Milton Hospital) (HCDSB)   UHN/Holland Bloorview (TDSB) (33%)   YMCA Three Rivers Guelph (UGDSB)	Does not braid education & employment expertise to optimize outcomes  Most funding only 1 skills trainer position in addition to teacher – limits total class size  Sustainability concerns (see below)
2.0	Purchased service arrangement between school board and agency		Sustainability concerns due to deficits across many boards

“ Since hiring skills trainers last summer we have already had 2 staff turnover. It has been a challenge to attract and retain skilled candidates with the funding we currently have for skills trainers (\$21-\$23/hour).”

“ It will be difficult to expand Project SEARCH without funding to support the salaries. Grant funders are not seeing the greater impact of Project SEARCH as it supports a small number of interns. As a result, grant applications remain unsuccessful.”

“ ...It is hard to ensure proper staffing. Grant writing is time consuming and is not consistent.”

“ Funding has always been a struggle.”

“ When we accept a student to the Project SEARCH training program if we could bring them off the DSO supported employment waitlist at the same time we could fund the skills trainer, train and support and achieve strong employment outcomes.”

## **Appendix 6: Impact of Employment Ontario transformation on Project SEARCH**

All employment services that were ODSP Employment Supports (ODSP ES) are now in the integrated Employment Ontario (EO) system. In each catchment area, the way funding is being delivered is different depending on who the service system manager (SSM) is. However, consistently across the province ODEN hears that there is a higher number of targets to be reached for the same number of dollars which impacts capacity to serve individuals with significant disabilities who may need pre-employment training and/or enhanced personalization in job development and maintenance. Job seekers' outcomes only qualify for outcome payments (performance-based funding) if the individual is working 20+ hours every week consistently throughout the reporting periods and stream C payments are lower than they were in the ODSP ES model. For these reasons, overall agency operational funding is reduced.

### Project SEARCH 10-month training program:

No agencies are directly funding Project SEARCH skills trainers during the 10-month transition to work training period via EO.

However, agencies who are participating in Project SEARCH and assigning a skills trainer report revenue constraints as described above and a decreased flexibility to participate in activities that do not directly immediately generate employment outcomes and revenue (pre-employment activities generally, although all acknowledge that pre-employment opportunities are often essential in connecting individuals with significant disabilities to the labour market).

Employment agencies who are part of Project SEARCH and part of EO model and where EO transformation is fully operational are reporting the most challenge with funding skills trainers for the 10-month Project SEARCH training program (e.g., Hamilton, Halton, Kitchener).

### Follow-along support after graduation from Project SEARCH 10-month training program:

Many employment agencies are reporting challenges appropriately supporting employee/employer after hiring (job maintenance) which is very important for individuals with significant disabilities such as those graduating from Project SEARCH who may need support when: new tasks assigned, new training required, staff/mentor/manager turnover, performance challenges, etc.

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