MICHIGAN ASSOCIATION OF ADMINISTRATORS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

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Michigan Workforce Program with High Employment Success Faces Critical Funding Decision

LANSING, Michigan — Project SEARCH Michigan, a nationally recognized school-to-work transition program serving students with intellectual and developmental disabilities and a program supported by the Michigan Association of Administrators of Special Education (MAASE), is facing a critical funding decision as the state finalizes its FY 2027 budget. Continued support through Section 99aa of the School Aid Fund will determine whether Project SEARCH Michigan can maintain and expand access for students across the state.

Project SEARCH Michigan prepares students for competitive integrated employment through immersive internships in real business environments.In Michigan, the program has achieved an average of 85% employment success rate, demonstrating strong and consistent outcomes.

“This is a program that is already working,” said Abby Cypher, Executive Director of MAASE. “We are not talking about building something new. We are talking about protecting a proven model that delivers real results for students and has strengthened Michigan’s workforce for years.”

“Kent ISD’s Project SEARCH Employment Program consistently achieves 100% employment outcomes”, said Kirsten Myers, MAASE President and Assistant Superintendent of Student Services for Kent ISD. “This means students are working and earning wages in their communities. Their success is driven by strong partnerships, including our collaboration with Corewell Health West, which provides meaningful relationships and a wide range of real-world employment opportunities that prepare students for sustained, competitive employment.”

Section 99aa funding supports Project SEARCH Michigan sites across the state, enabling partnerships between schools, employers, and service providers. These partnerships provide students with hands-on workplace experience and structured support that leads directly to employment.

Without continued funding, expansion into new districts may stop and existing programs may face capacity limits, reducing access for students who are ready for employment. Advocates warn this would also weaken a workforce pipeline that employers increasingly rely on.

“Employers are telling us they need reliable, trained workers,” Cypher added. “Project SEARCH Michigan meets that need while creating real opportunities for students. Reducing access would impact both workforce development and economic growth.”

Families report increased independence and confidence for students, while employers benefit from motivated employees prepared for workplace expectations. Educators emphasize that Project SEARCH Michigan fills a critical gap by providing real-world, immersive work experiences.

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"We want adults with disabilities to have agency in shaping their future and the opportunity to achieve and sustain meaningful employment, contributing to their community and the world around them in ways that reflect what other adults are doing", Myers said. Remaining in a classroom until aging out at 26 is not always appropriate, especially when students demonstrate readiness for employment. Project SEARCH helps guide this transition by building the necessary skills and providing the support needed to move students toward meaningful, sustained employment."

As Michigan enters final budget negotiations, advocates are urging legislators to preserve and strengthen Section 99aa funding to ensure continued access and expansion of Project SEARCH Michigan programs statewide.

"This moment matters," Cypher said. "Decisions made in the coming weeks will determine whether more students gain access to employment pathways or whether those opportunities are reduced. We are asking policymakers to protect what is already working. Not to mention, when we invest in Project SEARCH, the state saves millions over time because students leave school and enter the workforce. That is easy math."

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About Project SEARCH Michigan

Project SEARCH employment programs are a school-to-work program that prepares young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities for competitive integrated employment through immersive internships in real business settings. The program is delivered through partnerships between schools, employers, and community organizations across the state.

In Michigan, Project SEARCH has achieved on average a 85% employment success rate for participants and is one of the leading states in the nation.

To learn more about Project Search Michigan, visit: https://www.maase.org/project-search

About MAASE

The Michigan Association of Administrators of Special Education (MAASE) is a statewide professional organization representing leaders in special education administration. MAASE supports equitable, high-quality educational opportunities for students with disabilities and advances programs that strengthen the connection between education and employment outcomes. They work in partnership with Ingham Intermediate School District to support this grant. To learn more about MAASE, visit: https://www.maase.org/

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