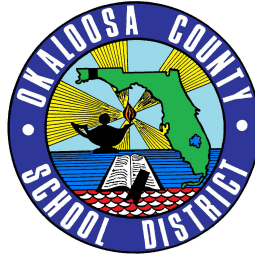


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NEWS RELEASE

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Okaloosa County School District's Project SEARCH Program Earns Statewide and Global Recognition; 10 Interns Enrolled for Upcoming School Year

The Okaloosa County School District (OCSD) is proud to announce that its Project SEARCH program at the Hilton Garden Inn Fort Walton Beach has received the Florida Project SEARCH Excellent Outcome Award for achieving outstanding employment outcomes for its 2024-2025 cohort. Presented during the Florida Project SEARCH Annual Conference, the Excellent Outcome Award recognizes Project SEARCH sites that achieve employment outcomes between 77% and 99% for graduating participants. Florida currently has 45 active Project SEARCH sites across 38 cities, and the Hilton Garden Inn Fort Walton Beach program was one of only five sites statewide to receive this prestigious recognition. In addition to the statewide honor, this achievement represents a significant global accomplishment. Project SEARCH has approximately 800 sites worldwide, and the Hilton Garden Inn Fort Walton Beach program was one of only 166 selected to receive an Excellent Outcome Award, placing it among the top 21% of Project SEARCH sites internationally.

Project SEARCH is a nationally recognized high school transition program that prepares young adults with disabilities for competitive, integrated employment through workplace immersion, career exploration, and hands-on job training. Designed for students ages 18-21 who have completed their high school credits and deferred their diplomas, the program combines classroom instruction with real-world work experiences through strong partnerships with local businesses. "This recognition is a reflection of the incredible commitment of our students, instructors, employment specialists, and our valued partners at Innisfree Hotels," said Kathy Ard, Director of Exceptional Student Education for the Okaloosa County School District. "Project SEARCH provides our students with the confidence, skills, and real-world experiences they need to thrive in the workforce. Being recognized as one of only five programs in Florida and among the top Project SEARCH sites worldwide to earn this award speaks to the dedication of everyone involved and the life-changing impact this partnership continues to have."

The partnership between the Okaloosa County School District and Innisfree Hotels has become a model for preparing students for meaningful employment while demonstrating the value of inclusive workforce opportunities. "This statewide and global recognition highlights the outstanding work taking place through our Project SEARCH partnership," said Superintendent Marcus Chambers. "Our students continue to demonstrate what is possible when they are provided with meaningful opportunities, exceptional support, and dedicated community partners. We are incredibly grateful to Innisfree Hotels for investing in our students and helping them develop the skills needed for lifelong success. This accomplishment is a reflection of the commitment and collaboration of everyone involved."

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The recognition follows another successful year for OCSD's Project SEARCH program, which celebrated five graduates in May after they completed a year of intensive workplace training and career development. Looking ahead, ten interns are enrolled for the upcoming school year, continuing the program's mission of preparing young adults with disabilities for successful, competitive employment and greater independence.

Through its continued partnership with Innisfree Hotels, the Okaloosa County School District remains committed to expanding opportunities for students and creating pathways that empower every learner to succeed beyond the classroom.



(L to R: Bev Wilson/OCSD Instructor, Carly Detlefsen/Program Specialist, Project Search, Lisa Bloodworth/Sr. Director of Transition and Support Services, Global Connections to Employment, Mei Lanie Bilbow/Employment Transition Specialist, Global Connections to Employment, and Vlady Fierro/Employment Transition Specialist, Global Connections to Employment)

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