

Berrien RESA expands internship program for students with disabilities

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BERRIEN SPRINGS — Rising demand is prompting the Berrien Regional Education Service Agency to expand an internship program for students with disabilities who want to work.

Four more departments at Lakeland Health are asking to participate in the Project SEARCH program, and discussions are underway with Lake Michigan College about offering it there also, Berrien RESA Superintendent Kevin Ivers said Friday.

“For students with disabilities making that transition from education to going to work, it could be

the best thing that I’ve ever seen happen,” he said.

Project SEARCH began last year with seven student interns working in eight departments at Lakeland, Ivers said.

“The Lakeland employees see the work ethic of these young adults,” he said. “They’re very focused and driven to be successful, and that makes the hospital see the caliber of employee they’re receiving. And they’re just very impressed with that.”

Lakeland has since hired three of the original seven interns and may hire two more this summer.

The program is a school year internship for students with disabilities aged 18 to 26 looking to get a job, as

Ivers noted in a report to the board.

“The goal is to acquire competitive, transferable and marketable skills that will allow the students to sustain employment within Lakeland Health or other companies in the area,” he said.

Students also learn life skills outside the hospital, such as attending a job fair at LMC, getting a driver’s license and using public transportation, he added.

The district is looking at nine interns for next year’s program, which it is operating with Lakeland, the Bureau of Services for Blind Persons, Disability Network of Southwest Michigan, Michigan Rehabilitative Services and the

Riverwood Center, Ivers said.

Project SEARCH distinguishes itself from other programs through “partnerships and the people who are willing to reach out and try something different they haven’t done before,” Ivers said.

LMC definitely could serve as a second major site for the program, though many details still need working out, Ivers said.

“Obviously, we’ve had a transition in leadership there, so we need to get (new president) Dr. (Trevor) Kubtažke up to speed with what we’re doing,” he said.

The board also hired Alyssa Barkovich of Lawton as a new teacher for

Lighthouse Education Center’s autistic impaired (autism spectrum disorder) program.

“She’s a replacement (hire), but this has been an open position for a long time, and we’ve finally been able to find someone to fill it,” Ivers said. “This has been open for the whole school year.”

Barkovich’s hiring exemplifies the difficulties in filling an extremely specialized position. According to Ivers, it comes down to numbers since autistic impaired is the fastest-growing special education category.

A count taken on Oct. 5, 2016 showed 3,162 special education students county-wide.

About 7 percent, or 209

students, qualified as autistic impaired compared to 203 (6.7 percent) for 2015, and 183 (6 percent) for 2013, figures show.

“That disability area is probably the most in demand,” Ivers said.

Ivers also reminded board members of the annual biennial election set for 5:30 p.m. Monday, June 5, at the district’s administrative headquarters, 711 St. Joseph St., Berrien Springs.

Treasurer Linda Holt and Trustee J. Allene Smith are vying for two new six-year terms.

Local school boards must pass resolutions to name a representative and identify the candidate its local representative must vote for on the first ballot, Ivers said.