

State awards CSIU a \$3.5M grant

Funding will go toward student mental health programs

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MILTON — The Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit was awarded a \$3.5 million grant to address the increasing needs of student mental health

in its five-county service region.

The grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) is for over four years. Through the work of Project AWARE IMPACT (Improving

Mental health Practices Across Communities Together), CSIU will partner with the Pennsylvania Department of Education, the Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, The McDowell Institute at Bloomsburg's campus of the Common-

wealth University, Geisinger's Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Health (the largest sub-grantee), and community resource agencies to create sustainable infrastructures of support to address the growing mental health needs of stu-

dents and staffing shortages in school-based mental health.

"Everyone is talking about the mental health crisis with our children today because we can see it, post-COVID, but I don't think we have even scratched the surface of the issue," said Julie Petrin, the director of Behavioral Health Support Services who will oversee this

grant. "This crisis was building before COVID and it is just more obvious now. Giving our communities, schools and especially our students the tools to address the stress and trauma in their lives is probably the most important work I will do in my career in education."

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Petrin said she hears educators, parents and students all asking for help and seeking resources.

“This grant will provide the system, the tools, the training and the knowledge to address what is happening to our children,” she said. “If we can make mental health as important as physical health and decrease the stigma associated with it, I think we change trajectories for the future.”

CSIU Chief Outreach Officer Dr. Bernadette Boerckel said behavioral and mental health concerns have been significantly impacting students in the 17 school districts and three Career and Technical Centers served by CSIU since pre-pandemic and student needs have only been exacerbated by the ripple effects of isolation, loss, and changes in learning modalities throughout COVID-19.

To meet this challenging goal, the Project AWARE IMPACT team will assist school districts through a

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needs assessment process that will result in action plans and resources which may include a three-tiered model for providing supports to promote positive behavioral health for all students, targeted services to those who need more support, and indicated-intensive services for those in need, said Boerckel.

The team will also assist with specialist-specific professional development using the ECHO learning model — a combination of instruction and case studies for collaborative learning — to support the best practices of school-based social workers, counselors, and school psychologists, said Bo-

erckel.

They will further assist with referral pathways via student assistance programs (SAP) and Geisinger telehealth services to ensure that students in need of services receive necessary school-based and/or community mental health, substance use, and co-occurring supports and services; and a Geisinger Bridge Clinic, which will offer a rapid-access-to care clinic for pediatric patients in acute psychiatric crisis, providing short-term, evidence-based care to children and families while simultaneously assisting with the coordination of long-term access to therapy, Boerckel said.