

Mental health funding restored

Funding resumption confirmed during legislative breakfast

BY GAWHARA ABOU-EID
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MILTON — The Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit (CSIU) announced Thursday morning that a \$2.3 million federal school-based mental health grant abruptly terminated just over one week ago was restored within 24 hours, a development revealed as state lawmakers and regional education leaders gathered for the intermediate unit's annual legislative breakfast.

State representatives and senators serving parts of Northumberland, Union, Snyder, Columbia and Montour counties participated, along with regional school district superintendents and CSIU leadership.

CSIU Executive Director Dr. John Kurelja addressed the sudden federal decision earlier in the week to terminate the Project AWARE IMPACT grant, awarded by the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and its equally sudden reversal. The funding supports school-based mental health services for as many as 25,000 students across Central Pennsylvania.

"I don't know exactly what happened to turn that around, but we're extremely grateful for any help or support that happened," he said. "That comes from the work of our



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From left, CSIU Work Foundations Plus program instructor Rob Welch talks with Rep. Michael Stender (R-108) during Thursday's legislative breakfast.

local and state advocacy, that comes from our board members, that comes from our legislators we spoke to.

He said the funding directly supports crisis response and mental health professionals who were actively assisting school communities during a recent emergency.

"Many of you have the opportunity to take advantage of those services in one way or another, and that's a byproduct of those dollars," he said.

"And we have been working really hard to make sure that's sustainable long into the future — That it's not something that just goes away."

Kurelja also emphasized CSIU's unique operational model, noting that intermediate units do not have a tax base and must generate revenue through services.

"The only way we're going to exist is if we build, create, make and sell

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things — in service to all of you,” he said, adding that convening educators and lawmakers is part of that mission.

Mifflinburg Area School District Superintendent Dr. Ken Dady used the breakfast to highlight a major expansion of agricultural education in his district, describing a multi-year effort to transform a traditional program into a full school of agriculture.

“We’re in a very rural community, and agriculture is important,” Dady said. “So, with this addition that we’re doing, it’s going to cover more areas.”

Dady detailed how precision agriculture and technology are driving curriculum changes, citing examples from industry and recent farm shows, including the use of advanced combines, soil monitoring and drone technology. He said the district is seeking to add a third agriculture teacher and is expanding instruction into agribusiness, physics and biology credits tied directly to agriculture.

He also described a potential collaboration with a local Mennonite business community, to include teaching.

“That’s the first time that the Mennonite community has actually been open to the fact of ‘We might have interest in something the public schools offer,’” Dady said.

The program also serves students beyond Mifflinburg through a partnership with the Lewisburg Area School District and includes a new greenhouse facility and a student-produced agriculture podcast titled “Roots and Routes.”

Sen. Lynda Schlegel Cul-

ver (R-27), chair of the Senate Education Committee, addressed attendees with an overview of major education challenges facing Pennsylvania, and emphasized the importance of direct communication between schools and lawmakers.

“It is not an easy job, especially in today’s world,” Culver said. “Education is changing so quickly with technology.”

She referenced early data she encountered upon assuming the chairmanship, including low reading proficiency rates, challenges in higher education, pension system pressures, cyber charter funding and school adequacy funding.

“We are still dealing with a cyber charter situation. We are still dealing with adequate funding,” she said, adding that progress has been made but significant work remains.

Culver stressed that education policy should remain nonpartisan.

“Education is not a party... education is about educating children,” she said. “So, when somebody comes to me with legislation, the first question I ask is, ‘How is this helping children?’”

She encouraged superintendents to maintain open lines of communication with legislators.

“Please don’t ever assume we know what’s going on,” Culver said. “Please reach out to us.”

Additionally, Berwick Superintendent Jason Bendle discussed the district’s willingness to partner with energy companies and the need to prepare students for a rapidly changing workforce.

“I think we’re very willing to partner with these

groups,” he said. “I think sometimes maybe the groups don’t know how to partner with schools, so I think that’s a challenge... It’s a local decision of whether boards entertain that or not. I think there’s positives on both ways of working through deals and also just saying, ‘Well, if you’re coming anyway, we’re going to take the tax revenue from it.’”

The breakfast also included a presentation from CSIU’s Work Foundations Plus program in Sunbury. This secondary transition program supports students with special needs in developing independent living and employability skills.

Instructor Rob Welch described the building trades component of the program and introduced students who helped

design and build wooden s’mores kits that were distributed to administrators and legislators.

“We teach basic introductory skills in building construction, carpentry, plumbing, painting and drywall,” Welch said. “It’s really fruitful for employment to be gainfully employed... We’re kind of like a bridge to our local career and technical schools.”

Students, including Aaron Haugher, a 2025 Mifflinburg graduate, explained their roles in measuring, cutting, sanding and finishing the boxes, which also featured laser-engraved designs created with assistance from another CSIU program.

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