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CSIU Executive Director Dr. Kevin Singer spoke during a meeting of superintendents held in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, in July.

Outgoing CSIU director reflects on career in education

BY KEVIN MERTZ
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MILTON — Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit (CSIU) Executive Director Dr. Kevin Singer recently penned a personal piece on social media in which he reflected on sunrises and sunsets.

“There’s an interesting thing about sunsets,” Singer said. “They’re always followed by a sunrise.”

While Singer is watching the sun set on his career in education, he is preparing to watch the sunrise from a new location.

The CSIU board recently

approved Singer’s retirement, effective June 30. The board previously announced that Assistant Executive Director Dr. John Kurelja would assume the helm of the organization upon Singer’s retirement.

Singer was hired by CSIU in 2011, after serving as superintendent of the Topeka (Kan.) Public Schools. Prior to serving in Kansas, Singer was superintendent of the Manheim Township School District.

When he joined CSIU, Singer said there was “quite a bit of controversy” surrounding the organization.

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“Our board, one of the first things they said to me was ‘how do we get this turned around?’” Singer recalled.

Over his first few months on the job, Singer met with area superintendents, community leaders and others.

During each meeting, he asked a specific set of questions about the individual’s perception of CSIU. He still has that list, and the compilation of responses.

“It gave us a pivot point, here’s where we’ve been, here’s what people thought of us, here’s what the need is, what we need to do to move forward,” Singer said, of the questions.

What he learned about the perception of CSIU at his various meetings was quite revealing.

“The superintendents (of area school districts), in some ways, had given up on us,” Singer said. “They had created their own little mini IU group. They met in rotating locations, at their own districts, instead of coming to the CSIU to meet as a superintendent group.”

He noted that Harry Mathias, former Central Columbia superintendent, was the leader of the effort.

In conducting his initial meetings with area superintendents, Singer said he was cautioned that the meeting with Mathias may be “difficult.”

“Sitting in his office, Harry said ‘we want the IU to be successful,’” Singer recalled. “We want to be a part of that success.”

“That lit a lightbulb for

me,” Singer continued. “The superintendents weren’t angry at the IU. They wanted to be a part. I asked if I could go to one of their meetings.”

Initially, Singer sat in the back of the room during meetings which he attended with superintendents. After about one year, he was asked if the superintendents could meet at the CSIU headquarters.

“I said ‘of course, why not?’” Singer recalled. “One of (the superintendents) said ‘the IU charged us for a meeting room.’”

Singer allowed the superintendents to meet at the CSIU headquarters in Milton, without charging to rent a room.

“Their meetings became part of CSIU,” Singer said.

Mathias led each meeting, with Singer later speaking about CSIU services. He later came to realize that previous CSIU leadership focused meetings with superintendents on products and services the school districts could purchase from the intermediate unit.

However, Singer learned the school districts located within the intermediate unit accounted for just one-half of one percent of purchases of software and other services from CSIU.

“I thought ‘why in the world do we talk to them about buying more?’” Singer recalled. “Why bother them with a sales job? It was a moot point.

“We quit trying to do the sales job, say ‘buy this, buy that,’” he continued. “If they wanted to know more about software, we would have

someone come in (and speak about that). We put a focus on curriculum, instruction, support of their districts.”

During his first year with CSIU, Singer said the board allowed for \$50,000 additional to be budgeted for curriculum development.

He asked area superintendents if they wished for CSIU to handle an additional curriculum person. Or, he proposed dividing the funds among five school districts.

In exchange, he asked the districts to provide a curriculum person to CSIU for one day every two weeks.

“They liked that idea better,” Singer said. “That’s what we did.”

He noted the collaboration between school districts and the intermediate unit on curriculum development grew from there.

Over the last 10 years, Singer said those who work for CSIU have “re-framed” how they think of the organization.

“Today, with pride, we view ourselves as a service center, helping other people,” he said. “Within all of that, we never lost the marketplace philosophy, trying to be entrepreneurial.

“It was the concept of entrepreneurship we carried out in four ways,” Singer said.

Those four ways, as listed by Singer, are: Offering curriculum and instruction services from pre-school through adulthood, management of resources, social entrepreneurship by helping improve the local communities, and marketing services to be used a revenue so CSIU

can avoid collecting taxes.

Singer expressed full confidence that Kurelja and the CSIU’s leadership team will carry on the work he initiated at CSIU.

While Singer brought area superintendents back together to work with CSIU, he said Kurelja has taken that partnership a step further.

Eighteen months ago, Singer said the superintendents started meeting weekly. Those meetings switched to a virtual format with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I love knowing the history of where we were and seeing the reality of where we are,” Singer said. “For how good it is right now, for the way we’re operating and what we’re hearing (from superintendents), most of that credit goes to John Kurelja. I get a little bit of credit too.”

As Kurelja was selected as Singer’s successor, Singer said the board asked him to identify areas Kurelja could start to take charge of prior to Singer’s retirement.

“One of the areas I asked John to take over completely was the superintendent meetings,” Singer said. “He has been outstanding at that... I don’t think we would have been as successful as we’ve been in navigating the pandemic if John weren’t there to lead the charge and keep the communication going.”

Singer has full confidence CSIU will continue in a positive direction.

“I hope (Kurelja) takes on new directions that I hadn’t even thought of,” Singer said. “That’s the way things

work... I have every confidence in John and the team of people that are around him.”

While the sun is setting on Singer’s career in education, the sun is about to rise on a new chapter in his life.

Singer and his wife, Sally, will be relocating to the Lancaster area. Three of their children, and their families, live in that area.

“Most immediately, I took another job,” Singer said. “Here’s my next sunrise.”

While his wife will be spending time with their three grandchildren in Lancaster, Singer will leave in early July to start a temporary position working as a clerk at a general store at Silver Gate Lodge in Montana.

The store, Singer said, is located at the northeast corner of Yellowstone National Park. He will work there through Sept. 30.

“I’ve been to Yellowstone quite a bit,” Singer said. “More than that, the description of the job is what attracted me... You’re there for one reason, and that’s to serve customers... They want you to provide advice on Yellowstone.”

Singer is looking forward to all of the people he will meet while working in Montana.

“The guy that runs the property, he’s written a book on Yellowstone that’s very good,” he said. “I will enjoy learning from him.”

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