

# Tools improve communication

by Kevin Mertz | Posted: Thursday, May 11, 2017 6:49 am

MILTON — As a small robot moved through the entrance of the Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit (CSIU) on Wednesday, three area students could hardly contain their excitement. At the head of the robot was an iPad, and appearing on the iPad was Pennsylvania Secretary of Education Pedro Rivera.

Using an iPad from his office to virtually connect his image to the robot's iPad, Rivera was able to take part in CSIU's 21st annual Celebrate Communicate Day.

He spoke briefly with the three students, as well as CSIU staff participating in Celebrate Communicate Day. The day featured activities, entertainment and games for students of various levels of communication ability.

CSIU Executive Director Dr. Kevin Singer coordinated Rivera's "visit" to the event.

"We wanted him to see what's happening for some of our kids that have some of the most difficult problems to deal with," Singer said.

He said it was important for Rivera to participate in the day using a communication device as many of the students who participated in the event use various electronic devices to assist with their communication abilities.

"That sent a really strong message about what this day is about," Singer said. "A lot of these kids are using different tools... and they are still able to communicate."

Courtney Troxell and Alycia Bohner are students enrolled in CSIU's Work Foundations program. The girls helped to set up for Celebrate Communicate Day and had the opportunity to tell Rivera what they enjoyed about the day.

Bohner noted that she enjoys working with children.

Using a computer attached to her wheelchair to communicate, Midd-West School District student Emily Smith also introduced herself to Rivera.

Rivera was impressed with what he observed about Celebrate Communicate Day while utilizing technology to participate in the day's activities.

"I'm still processing this, taking this all in," he said as his image appeared on the iPad.

"Thank you for doing this," Rivera continued. "This is absolutely amazing."

Prior to appearing via the robot at Celebrate Communicate Day, Singer said Rivera appeared virtually to a meeting of superintendents from school districts served by CSIU.

Singer said Rivera provided the superintendents with an update on various education-related issues currently being addressed in Harrisburg.

Jennifer Williams, CSIU's Special Education director, said 110 students from 14 school districts in Northumberland, Union, Montour, Snyder and Columbia counties took part in Celebrate Communicate Day.

In addition, students served by various CSIU programs helped with setup for the day. CSIU staff also volunteered in force to help with the day's activities.

Jeff Kay, senior information technology project coordinator with CSIU, said he enjoys participating in Celebrate Communicate Day.



## Communicate

Jennifer Williams, CSIU's Special Education director, spoke with Pennsylvania Secretary of Education Pedro Rivera, who appeared on an iPad placed on top of a robot during CSIU's Celebrate Communicate Day.

“For the staff that works here... it’s one day we look forward to seeing the kids so we can make a difference,” Kay said, noting that some CSIU staff members are office based and rarely get to connect with children served by the intermediate unit.

“This is a good way to feel connected,” he said.

Kristin James, CSIU’s assistive technology consultant, agreed.

“I work behind the scenes all year long,” she said. “Today, we are able to see the fruit of our own labor.”

By participating in the day’s activities, James said one parent told her their child may be more willing to use their assistive communication device as the day is a rare opportunity for the child to interact with others who use similar devices.

Jenny Rakovan was one of approximately 25 CSIU speech therapists to participate in the day’s activities.

She was glad the event afforded students the opportunity to interact with others who use assistive communication devices.

“Without this technology, our kids would not be able to express themselves, comment on things going on in their environment,” Rakovan said.

Williams was appreciative of Rivera’s time, and thankful he was able to see what Celebrate Communicate Day is all about.

“The look on his face was exciting for me... for him to see these things taking place,” Williams said. “When you’re looking at budgets and the fiscal process, it’s important to see these things that are really important (in education).”

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