I. GRANT PROPOSAL SUMMARY SHEET

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Date: October 14, 2026

Contact Information

Organization Name: Chester County Intermediate Unit
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Phone: 484-237-5000
Website: https://www.cciu.org/
Year Incorporated:
FEIN: 23-6003597

ED/CEO Name: Dr. George F. Fiore
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Board Chair Name:
Board Chair Approval (check here): ☐
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Organization Information:

Field/s of Interest:

	Arts, Culture, Heritage	☒	Education, Library		Environment, Animals
	Health		Human Services		Social Justice, Civic Engagement
	Religion		If other, please describe:		

Mission:
The Chester County Intermediate Unit is a dynamic educational service agency providing high-quality, innovative, and cost-effective programs and services to enhance the lives of learners, educators, and members of our communities.

Geographic Area Served *(If not all of Chester County, specify primary Chester County regions served):*
Chester County

Describe Population Served & Annual Number of People Served. *(Include Chester County # &/or % served.)*
The Chester County Intermediate Unit (CCIU) provides services to the 12 school districts in Chester County. This includes services to nearly 86,000 school students and over 6,000 educators.

Annual Budget $403,293,636 _1,710.32_ # of Full-Time Equivalent Paid Staff
_____ % of budget for program expenses __12____ # of Board Volunteers
_____ % of budget for administrative expenses ___0____ # of Active Non-Board Volunteers
_____ % of budget for fundraising expenses ___0____ # of Volunteer Hours
100% = total

Top 3-5 funding sources:

This grant proposal is for: __X__Direct Service Programs & General Operating &/or ____Capacity Building

If Capacity Building Proposal, the focus is:

	Contingency Planning		Partnerships, Collaborations		Merger, Closure
	Mission, Vision, Strategy		Board Engagement & Leadership		Marketing, Communication
	Resource Development		Operations		Technology
	If other, please describe:				

Grant Amount Requested from the Community Foundation: $ 100,000

Proposal Summary: *(a few sentences, please)*
This pilot will provide 10–15 high school students with a personalized, AI-supported learning experience centered on real-world projects, mentorship, and competency-based learning. Students will work with educators, industry professionals, and AI tools to explore career interests, develop critical skills, and demonstrate learning through authentic outcomes. The pilot will evaluate the effectiveness of this model and inform future expansion across participating districts.

II. GRANT PROPOSAL NARRATIVE

Provide clear, concise information in 1-3 pages. Please be brief.

1. Nonprofit's overall aims, key initiatives, key achievements & distinctiveness

The Chester County Intermediate Unit is a dynamic educational service agency and has a long-standing commitment to providing innovative educational services to students and educators in Chester County. Our mission is to provide high-quality, innovative, and cost-effective programs and services to enhance the lives of learners, educators, and members of our communities. The CCIU offers a range of programs and services to enhance educational opportunities and support the development of effective teaching practices through the provision of high-quality resources and professional development.

2. Funding request

- **What specific needs & issues are being addressed, via what programs and services?**
- **Why is it important to fund this now?**
- **How will results & impact be demonstrated?**

The education system in place today was built for a different era. Its emphasis on standardization, conformity, and memorization reflects the needs of the Industrial Age economy it was designed for, not the needs of the era we are now entering: the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Age. This new AI Age has commenced by the onset of commercial large language models (LLMs) such as OpenAI's ChatGPT and Anthropic's Claude. Some of the paradigm shifts in AI are a continuation of the changes brought by the internet in the 1990s and the subsequent Information Age: personalization; automation; and near-limitless access to information. At the same time, AI introduces social norms of its own, valuing traits such as adaptability, critical analysis, self-directed learning, interdisciplinary thinking, and collaboration. These are not skills a standardized, one-size-fits-all curriculum is built to teach, and the gap between how students are taught and what the world asks of them keeps widening. With the rate of these paradigm changes also advancing exponentially with technology - there is only a three-decade gap between the internet and AI, while the Industrial Revolution preceded the internet by two centuries - there is a risk of future generations to experience widespread cultural lag and digital skills gap, resulting in a workforce that is underprepared for the reshaping of industries across the economy.

Education has always been one of the primary means in which a society can advance economically and technologically, with political benefits tied to this. As a historical example, after the launch of Sputnik during the Cold War, the United States dramatically expanded and reformed science and math education because falling behind in the Space Race was seen as an existential threat. Analogously, American society is at an inflection point with the emerging AI Age that is equally, if not more existential. Preparing the next generation to embrace AI and its paradigms will help them work alongside it for technological advancement rather than getting replaced by it. Additionally, with intensifying global competition over AI model development from countries like China, we could be nearing a technological race akin to the Space Race, making AI education more important.

A major challenge with the education system is structural. In traditional classrooms, teachers have been given the role of delivering content to their students. Chester County's public school districts report a student-to-teacher ratio between 13 to 14 students per teacher, in line with the PA average of

13.3, and slightly better than the national average of 15.4 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). At this ratio, no teacher can realistically give instruction that can meet each student's individual needs within a standard class period, forcing them to fall back on lectures with standardized pacing, with tests and grades becoming a primary measure of learning. Compared to more active, engaging ways of learning material and assessing competency (i.e., discussions, "learn by doing," teaching others), passive lecturing and tests incentivize students toward cramming instead of genuine understanding. Research on memory retention, originating with Hermann Ebbinghaus's formulation of the "forgetting curve," has supported that newly learned material fades quickly without active reinforcement (Murre & Dros, 2015). This is exacerbated by the standardization of curriculums and subject areas; whereby each student learns the same material rather than focusing on content areas they have a genuine interest in, leading to a loss of engagement, and contributing to low retention. The standard school subjects also lend to teaching content which is rarely applicable outside of the classroom, creating a disconnect between students and the system. Supporting this, a 2018 survey of American adults found that 84% of them saying they learned material they never used again, with respondents using on average 37% of what they learned in school in their professions ("Americans Use Just 37 Percent", 2019).

Defenders of this format argue that standardization serves two purposes: it guarantees students a shared baseline of knowledge; and that the formal curriculum (standard school subjects) is merely a means of providing an informal curriculum - instilling core values and soft skills such as time management, critical thinking, and creativity. Neither argument holds under scrutiny. Due to the lack of engagement and low retention, most adults don't actually retain or use most of the baseline skills that a standardized curriculum teaches them. A 2023 federal skills survey found that 28% of American adults score at or below the lowest literacy proficiency level, up from 19% in 2017 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2026). Regarding instilling core social values, the conformity which is rewarded by the existing system is an outdated trait suited for assembly-line professions from the Industrial Age. Also, there's little reason to think that soft skills are best taught to students through content that they didn't choose and may not be interested in. For instance, a student can build the same (or arguably better) analytical thinking and pattern recognition by working on a project in a subject they are passionate about as they can by analyzing a standard assignment, since the skill is being built on something they want to master rather than something they have to sit through.

This lag in the educational system impacts society unequally. Existing measures of student success, such as the SAT and Pennsylvania's Keystone Exams, correlate more closely with family income and socioeconomic/demographical status instead of the quality of learning. A regional study of school-level data in Massachusetts and New York City found that schools with higher percentages of Black, Hispanic, and low-income students post lower average SAT scores than schools with higher percentages of white, Asian, and higher-income students; this gap was closely tied to differences in school funding per student (Liu et al., 2024). The PA Keystone Exams also show this pattern: a 2019 report from the state Auditor General found that of the 100 highest-scoring schools on the Keystone Exams statewide, only five were located in districts with average household incomes below $50,000 (McGlynn, 2016). This emphasizes that standardized curriculums, where every student is taught the same subjects and curriculum, do not lead to equitable and standardized academic performance. Since these tests are representative of income rather than honest measures of ability, students in under-resourced districts who most need access to personalized learning and AI literacy are the ones least likely to have it, making them the most vulnerable group to being left behind as AI reshapes industries.

To address these needs, we propose a pilot program of an educational model oriented around AI-based experiential learning. This pilot will be in the form of a semester-long dual-enrollment course, hosted by the Chester County Intermediate Unit (CCIU). We will also explore the possibility of offering dual enrollment credit by partnering with a local college or university. The course will enroll 10-15 students recruited from multiple districts across the county. We are deliberately not limiting access to the highest-performing (and wealthiest) students or school districts, since the program is intended to work for students of any background and not be a gated enrichment program. Students will apply through a brief application and interview process designed to bring in a diverse cohort of students. For students, the incentive to participate will be a real project to strengthen a resume or portfolio, the chance to spend a semester going deep on a field they actually care about instead of sitting through a generic elective and potentially gaining dual enrollment credits from a recognized higher education institution. Advisors will be drawn from CCIU certificated staff, high school teachers, college faculty, and industry professionals based on subject expertise, character, and practical experience.

The course itself moves through four stages that are meant to be fluid and iterative, inspired by the Engineering Design Process: Discover, Acquire, Build, and Share. In the Discover stage, spanning the first couple of weeks, students will choose any field or subject of interest and brainstorm project ideas with the scope of producing a tangible result within one semester (for students who need a jumping-off point, starter project ideas will be provided). The open-ended nature of the subject area and project topic is meant to encourage students to drive their own learning process. Each student is paired with a primary advisor aligned with their subject area and a set of secondary advisors for broader input, who will work with the students to draft a proposal that explains the subject area and project the student is focusing on, the specific content and skills the student will learn in order to accomplish the project, how core-subject skills (e.g. writing, literacy, analyzing data) will be integrated into the project, and a realistic timeline for one semester. Before students begin their project proposals, students will be instructed interactively on AI literacy: covering effective prompting strategies; verifying against AI hallucination; and high-level understanding of how AI works to understand its limitations. This ensures students will use AI tools thoughtfully and effectively.

In the Acquire stage, students will build the specific knowledge and skills they identified in their proposal. The use of AI for finding sources of information and clarifying content will be encouraged, along with support from regular 1-on-1 check-ins with their advisors to keep students accountable and on-track. Students will be encouraged to exercise metacognition, reflecting on their learning process to proactively identify and correct any gaps in skill or knowledge. In the Build stage, students will apply their learnings directly to their project, cycling back to the Acquire stage whenever a knowledge gap surfaces. The course concludes with the Share stage, where students will present their learnings and work to a panel of advisors and reflect on their learning process.

This course will incorporate a custom-built AI interface that both students and advisors will use, adding guardrails and specific instructions to existing commercial LLMs. For students, the platform will help brainstorm project ideas, explain unfamiliar content and guide students towards skill mastery, and point them toward the right resources for acquiring knowledge or building their projects. All student-AI conversations will be logged for data collection purposes and to ensure safe, ethical AI use. For advisors, this tool will summarize daily student logs (flagging any stalled progress or misconceptions), debrief advisors on student progress ahead of check-in meetings, as well as generate or find relevant assessments to test skills and content areas tied to each student's specific proposal.

Students will log their work and AI usage daily and meet with their advisor for brief 1-on-1 meetings weekly. In this educational model, while teachers are no longer responsible for daily lesson plans to provide the information to students (a job done by the AI tool), they are still very relevant. In fact, by being given the role of an advisor to student-led projects, they are freed to do the part of their profession which matters most: shaping students' critical thinking and other soft skills relevant to a modern "informal curriculum."

Impact from this pilot will be measured through quantitative and qualitative data. Students will take competency assessments on their selected skills or content (generated or searched by the AI platform based on each student's specific proposal) before they begin their projects, throughout, and at the completion of their project. These assessments will not determine a student's performance in the course but provide a quantitative baseline for student growth in specific skills and content areas required for each customized project. Data from AI conversation history and daily logs will also be used to track engagement and AI use, along with anonymous weekly surveys to gauge student motivation. Qualitative data such as end-of-course student reflections addressing each component of the course (i.e., project completion from ideation to end product, working with advisors, using AI to learn and brainstorm, presenting their work) will also be used. To capture the outcomes of the students' projects, each of which will be unique since they were self-designed, the impact (to community, research, or creativity) will be captured through individual outcomes and stories. Altogether, the data collected from this pilot will be used to evaluate this experiential learning model's effectiveness, allowing for scaling this program in the future.

References

Americans Use Just 37 Percent of Information Learned in School, Survey Finds. (2019, January 26). CBS News Philadelphia. Retrieved October 14, 2026, from https://www.cbsnews.com/philadelphia/news/americans-use-just-37-percent-of-information-learned-in-school-survey-finds/

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McGlynn, A. (2016). Higher Standards and Lower Achievement? An Evaluation of Pennsylvania's Keystone Exams. *Commonwealth: A Journal of Pennsylvania Politics and Policy*, 18(1). https://doi.org/10.15367/cjppp.v18i1.83

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Proposed Pilot Budget ($100,000)

Category	Description	Amount
Program Coordination	Part-time project manager responsible for recruitment, applications, scheduling, advisor coordination, communications, data collection, and grant reporting.	$30,000
Advisor Supplemental Pay	Primary advisors and subject matter experts supporting students throughout the semester.	$15,000
AI Platform & Technology	AI licensing, Azure/OpenAI credits, security review, lightweight Copilot Studio or custom front end configuration, data storage and logging	$25,000
Course Development	Curriculum design, project framework development, assessment design, AI literacy materials	$15,000
Professional Services	Legal/privacy review, higher education partner consultation, technical consulting as needed	$15,000
TOTAL		**$100,000**

III. ATTACHMENTS

Email this support information. If it is on your website, please provide the URL.

1. Copy of **501 (c) (3)** federal tax-exempt letter: The CCIU is a political subdivision of the Pennsylvania Department of Education. Attached is a W-9.
2. List of **Board** of Directors, with their affiliations ***URL: https://www.cciu.org/about/our-board-of-directors***
3. Most recent **annual report.** A link to the annual report is on this webpage. ***URL: https://www.cciu.org/about/welcome***
4. Audited or reviewed recent **financial statement.** Attached to email submission.
5. Itemized **organizational operating budget** with actual results for prior fiscal year & current fiscal year to date. Attached to email submission.
6. If capacity building initiative, **itemized budget** (including external consultant's proposal, if applicable). N/A
7. Current **strategic plan.** If your nonprofit does **not** have a current strategic plan, **explain why**. ***URL: https://www.cciu.org/about/strategic-plan***

Form **W-9**
(Rev. March 2024)
Department of the Treasury
Internal Revenue Service

Request for Taxpayer Identification Number and Certification

Go to *www.irs.gov/FormW9* for instructions and the latest information.

Give form to the requester. Do not send to the IRS.

Before you begin. For guidance related to the purpose of Form W-9, see *Purpose of Form*, below.

Print or type. See *Specific Instructions* on page 3.

1 Name of entity/individual. An entry is required. (For a sole proprietor or disregarded entity, enter the owner's name on line 1, and enter the business/disregarded entity's name on line 2.)

Chester County Intermediate Unit

2 Business name/disregarded entity name, if different from above.

3a Check the appropriate box for federal tax classification of the entity/individual whose name is entered on line 1. Check only **one** of the following seven boxes.

☐ Individual/sole proprietor ☐ C corporation ☐ S corporation ☐ Partnership ☐ Trust/estate

☐ LLC. Enter the tax classification (C = C corporation, S = S corporation, P = Partnership) . . . . .

Note: Check the "LLC" box above and, in the entry space, enter the appropriate code (C, S, or P) for the tax classification of the LLC, unless it is a disregarded entity. A disregarded entity should instead check the appropriate box for the tax classification of its owner.

☒ Other (see instructions) Political Subdivision of the Commonwealth of PA

3b If on line 3a you checked "Partnership" or "Trust/estate," or checked "LLC" and entered "P" as its tax classification, and you are providing this form to a partnership, trust, or estate in which you have an ownership interest, check this box if you have any foreign partners, owners, or beneficiaries. See instructions . . . . . ☐

4 Exemptions (codes apply only to certain entities, not individuals; see instructions on page 3):

Exempt payee code (if any) _____

Exemption from Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act (FATCA) reporting code (if any) _____

(Applies to accounts maintained outside the United States.)

5 Address (number, street, and apt. or suite no.). See instructions.

455 Boot Road

Requester's name and address (optional)

6 City, state, and ZIP code

Downingtown, PA 19335

7 List account number(s) here (optional)

Part I Taxpayer Identification Number (TIN)

Enter your TIN in the appropriate box. The TIN provided must match the name given on line 1 to avoid backup withholding. For individuals, this is generally your social security number (SSN). However, for a resident alien, sole proprietor, or disregarded entity, see the instructions for Part I, later. For other entities, it is your employer identification number (EIN). If you do not have a number, see *How to get a TIN*, later.

Note: If the account is in more than one name, see the instructions for line 1. See also *What Name and Number To Give the Requester* for guidelines on whose number to enter.

Social security number

			–			–				

or

Employer identification number

2	3	–	6	0	0	3	5	9	7

Part II Certification

Under penalties of perjury, I certify that:

1. The number shown on this form is my correct taxpayer identification number (or I am waiting for a number to be issued to me); and
2. I am not subject to backup withholding because (a) I am exempt from backup withholding, or (b) I have not been notified by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) that I am subject to backup withholding as a result of a failure to report all interest or dividends, or (c) the IRS has notified me that I am no longer subject to backup withholding; and
3. I am a U.S. citizen or other U.S. person (defined below); and
4. The FATCA code(s) entered on this form (if any) indicating that I am exempt from FATCA reporting is correct.

Certification instructions. You must cross out item 2 above if you have been notified by the IRS that you are currently subject to backup withholding because you have failed to report all interest and dividends on your tax return. For real estate transactions, item 2 does not apply. For mortgage interest paid, acquisition or abandonment of secured property, cancellation of debt, contributions to an individual retirement arrangement (IRA), and, generally, payments other than interest and dividends, you are not required to sign the certification, but you must provide your correct TIN. See the instructions for Part II, later.

Sign Here **Signature of U.S. person** [signature] **Date** 1/5/26.

General Instructions

Section references are to the Internal Revenue Code unless otherwise noted.

Future developments. For the latest information about developments related to Form W-9 and its instructions, such as legislation enacted after they were published, go to *www.irs.gov/FormW9*.

What's New

Line 3a has been modified to clarify how a disregarded entity completes this line. An LLC that is a disregarded entity should check the appropriate box for the tax classification of its owner. Otherwise, it should check the "LLC" box and enter its appropriate tax classification.

New line 3b has been added to this form. A flow-through entity is required to complete this line to indicate that it has direct or indirect foreign partners, owners, or beneficiaries when it provides the Form W-9 to another flow-through entity in which it has an ownership interest. This change is intended to provide a flow-through entity with information regarding the status of its indirect foreign partners, owners, or beneficiaries, so that it can satisfy any applicable reporting requirements. For example, a partnership that has any indirect foreign partners may be required to complete Schedules K-2 and K-3. See the Partnership Instructions for Schedules K-2 and K-3 (Form 1065).

Purpose of Form

An individual or entity (Form W-9 requester) who is required to file an information return with the IRS is giving you this form because they