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Investment by The Health Foundation of Central Mass. in the Southbridge CARES Project Surpasses \$1 Million

Additional \$400,000 Strengthens Partnership with Southbridge High School and Clark University

SOUTHBRIDGE, Mass. (March 4, 2026) – [The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts](#) today announced an additional \$400,000 grant for the [Southbridge CARES](#) (Clark Advancing Resilience in Education and Support) Project, a mental health initiative at [Southbridge High School](#) designed to improve students’ academic performance, strengthen social-emotional and behavioral health, increase school engagement, and better prepare high school students for college and career success. The Health Foundation has now awarded \$1,075,000 to the project to date.

The Southbridge CARES Project is supported by a [Synergy Initiative grant](#) from The Health Foundation and implemented in partnership with [Clark University’s Mosakowski Institute for Public Enterprise](#). The announcement of continued funding was made during a visit by Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) Commissioner Pedro Martinez to the Sensory Immersion Room (SIR) at Southbridge High School.

“The Southbridge CARES Project is redefining the traditional high school experience,” said Amie Shei, president and CEO of The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts. “Its dynamic, layered approach shows an understanding that every student learns differently and has varying needs in school. We are honored to put our support behind a team that is contributing to a brighter future for these Southbridge students and that is developing an innovative and comprehensive model for others to emulate.”

The SIR is the first of its kind in a public school setting in Massachusetts that integrates immersive technology, virtual reality, and sensory equipment to create customizable, calming, and therapeutic environments for all students, including those experiencing behavioral health challenges or sensory differences.

During his visit, Commissioner Martinez took a tour of the SIR and attended a demonstration session, experiencing how the state-of-the-art technology works to help students manage anxiety, decompress, improve their mindsets, and self-regulate while receiving support from trained counselors. Commissioner Martinez also

spoke with students and staff about the implementation of the SIR, and its positive impact on the school community since its opening in October 2025.

“We’re thrilled that The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts is continuing to fund the Southbridge CARES Project,” said Nadia Ward, project co-director and executive director of Clark University’s Mosakowski Institute for Public Enterprise. “We’ve enjoyed working with school administrators, teachers, and students at Southbridge High; it is truly amazing and incredibly rewarding to see firsthand how all three of our behavioral health interventions have transformed the lives of the students in this community.”

“We’re thrilled to welcome Commissioner Martinez to Southbridge High School to learn more about the CARES project and observe the sensory immersion room in action,” said Judy Maisonet, project co-director and assistant superintendent of Southbridge Public Schools. “This initiative reflects our deep commitment to caring for the whole child and ensuring every student feels safe, supported, and ready to learn. We are proud of the meaningful difference this work is making in the lives of our students each day.”

The Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) initiative is reaching up to 400 students across four grades (9th through 12th) and stimulating mental, personal, and academic growth and achievement.

About The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts

The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts is dedicated to improving the health of those who live or work in Central Massachusetts, with particular emphasis on vulnerable populations and unmet needs. Through its unique and impactful approach to grantmaking, The Health Foundation addresses community-identified health issues, with health defined broadly to include social determinants of health and with a focus on promoting health equity. As a health conversion foundation launched in 1999 following the sale of the not-for-profit HMO Central Massachusetts Health Care Inc., The Health Foundation’s grants have totaled over \$62 million to 250 unique organizations over its history. For more information, visit www.thfcm.org.

About Clark University

Founded in 1887, Clark University is a liberal arts-based research university that prepares its students to meet tomorrow’s most daunting challenges and embrace its greatest opportunities. Through 33 undergraduate majors, more than 30 advanced degree programs, and nationally recognized community partnerships, Clark fuses rigorous scholarship with authentic world and workplace experiences that empower our students to pursue lives and careers of meaning and consequence.

About Southbridge High School

Southbridge High School serves students in grades 9–12 as part of the Southbridge Public Schools district in Southbridge, Massachusetts. The school is committed to providing a rigorous, inclusive, and engaging educational experience that prepares all students for success in college, career, and civic life. Southbridge High School offers a comprehensive curriculum that includes Advanced Placement and Early College opportunities, as well as a wide range of extracurricular programs in athletics, the arts, and student leadership. With a focus on continuous improvement, equity, and high expectations, Southbridge High School strives to ensure that every student graduates with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to thrive in a rapidly changing world.



From left: **Aaron Haddock**, director of behavioral health initiatives and programs at the Mosakowski Institute for Public Enterprise at Clark University, **Nadia Ward**, project co-director and executive director of the Mosakowski Institute, **Amie Shei**, president and CEO of The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts, **Judy Maisonet**, project co-director and assistant superintendent of Southbridge Public Schools, **DESE Commissioner Pedro Martinez**, and **Bill Metzger**, receiver/superintendent of Southbridge Public Schools, in the Sensory Immersion Room at Southbridge High School on March 3.

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