

**Weekly column: EdTalk**  
**Superintendent of Schools: Dr. David Leach**  
**April 24, 2024**

*The Warwick Valley Board of Education, in a work session in early April, continued its discussion of relatively new legislation that will soon require school districts across New York State to move to zero-emission buses. The board is concerned about this legislation's impact on the Warwick Valley Central School District and its taxpayers, and sent the following letter to Governor Hochul, Assemblyman Karl Brabenec, Assemblyman Brian Maher and Senator James Skoufis last week.*

The Warwick Valley Central School District expresses deep concern regarding the law enacted as part of the 2022-23 state budget mandating school districts to exclusively acquire zero-emission buses starting July 1, 2027, and operate solely zero-emission buses by July 1, 2035. While we endorse the goal of offering various clean energy options, it must be approached practically. We believe that New York's expectations for schools to swiftly transition in this matter are overly ambitious and overlook critical considerations.

Navigating the transition to electric buses presents a formidable challenge, as their current high price tag and costly infrastructure requirements cast doubt on their immediate feasibility and affordability for districts like ours. Electric buses currently carry a significantly higher price tag, about three times higher, than traditional internal combustion engine buses. They are presently more expensive to power than our existing fleet because electricity costs are flat rate with no discount for off-peak charging. Initial projections suggested price parity between zero-emission and combustion engine buses would be achieved by 2027. However, it is evident that this balance won't be reached until 2030 or later. California's mandate, which sets a 2035 deadline for all bus purchases to be zero-emission, underscores the delayed affordability compared to our 2027 target. Electric buses are not yet manufactured in sufficient quantities and are expected to become more affordable as the industry advances in the future. Moreover, we do an exceptional job caring for our fleet, some of which will still be within their lifecycle in 2035 and it would be a waste of taxpayer money to retire buses prior to then. Additionally, the cost of the needed infrastructure will pose a significant challenge for our district. We are unsure whether our electric grid has sufficient capacity to meet our needs.

Amidst New York State's challenging financial landscape, our district faces unique hurdles fueled by a decade-long tax cap and significantly less New York State Aid due to our wealth index, setting us apart from neighboring districts. Our taxpayers already pay more of the overall school district budget than neighboring districts of similar size. Although the enacted law expands Transportation Aid eligibility to cover expenses related to electric school buses, the state's contribution will be substantially lower than that received by neighboring districts.

Consequently, we anticipate our taxpayers bearing significant expenses during the transition. For example, based on budgeting objectives that require an eye towards NYSED's equity framework, as well as in light of rising inflation and tax levy increases, it is likely that significant reductions in educational and extracurricular programming, or their elimination, will be required in order to fund the ambitious goal of 100 percent electric vehicle busing. With only so much we can ask from our public financially, we do not want to sacrifice educational opportunities for transportation.

Within Warwick's expansive 100 square miles, the recent mandate for zero-emission buses overlooks critical factors like distance, terrain, and real-world operational challenges, raising concerns about its feasibility and effectiveness in meeting our community's transportation needs. The law fails to address geographical variations, weather conditions, or the specific transportation needs of different districts. While manufacturers claim an average range of 125 to 200 miles for zero-emission buses, real-world conditions such as temperature, terrain, speed, driver behavior, and battery degradation are likely to result in significantly shorter ranges once these buses are in operation in our communities. As it currently stands, nearly a third of our existing routes would not be able to transport our students with the limitations of these electric buses. These limitations would lead us to have to purchase more buses, which we doubt we could staff due to the nationwide bus driver shortage. Furthermore, it is crucial to acknowledge the challenges associated with completely transitioning all student transportation to zero-emission vehicles. School districts provide transportation for students in various scenarios beyond regular routes. These scenarios include private and charter school attendees, special education placements, homeless students, field trips, and athletic events.

The Warwick Valley Central School District remains deeply concerned about the implications of the law mandating the exclusive acquisition of zero-emission buses starting July 1, 2027, and the operation of solely zero-emission buses by July 1, 2035. All of our schools have been designated Green Ribbon Schools by the U.S. Department of Education. With Green Ribbon designation and a track record of implementing various green initiatives over the past decade, we are fully committed to advancing the overarching objective of promoting clean energy alternatives. Nevertheless, we stress the importance of approaching this transition with pragmatism and consideration of the challenges faced by districts like ours. The current pricing disparity, infrastructure limitations, and lack of consideration for geographical factors and diverse transportation needs present formidable obstacles that must be addressed. Additionally, the financial strain imposed by the transition, exacerbated by the state's funding structure, further complicates matters. Ultimately, we urge policymakers to reconsider the timeline and provisions of this law. This correction will ensure a more feasible transition to zero-emission school bus transportation for all schools across New York State.

***Here are some highlights from our schools this week:***

## **Park Avenue Elementary School**

Kindergarten students in art class with Ms. Martimucci learn about Keith Haring. Keith Haring was an activist artist who moved to New York City at 20. After gaining popularity, Haring opened his own shop where his art is sold on all types of goods. These goods include T-shirts, sneakers, mugs, magnets and more. Kindergarten students used Keith Haring's style to recreate some of his famous characters. Students focused on creating bright backgrounds and using thick bold lines just like Keith.

The Park Avenue Student Council is working on their Spring Project. This project will raise money for K9 First Aid Kits for dog handlers to carry while on duty. These kits are specific for K9 police dogs and provide the essential equipment to care for a K9 when veterinary care is not immediately available. As part of this project the Warwick Police Department's K9's visited Park Avenue. Each grade came to the outdoor classroom for a 20-minute Meet & Greet session with the dogs (Rocky and Fritz) and their handlers, Officers Kevin and Derek. Thank you to the police department for visiting, sharing what they do with our students and for their exceptional professionalism while working with our students. As well, thank you to our awesome Student Council advisors Amy Buliung and Theresa Canfield for organizing this opportunity.

## ***Sanfordville Elementary School***

Earlier this school year our PIE 1/2 classes visited village hall and made recommendations on how to improve the surrounding community. Warwick Village trustee Carly Foster recently informed teachers that some of the recommendations the students made included more first aid kits, children at play signs and recycling bins. These recommendations were implemented by the village. Our students embodied what our Portrait of a Graduate looks like in action. They were effective collaborators, communicators, and global and ethical citizens as they presented their ideas. They also showed that they are never too young to make an impact on the world around them!

The High School Spanish Club led by Kathleen Randall and Meghan Murphy visited Ms. Havell's classroom. They taught the students the seasons in Spanish and the months of the year. The club visitors taught the younger students with posters and singing songs. Kindergarten students always look forward to the club visit and learning new Spanish words.

Third, fourth and fifth grade students from Sanfordville Elementary and Warwick Valley Middle School participated in the Eighth Annual Orange County Elementary Special Olympics. They attended Presidential Park Elementary School in Middletown. Each athlete competed in three basketball and soccer skills. Basketball skills included a 10-yard dribble in a straight line (timed), a chest pass into a 3-foot by 3-foot square box, and shooting baskets. Soccer skills included a 10-yard dribble in a straight line (timed), kicking goals into an open net from 10-15 feet away and

four aimed passes. During the award ceremony, each athlete stood on the podium to receive a medal or ribbon. Go Wee Wildcats!

### ***Warwick Valley Middle School***

Mr. Kirshke and his MAC students recently displayed all of the characteristics of a Portrait of a Graduate by completing their sustainable village projects. These projects were the final projects of a unit focused on the many different types of energy sources, both fossil and renewable, that societies need to function properly. The unit began by looking at the pros and cons of these sources. It discussed options that were viable for the preservation of the Earth, as well as future generations. At this point, students worked in groups researching the energy source, or sources they felt were best. They then presented their findings to the class via a digital presentation, thus, becoming teachers and effective communicators.

Soon after, the students looked at fringe energy sources such as sound by making cup telephones. They also researched how scientists use them for renewable energy purposes. After the presentations were completed, students began to investigate waste management procedures by embarking on virtual tours of New York City's waste management program. They also researched how Las Vegas handles waste, how water treatment plants work, and how food is provided and distributed in cities and towns. With a strong knowledge of sustainable practices, the students worked in teams to create a sustainable village of their own. This was based on a geographical location randomly chosen. These geographical locations included a coastal area, a mountainous and forested area, and an open grassland area.

### **Warwick Valley High School**

The high school proudly hosted its ninth annual career fair. This event underscored the vital connection between the school and the wider community. It was a fantastic opportunity for our students to interact directly with community members representing various professions. They gained valuable insights into different career paths.

The presence of community members not only enriches our students' understanding of potential career choices but also emphasizes the importance of community engagement in education. By bridging the gap between the classroom and the real world, we provide students with a holistic learning experience that extends beyond textbooks and lectures.

During the event, students were encouraged to ask questions, sparking meaningful conversations and fostering a spirit of curiosity and exploration. From healthcare professionals to entrepreneurs, each guest brought fresh perspectives and a wealth of knowledge. This interaction inspired our students to dream big and pursue their passions.

Beyond the exchange of information, the Career Fair served as a powerful reminder of the symbiotic relationship between our school and the community. By inviting community members into our school, we strengthen ties, build trust, and create opportunities for collaboration and mutual support.

As we reflect on the success of this event, we reaffirm our commitment to fostering a culture of community involvement in our school. By continuing to bring the community into our educational initiatives, we ensure that our students are well-equipped to thrive in an ever-changing world, supported by a network of mentors, advocates, and role models from their own community.