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School buses start running again next week for Wednesday, September 3 openings at Ellenville, Pine Bush and Rondout Valley schools. Be safe when driving; they're carrying our future! Photo by Chris Rowley

Back To School!

New Years Starts Wednesday As New Report Calls For Sharing Of Administrative Costs, Late HS Start Times

By Chris Rowley

By Chris Rowley REGIONAL – Our local school districts all kick off their 2014-15 school years on September 3. For some it has been a busy summer; in Pine Bush new teachers have been hired and a \$16 million capital project has begun. At Ellenville, the district is now looking ahead to new capital projects as they have finished the last round of bonding from twenty years back; there is a sense there that the district is in quite a good position. In Rondout Valley, a recent consolidation is done and new horizons are on the agenda.

Each of the school districts reflect a sense of having weathered a recent storm, embedded in the recent Great Recession, which decimated their budgets following the state financial crisis of 2009. The Gap Elimination Adjustment and other state budgetary devices have stripped the districts of funding, reducing state aid and cutting back on promised Foundation Aid, on which the districts had previously made their plans. At the same time, the districts have seen a contraction in student numbers, reflecting the changing demographics of the region.

Looking ahead, we have a report from the Center for Research Regional Education and Outreach (CRREO) at SUNY New Paltz, stemming from an

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ongoing partnership between themselves and the Legislative Action Committee of the Ulster County School Boards Association. The first policy brief released by these partners is titled "An Agenda for Change through Countywide Collaboration."

The second brief "Later School Times for Adolescents" reviews the current literature on this topic, which has been gaining traction with educators across the country... and which the Rondout Valley school board meeting this week featured in discussions.

The partnership seeks to promote countywide thinking among the eight Ulster County School districts — Ellenville, Highland, Kingston, Rondout Valley, Onteora, Saugerties, New Paltz and Walkkill. It began with a symposium in November 2013 at SUNY New Paltz, where efforts to come up with countywide responses to the current challenges were begun. Among the ideas being discussed are moving towards a regional transportation model, regional pre-K, course sharing, distance learning, and the sharing of staff.

The groups compiled a list of the regulatory and legislative barriers that currently prevent school districts from engaging in collaborative efforts. This could become the basis for a platform to advocate for legislation on behalf of the county's school districts.

"Education is government's most important function," said CRREO director Gerald Benjamin, a former Ulster County Legislature chairman and dean of SUNY New Paltz. "In a time of tax caps, rapid demographic change and declining school enrollments, it is crucial that we seek smart new ways to efficiently and effectively deliver the best possible education for our children in the Hudson Valley."

CRREO was established in 2007 to engage SUNY New Paltz with the communities across our region. More policy briefs will be released by the partnership over the next few months.

Working in another direction, and with pressure coming up from Orange County, is the ongoing effort of the Fair Funding For Our Schools movement. This group is seeking to energize our political leadership on the subject of school aid and the now notorious Gap Elimination Adjustment. A public meeting in Middletown is going to be held in early October to bring together educators, administrators and concerned parents.

The issue of starting school at a later time for high schools is building off research that shows what many former students and now parents know all too well... Teenagers are prone to not getting to sleep early enough and are often half asleep in morning classes that start before 8 a.m. The conundrum for districts lies in the need to be as efficient as possible with the school buses;

most buses make double runs, one for the high school students and then another for the later arriving elementary and middle school students.

Also, while the property tax bills are going out this week across the region, the upcoming work on budgets for next year has really begun already. Our school superintendents and their superintendents for business are looking ahead, perhaps nervously, as they contemplate the upcoming election and in its aftermath the state budgeting season with who know what possible surprises in store for public education funding in New York.

And beyond all these matters lies the much disputed Common Core Curriculum, now settling in after a couple of rocky years but fast getting picked up as a Fox News anger staple. While some controversy continues, the curriculum is now being taught, and this is what our students will be learning in the coming year.

We'll see what happens... after school starts next Wednesday.

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