

For a sustainable world take small but essential actions

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For a sustainable world, take small but essential actions

Gone are the days when most kids walked to school to scattered one-room schoolhouses often miles from their homes. Gone, too, are the days when students wrote on slates, erased one lesson and then wrote another in its place. Weve all heard the stories from earlier generations, steeped in rugged independence.

Now our schools are in centralized districts and we pay thousands of dollars to run the big yellow buses that transport our children safely from their homes to modern learning centers. There, they write school assignments on paper, going through reams of it.

As we revel in our progress, its easy to overlook some of the drawbacks.

One of them is pollution. The diesel emissions increase breathing problems for kids with asthma or other lung diseases and they increase greenhouse gases, adding to global warming which will one day harm us all if its not curbed.

The federal government has offered schools help albeit limited in dealing with the pollution. A retrofit program for school buses came out of a 2003 settlement between Toyota and the Environmental Protection Agency under the Clean Air Act. According to United States v. Toyota, about 2.2 million vehicles had faulty diagnostic systems; the car manufacturer was required to pay \$20 million for a supplemental environmental project.

The Berne-Knox-Westerlo School District was wise and progressive to apply for the grant, issued by the Clean Buses for Kids Diesel Retrofit Program. The district recently learned it would get \$149,000 to retrofit up to 19 of its school buses, which run on diesel fuel, with filters that would lower sulfur emissions.

So far, so good.

The school board and administrators, though, may decide against accepting the grant. They are concerned about the cost of replacing the filters after their five-year warranty runs out and the board is concerned about added fuel costs.

School budgets are the only ones voted on by the public and we dont blame BKW leaders for being cautious and careful with taxpayers money. But we urge them to take another look.

Andrew Amey, the account manager for the Clean Buses program, told us that the low-sulfur fuel needed for the filters will be available in all 50 states by Oct. 15 and, with the filters, fuel consumption may go up 1 to 2 percent.

William Crosson, the director of transportation for the district at Wappingers Falls, which has the largest fleet of school buses in the state, has had the filters installed on 111 of the districts 250 buses. Crosson told us he has seen no increase in fuel consumption.

There may be a slight increase in cost, but we believe it is worth it. In this space a year-and-a-half ago, we wrote about the unsuccessful but idealistic campaign of one Guilderland High School student, Brian Tomasik, to convince his school board to buy recycled instead of virgin paper.

A bid for recycled paper cost \$1.50 more per case than virgin paper, he told us. The increase seemed slight weighed against the environmental costs.

It takes at least two to three-and-a-half tons of wood to manufacture one ton of virgin paper while one ton of recycled paper, in contrast, requires only slightly more than one ton of old paper. Besides massive energy consumption, paper production creates direct air emission, which increases greenhouse gases and hastens ozone depletion. Some of the pollutants are carcinogenic and all can cause toxic health effects.

Manufacturing one ton of virgin paper requires more water 12,000 to 22,000 gallons than the creation of a ton of any other industrial product. And wastewater from the virgin pulp and paper industry contains thousands of types of particles that can acidfy, cloud, and deoxygenate streams and lakes, killing fish and other species.

Paper comprises 40 percent of municipal solid waste.

The school board decided to buy the virgin paper. Such decisions are being made by the conscientious guardians of public funds everywhere. But we would argue the public is better served if efforts are made to save our world for future generations.

If we cant count on our federal government to require measures that will preserve our world, we must summon some of the independent spirit of earlier generations those who delight in telling of the long walks to school or of taking turns to stoke the schoolhouse stove, of the sacrifices made for the common good.

The pressure to preserve may not be as immediate as the pressure to pass the next school budget, but, in the long run, residents may appreciate the foresight. Individual school districts can make a difference and constituents should let their boards know their sentiments.

Would each taxpayer be willing to pay, say, an extra dollar a year towards clean air"

"Perhaps most importantly," Tomasik wrote to the Guilderland School Board, "this would set a good example to students, parents, and citizens, both within and beyond the district, of the importance of taking small but essential actions that help to ensure a more sustainable world for posterity."

Sometimes we have to pay for progress and work together to save ourselves.

Melissa Hale-Spencer, editor

