

Expanding Spaces, Expanding Minds

Westbury superintendent gives progress report

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For reasons that are not quite understood, the Westbury School District is bucking the demographic trends and actually increasing its enrollment.

That has led to serious overcrowding and its attendant problems.

By 2021, according to projections, the middle school will be at 138 percent of the state maximum recommended capacity. The high school faces even more severe overcrowding; by the 2023-24 school year, it is expected to be at 173 percent of capacity (2,023 expected enrollment for a facility built to handle 1,169).

The district found a temporary solution by putting its freshmen at its Ninth Grade Academy, leasing space at Nassau Community College. Freshmen are expected to join the high school by the 2020-21 scholastic year. A district newsletter notes that state officials will not accept this as a long-term solution. There are substantial leasing and transportation costs associated with the Academy.

Fortunately, the district voters gave their assent to a \$58,585,000 bond referendum last spring that will address the overcrowding by building modulars at both schools. In addition, the funds will make necessary infrastructure improvements at both facilities.

Modulars

It just happened that the day that Westbury Superintendent of Schools Eudes S. Budhai sat down with the *Westbury Times* (Jan. 29) was when the construction bids were due.

"The preliminary phases begin in April," Budhai said. "The actual construction will start in the summer [at both schools]. So we're on the timeline, and we're on time to open up the high school [additions] in September."

The middle school



This rendering shows one of the modular expansions to the Westbury High School that will add 14 classrooms.

(Contributed Rendering)

projects are expected to be completed in time for the 2020-21 school year.

Budhai wanted to clear up a misconception about the modulars.

"The modulars are structured. They are buildings, not portables. Some people use 'module' like it [means] 'portable,' but it's not," he explained. "A module is a prefabricated construction which means that when you look at a construction after it's completed, it will look like it's part of the building. It's a structure. It's a building, not a portable."

According to the information the district provided to its residents in advance of the vote, "Modulars have an expected lifespan of 20-30 years and offer many of the advantages of brick and mortar at less cost and faster project start-to-finish completion time."

Upward Trends

In 2017, the district's board of education sent an open letter to residents making note of the low performance

scores and pledging changes. Among those was promoting Budhai to superintendent; previously, he had served as assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction and personnel.

"All of our schools are in good standing," Budhai noted. "Our middle school was a focus school—those are the designations that the state had in place for schools that needed the most support to increase their achievement scores."

He added. "As a result of improvements in student scores, we were able to come off the list and be a school in good standing."

Budhai said that 100 percent of Westbury students passed the physics exam—emphasizing that these were ninth graders passing an exam that's normally given in 12th grade.

"A ninth grader passing a physics exam is pretty extraordinary, and those students are going to be taking even further advanced placement courses—which

are considered to be extremely rigorous," he said. "Students are also taking college-level courses with the partners we have at the various area colleges."

"Every year we see an increase in student scoring 3 or better on the AP exams (scored on a 1-5 scale)," he continued. "We had an increase in the living environment (formerly biology) regents were 80 percent of our students passed the exam in eighth grade that used to be taken in 10th grade."

The majority of Westbury students are entering high school with two or three regents to their credits, giving them opportunities within their schedules to take on advanced placement courses.

"Our students are doing amazing things. We're now closing this achievement gap between our school district and [others]," Budhai said. "Nassau County in particular has the highest achievement scores in the state. We're up against the Jerichos and Syossets. I don't have a

problem with that. I think our students can perform... with the proper support and the proper resources we can create magic."

Budhai said that he had seen a 15- to 25-percent increase in test scores, noting, "We had a 10-percent increase this year in language arts—that's unique. I would love to talk to any other district that has made the gains that we've had. We've also made increases in our math, as well as the 3 to 8 [grade] assessments."

Budhai related that at the Park Avenue Elementary School for two successive years—first as fourth graders and then as fifth graders—students beat middle school- and high school-level students in robotics competitions.

"There's no limit to what our students can do," he summed up. "Our children are empowered to create their own goals."

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