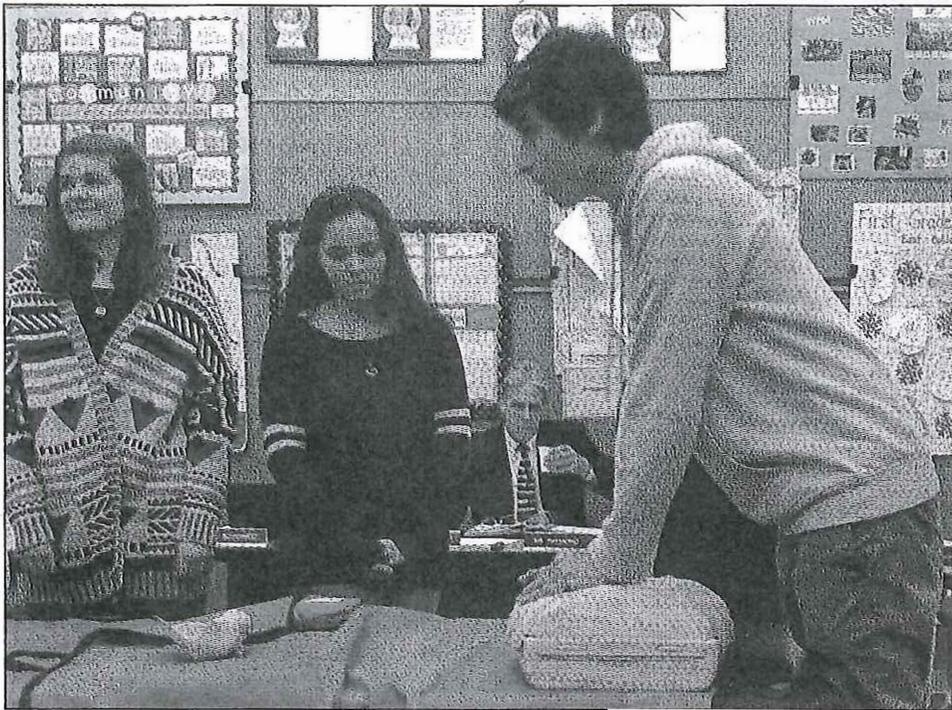


Valley Central OKs bus pact; Smart School plan



VC students demonstrate CPR techniques at a recent school board meeting. Pictured (l. - r.) Erin McKeon, Alayna Mahon and Lucas Maqueda.

By TED REMSNYDER

The Valley Central Board of Education made a pair of moves to shore up major aspects of the district's future at last Monday's board meeting, as the panel approved the district's new transportation contract and gave the greenlight to the administration's Smart Schools Investment Plan. The five-year bus contract with the East End Bus Lines of Medford was the result of a Cooperative Request for Proposal with the Wallkill Central School District, and the agreement will give Valley Central access to dozens of new vehicles that the Long Island firm will purchase as part of the deal.

The deal concludes the district's three-decade relationship with the local First Student bus company, which was one of four businesses that submitted bids for the joint bus contract. The RFP's rubric determined that East End's proposal was superior to the bids extended by First Student, MAT and Selby. The compact, which was approved unanimously by the board, keeps transportation costs flat for the district. "From what we budgeted this year, we will not see an increase," Valley Central Assistant Superintendent for Business Lisa Raymond said. "We're

right in the ballpark for where we need to be. If we had stayed with First Student, it would have been substantial." East End's bid arrived \$7.6 million below its closest competitor.

The economics made it infeasible to stay with First Student, which is based in Wallkill. "We hadn't gone out for an RFP in 30 years and we really needed to get that out and clean up a lot of the contract," Superintendent John Xanthis said. "Our attorneys didn't recommend just going into negotiations with them (First Union). For the benefit of the district and the taxpayers, we had to get it out there and let people bid. The numbers and the other things on the rubric came in the best for the company we're going with." East End owner John Mensch has vowed to honor the contracts of the current crew of 150 bus drivers that transport Valley Central and Wallkill kids to and from school every day. "He's talked to the Teamsters and they're holding a meeting on February 11 at the Wallkill Middle School auditorium for all drivers, monitors and management," Raymond said. "He'll hire them all. He's prepared to offer them all a job."

The drivers will all be required to

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reapply for their positions if they want to stay on under East End's management. "They have to go through the process certainly," Xanthis said. "He's starting out new and he just can't hire them. He has to check their license, drug testing, all of the things that you do when you hire new employees. He's going to have that meeting to talk about what his plans are and to kind of squelch the rumor mill. I think that will be good for everybody." The cooperative bid allowed both districts to secure a beneficial deal. "The consolidated bid versus the single bid, the rates were cheaper," Raymond said.

At the Jan. 30 meeting, which was postponed one week due to inclement weather the previous Monday, the board also unanimously approved its Smart Schools Investment Plan, which will outfit the district's schools with

technological and security upgrades. The first wave of renovations will focus on improving the district's tech framework and the plan calls for spending more than \$694,000 on measures such as increased bandwidth and new fiber optics cables. Once the district's outdated technological infrastructure is improved, Valley Central can use additional Smart Bond funds to purchase new devices for student use. "Our railroad right now is really antiquated, so we have to bring it up to date to handle all of the things we want to bring in," Xanthis said.

The first phase of the plan only uses a portion of the \$3.4 million in state funding the school will eventually receive and the document will be posted on the district webpage for a community review period. "It has to sit on our website for 30 days for anybody to ask questions or contest," Raymond said. "We have to submit the investment plan to the state so they can approve it, we've got preliminary

approval, then we can start doing what we want to do. We submit that to the state and we'll be reimbursed within 90 days. We're hoping that before the summer work will start and then it will go straight through the summer." The plan includes \$1.1 million in security upgrades for district schools, but not all aspects of that segment have been finalized. At the meeting, Trustee Melvin Wesenberg expressed reservations about a part of the plan that would install license plate-scanning security cameras in school parking lots. "We're still reviewing that because we know there are concerns here," Raymond said. "(Assistant Superintendent) Mike Bellarosa and (district IT head) Chris Moore went to a presentation at Ulster BOCES and we think there are some things that we think are better out there. So we're going to research those. Security we're going to put on hold for a little while, because we want to get our infrastructure done first."

The meeting began with a presentation from a group of high school students demonstrating the district's annual CPR and AED training course. Program participation is required for seniors to graduate, but the district decided to expand the initiative for grades 9-12. "The state mandate says students have to have exposure to it at some point in their high school career," Bellarosa said. "When the mandate came out, we were worried that we would miss somebody and then we realized that it's such a good thing. We can just do it every year to every kid and if they get it four times that's great. Maybe it will save somebody's life." Students get one day of hands-on CPR training and one day of AED instruction. The high school pupils used dummies to show how easy it is to apply an automated external defibrillator to someone who could be dying from a heart attack.