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Schools say Indian Point evacuation plan unrealistic

By Abby Luby

Evacuation plans in the event of a radiological release emergency at the Indian Point Nuclear Power Plants, especially for area schools, are being called unrealistic by many school officials, who say it requires teachers to perform duties not stipulated in their contracts.

If there is a radiological release at the Indian Point Nuclear Power Plants during a normal school day, the updated version of Westchester County's evacuation plan stipulates that teachers will accompany their students to reception centers several miles from the schools. The plan only affects those schools and residents who live within a 10 mile emergency planning zone, or EPZ, that surrounds the plants.

The "Emergency Planning for the Indian Point Nuclear Power Plants" states that students will be taken "with their teachers by bus to a School Reception Centers" in the event of a radiological emergency, even though no such agreement was negotiated or is included in teacher union contracts.

"There's a lot about the county plan that is unrealistic and that's one of them," said Tom Cole, Assistant Superintendent for Business for the Yorktown Central School District. "But we have surveyed our teachers to see who would be willing to stay in certain emergencies. We found a core of teachers that would stay based on their circumstances."

The plan, which is required by New York State and by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), has often been criticized by county and local officials for not being realistic. Many have said one of the big problems would be the traffic congestion caused by evacuating the schools. Most school officials have also voiced their concerns about the evacuation plan's viability.

"The issue will not be about accompanying students to a safe place because we have very caring teachers," said Judith Johnson, Superintendent of the Peekskill School District. "I think the issue will be that the teachers will want to get home to their children – that's going to be the big issue."

Johnson said that Peekskill teachers have worked out a buddy system to accommodate teachers that couldn't stay with their students. "When we've had early dismissal the teachers who live near by who don't have immediate obligations have agreed to remain in

the building until parents pick up their kids,” said Johnson. “That allows the teachers who live at a distance and who have children to leave. It’s a really nice buddy system that’s taken place informally at the schools.”

Anthony Sutton, Commissioner of the Westchester County Department of Emergency Services who oversees the emergency evacuation plan, said that the county understands that some teachers may not be able to travel with students to reception centers. “I do understand that if two teachers are standing next one another [during an emergency] and one has young kids in a school district somewhere else and they want to get back to their kids and there is a teacher standing next to them whose kids are grown, they would say ‘listen you go, I’ll stay with the kids. It’s not a problem.’ I think that’s the kind of stuff you can’t put in a plan but that’s the stuff that would happen very frequently in a real emergency.”

Teachers who are pregnant or are of child bearing age are more susceptible to the effects of radiation exposure, studies have shown. The evacuation plan presents them with difficult choices if they have young children at home or at a school. The plan makes no provision for transporting teachers back to their vehicles once children are picked up at reception centers.

However, Michael Lillis, a teacher at Lakeland High School and president of the Lakeland Federation of Teachers said he expects teachers to respond as they do in any other normal emergency situation.

“My expectation is that everyone would be here in an emergency. We are professional and no one is going to stand in front of 25 students and abandoned them.”

Lillis said that some teachers will be on the buses and others are expected to take their cars and follow buses to the reception centers.

“Even though it’s a scary situation the people in the school buses will do everything they can to make sure the students are safe,” Lillis said.

Accompanying students during an evacuation is not the big issue for some teachers and administrators – it’s the transportation.

“We certainly don’t have enough buses for the 6300 kids in our district,” said Lakeland Superintendent Kenneth Connolly. “It will depend on the county and if they will provide us with additional buses.” Lakeland is one of the few districts that own its buses as do the Hendrick Hudson and Croton Harmon school districts. Owning a bus fleet not only makes a difference in how well districts would evacuate students, but it could determine how evacuation drills are carried out.

Lakeland’s emergency evacuation drills include emptying out school buildings and having students get on buses that remain outside the school for a short period of time before allowing students to return to class. Hendrick Hudson’s evacuation drill has had buses drive some five miles to Croton and back.

“We never went to our reception center at Manhattanville College,” said Lynda Hall, Principal of the Buchanan-Verplanck Elementary School in the Hendrick Hudson School district.

Anthony Merlini, Hendrick Hudson’s Director of Schools Facilities, Operations and Maintenance, said many of his district’s custodians are expected to double as bus drivers in an emergency evacuation. “They will drive our large buses while the smaller buses are driven by other members our community.”

Linda Carpenter, Executive Director for Finance and Operations for the Ossining School District oversees the Emergency Management Program. She said their drills have buses do a run only around the block of each school.

“We’ve were one of the first districts to do this around four years ago. We put elementary students from Pre-K to fifth grade on the bus which then runs around the block.”

Carpenter said the buses cycle back until all of the district’s 4300 students have been through the drill. The Bauman Bus Company services the Ossining students. “The emergency drills are part of their contract which they provide at no additional cost. In case of emergency they will supply us with their available buses until the county buses get here.”

For many educators the question is whether bus drivers will actually come up to the schools to retrieve students, especially if there is a radioactive release. “What bus driver is coming north, past Indian Point, to pick up Peekskill [students] to take us south?” asked Johnson. “That’s a really interesting dilemma. Hopefully it will never happen – I can’t picture that scenario.” According to the emergency plan students in Peekskill are to be relocated to schools in Hartsdale and Greenburgh.

Emergency evacuation drills don’t include actually transporting students to the reception centers. Lakeland students are expected to go to their reception center at SUNY Purchase, about 20 miles away. “The staff and everyone knows where we are going,” said Connolly. “We’ve all reviewed the evacuation plan but we’ve never actually been there.”

It would be impossible to hold an emergency evacuation drill where students would be transported to reception centers, said Sutton. “The consequences of doing an actual Indian Point evacuation drill mean that life as we know it, on a daily basis, would stop. If you had a doctor’s appointment that day you couldn’t go. If you had a bank closing you couldn’t go or if you had elective surgery at the Hudson Valley Hospital, you couldn’t go. The county’s bus system would be disrupted because be would reallocating all of the transit resources up into that area.” Sutton said all of the county’s resources including transportation, law enforcement, fire and emergency medical services, would have to participate in the one day drill.

The county runs very thorough, table top drills every year to make sure all the necessary lines of communications are operating in emergency mode. But as schools continue to practice their own versions of emergency drills, there is a sense of uncertainty.

“There are so many ‘ifs’ on this whole thing,” said Robert Faigle, teacher in the Yorktown Central School District and also president of the Yorktown Teachers Union. “The best of plans can go astray. If you’re trying to get out on Route 202 along with everyone else, you can’t really leave. In a crisis parents will come to get their children.”

The evacuation plan advises parents not to go to their children’s school to pick them up, and instead, head to the reception centers to get their children. Many school administrators say this is another unrealistic piece of the plan and have come up with their own alternate plan in an emergency. The brochure also notes that many schools have their own plans in place that would allow parents to pick up their children prior to relocation.

Marjorie E. Castro, Superintendent of the Croton Harmon School District said parents have worked out agreements with their children’s schools. “Parents have told us whether their child must stay and wait for them or a neighbor to be picked up or to go to the reception center. We have a sign-out procedure.”

The district has 1800 students and Castro said they considered many scenarios, including transporting students to their reception center at the Westchester Community College campus in Valhalla.

“For the high school kids that have cars, we’re not going to keep them in school or make them go to Valhalla. We tell parents to please talk to their high school students and consider if they want them to be stuck in a traffic jam somewhere or it might be safer coming with us than going home.”

If an emergency evacuation is announced, there would most probably be a rush of parents at the Yorktown school said Cole. “Parents would be on their child’s school campus in the same way it was on 911 when we were overwhelmed with parents. This would probably be worse.”

Connolly said he would expect hundreds of parents to show up at the elementary schools in the event of an emergency evacuation. “My guess is that we would have a massive traffic jam in the entire Westchester County.”

The county claims they want parents to be reunited with their children as soon as possible in an emergency evacuation. “It’s not our objective to separate kids from their parents in an evacuation,” said Sutton. “We try not to shut down the rail lines so if dads working in New York City hear that something is going on, we want him to be able to get on the train and get to his family.”

In general Sutton understands that the plan is both complicated and ambitious. “This is a good plan and is probably one of the best plans around. “We don’t have the option of saying it won’t work.”

For school administrators in the EPZ, it’s more a matter of drilling regularly and being prepared as much as possible.

“We don’t spend a lot of time wondering about the plan even though we are less than 10 miles from Indian Point, which we see clearly every day sitting on the riverfront,” said Johnson. “We all know that there is a plan in place but we also know that the plan is faulty. We just really don’t dwell on ‘what if.’”

More information about the emergency evacuation plan is at www.westchesergov.com/keepingsafe_emergencyplanning.htm

A copy of the emergency panning booklet is available at www.westchestergov.com/pdfs/IP_Westchester_CEPiP_08-9.pdf