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LEAGUE OF CONSERVATION VOTERS

# CHISPA, NYLCV, and the NYLCV Education Fund

## *Case Study: Electric School Bus Campaign*



# Executive Summary

This case study highlights the story-in-progress of the Electric School Bus Campaign led by the New York League of Conservation Voters (NYLCV) and its sister organization The New York League of Conservation Voters Education Fund (NYLCVEF) and supported in both funding and capacity-building by Chispa, a program of the League of Conservation Voters (LCV). This case was commissioned by Chispa and includes the perspectives of over 15 staff, community, and coalition partners who have engaged with the campaign for electric school buses (ESB).

Overall, the campaign supports the effective and equitable implementation of New York City's mandate (Local Law 120) to transition the city's fleet of [10,000](#) school buses to all electric by 2035 and the subsequent nation-leading state legislation requiring that all new school bus purchases be zero emission starting in 2027, and all [45,000](#) school buses statewide be 100% zero emission by 2035. The campaign continues to push for state funding to help school districts invest in ESBs, including through budget allocations and government bonds.

This campaign addresses the public health and climate crisis propelled by air pollution from dirty diesel buses and highlights the disproportionate burden of this pollution on the developing lungs of young people and especially within communities of color, where many of the diesel bus depots are located. In addition, this narrative highlights the importance of working in cross-sector coalitions across regions and areas of expertise to maximize grassroots and grassroots power-building in both the policy development and implementation phases of the campaign.

Further, this case demonstrates the unique opportunities and challenges that arise during implementation - from the rapid development and testing of electric bus technology, to battling partisan politics and misinformation in the press, to providing capacity assistance and guidance to school districts so they can take advantage of the state budget allocations - pointing to the necessity for authentic community engagement strategies and grassroots organizing expertise to grow community-driven support for ESB adoption.

Lastly, this case study calls for sustained funding with flexibility for 501c3 and c4 spending to effectively support continued coalition efficacy and to expand grassroots community organizing initiatives in impacted communities of color, within disability communities, and across school districts that might be hesitant to "Vote Yes" to accept funding or awards for electric buses.

The iconic image of the yellow school bus provides an accessible entry point for widespread community awareness and involvement in protecting young people, communities, and the planet through clean bus campaigns in New York and across the country. The New York Electric School Bus Campaign case participants hope their long-term commitment to the work and ongoing insights will offer a bright spot for fellow environmental justice advocates working to achieve the shared goal of a nation-wide transition to ESB.

# Community Context: Why Electric School Buses Are at the Forefront of Environmental Justice

Diesel school buses—the largest form of public transportation in the country—emit harmful exhaust that is especially damaging to the developing lungs of children.

States Deb Peck Kelleher, Deputy Director at the Alliance for Clean Energy New York and Electric School Bus Campaign Coalition Member, *“I see kids lined up in front of schools and their noses are at the exact same level as the diesel bus tailpipes. Those kindergartners and first graders are breathing the exhaust right in.”*

Further exacerbating the problem is that due to frequent stops and idling, oftentimes the diesel exhaust seeps into the cabin, making the air inside the bus even more toxic than the air outside.

In a 2001 [landmark study](#), researchers found that kids riding diesel school buses were breathing in 4 to 8 times more toxins than they would have otherwise. Diesel school buses also travel thousands of miles through neighborhoods each year, polluting communities. At the same time, there is general agreement among scientists that the burning of fossil fuels—including but not limited to diesel—is the principal cause of global climate change.

In September 2018, NYLCV/EF [released a white paper](#) documenting decades of scientific research on the negative public health and environmental impacts of diesel pollution and the disproportionate burden of dirty diesel bus emissions on low-income communities and communities of color. This is especially true in urban areas like New York City with higher exposure to diesel bus emissions.

The white paper details numerous studies linking diesel exhaust and its byproducts to lung damage and respiratory problems, cardiovascular illnesses, cancer, and higher mortality rates. Diesel pollution is worse near large traffic corridors, landfills, toxic waste sites and other places designated for undesirable land use.

Unfortunately, all too often these polluting facilities are located near communities that already face disproportionate impacts from climate change and decades of short-sighted and racist environmental policies.

Diesel exhaust pollution also affects student wellbeing and jeopardizes academic progress. It can harm cognitive development and lead to neurodevelopmental disorders, IQ loss, various cancers, and issues like cardiovascular disease that can follow them into adulthood.

There are more than [1.5 million children riding diesel school buses in New York State](#) who are regularly exposed to diesel pollution while commuting to and from school. Statewide, 1 in 10 children suffer from asthma, making it one of the leading chronic illnesses and among the top reasons for school absenteeism. In low-income communities and communities of color, poor air quality impacts public health at drastically higher rates. There are higher rates of diagnoses, mortality, and hospitalization for respiratory disease, with up to [1 in 4 children suffering from asthma](#) in some Disadvantaged Communities. In New York City, where many

students walk or take public transportation, the majority of school children using school buses are [those with disabilities](#).

Students with disabilities face disproportionate diesel pollution because they rely heavily on school buses and often travel longer routes across New York City. [Analyses from the Guarini](#) Center and the New York State Energy and Research Development Authority ([NYSERDA](#)) show that special-education students make up a large share of NYC bus riders, spend more time on buses statewide, and therefore encounter higher exposure to harmful pollutants. National studies echo this pattern: children on diesel buses can inhale up to four times more toxic exhaust than those in nearby cars, and reducing diesel exposure improves lung function and cuts absenteeism for students with asthma. Prioritizing disability justice in the shift to zero-emission buses will mean the most vulnerable students – also the ones most reliant on the system – will be among the first to receive these health benefits.

States Suhali Méndez, Policy and Legislative Coordinator at New York Lawyers for Public Interest and ESB Campaign Coalition Member, *“In New York City, a lot of these school bus depots are concentrated in disadvantaged communities. So that plays a lot into the environmental justice and environmental racism aspect of the work that we focus on. It doesn’t just impact children. It impacts a lot of people in the community, including bus depot workers and drivers who are inhaling the diesel emissions regularly. We also find that there are higher rates of absenteeism in the workplace as well as children missing school because they’re regularly inhaling toxic diesel emissions. These absences impact the long-term social and academic development structures for children and impact more students who receive special education services in New York City, because many of the children in special education are transported in these diesel buses. There is a lot of interconnectedness in the work we do in this campaign.”*

The ESB Campaign is grounded in this comprehensive research and shared values of protecting young people, dismantling systemic environmental racism, and preserving our planet.

States Lonnie “LJ” Portis, Acting Director of Policy and Legislative Affairs at WE ACT for Environmental Justice, and ESB Campaign community partner, *“Our goal and our mission is to make sure that people who live in these high pollution areas – in communities of color and in low income communities that are impacted by environmental hazards and the climate crisis first and worst – that they have a seat at the table. They are able to engage with political figures and folks who are making decisions. And they can express their concerns and their needs for their communities.”*

In practice, the campaign kept this commitment by intentionally creating opportunities for impacted residents to participate in the work. For example, through community events, school partnerships, and public facing activations organized by Juan Torres, Community Engagement Manager at NYLCV/EF, families, drivers, students, and educators have been invited to learn about ESBs, voice their concerns, and help shape local implementation strategies. These engagements – conducted in

collaboration with coalition partners such as Mothers Out Front, WE ACT For Environmental Justice, Alliance for Clean Energy New York, World Resources Institute, and the New York Lawyers for Public Interest – ensure that community members from high-pollution neighborhoods are not only informed but actively involved in decision making. By meeting people where they are and building trust, the campaign has expanded grassroots leadership and strengthened community power behind the transition to clean, zero-emission school buses.

# High-Level Overview: Electric School Bus Campaign to Date

**Campaign Mission.** To protect the health of our children and communities by supporting the statewide transition away from dirty diesel school buses to all-electric.

**Campaign Vision.** The equitable and effective implementation of the state and local mandates for school bus electrification by 2035.

NYLCV/EF is currently leading programs across New York State to educate and engage New Yorkers on environmental issues and encourage them to get involved in the decision-making process. Since 2017, NYLCV/EF have built a network of partner organizations and elevated the issue of diesel school bus pollution to become a statewide priority.

In 2018, the organization, in partnership with US PIRG, gathered more than [6,000 signatures](#) on a petition to the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and then-New York State Governor Cuomo asking them to prioritize the [Volkswagen Settlement](#) for ESBs, particularly in environmental justice communities that experience higher rates of air pollution and asthma. [In September 2018, the DEC announced it would allocate 40% \(\\$52.4 million\) of the Settlement for mitigating emissions from New York's bus fleets, including school buses, transit buses, and paratransit buses.](#)

In Fall 2021, after years of advocacy, coalition building, and organizing, New York City passed legislation to transition its entire school bus fleet to all-electric by 2035. Not long after, in 2022, New York State Governor Kathy Hochul and the New York State Senate and Assembly adopted nation-leading legislation that aims to have all new school bus purchases be zero-emission starting in 2027 and require all school buses statewide be zero-emission by 2035.

Additionally, NYLCV/EF successfully advocated for the legislature and the voters to approve the Clean Water, Clean Air, and Green Jobs Environmental Bond in November 2022, which included \$500 million for ESBs and charging infrastructure while ensuring that school districts serving Disadvantaged Communities will be at the front of the line to put electric buses on the road. These state and local wins coupled with the federal resources made available by the Biden Administration's Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, mean that ESBs have never been more accessible.

Since New York City and New York State passed legislation committing to a full transition to ESBs by 2035, NYLCV/EF has focused campaign efforts on ensuring its successful implementation. The organization has continued to collaborate with robust New York City and statewide coalitions and worked to deepen relationships with community-based organizations and their constituents to raise awareness and ensure that New York school districts are aware of the various funding opportunities and have the resources and community support to take advantage of the funds.

The Clean Buses for Healthy Niños campaign is a national initiative of Chispa, a program of LCV with a mission to ensure Latine and people of color have a strong voice in the decisions and policies that impact their communities and environment.

Chispa provides partial funding for the New York ESB Campaign and works collaboratively with NYLCV/EF staff on campaign strategy, in addition to leading the national [Alliance for Electric School Buses](#) coalition to promote multi-state learning among climate and environmental justice leaders.

Chispa's funding provides flexibility for campaign spending across 501c3 and c4 work and promotes a specific strategic focus on authentic community organizing and engagement as a necessary foundation of sustainable change and movement building.

## **A Unique Campaign Commitment to Electric Schools Bus Implementation**

While influencing policy is one hurdle, it is quite another to create the conditions for successful implementation. The implementation phase of the campaign presents opportunities to address challenges such as the rapid development and testing of electric bus technology, building infrastructure for battery storage and charging stations, and growing community support to influence school districts to "Vote Yes" to take advantage of funding opportunities.

New York State is one of the few places where residents in each school district must vote on whether to accept funding for ESBs that has *already* been awarded by the state or federal government. And there are instances of districts voting to turn down public funding, often due to misinformation about ESBs. In addition, district leaders are in need of guidance and capacity assistance so that they understand how to plan for a successful ESB transition and correctly submit the paperwork to receive the budget allocations. District planning support is being rolled out by NYSERDA, yet many districts have yet to take advantage of this assistance.

While industry work is in motion to test and refine the ESB technology and grow community support across school districts and impacted communities, challenges are being raised and campaign partners must now also invest in strategy and capacity to defend the policy. For example, there is a threat of federal resources being halted and there have been multiple legislative efforts to delay New York State's transition.

Simultaneously, partisan politics have fueled misinformation that is helping shape public opinion against the transition. Currently, NYLCV/EF and its coalition and community partners are responding by shoring up support from allies, leading education and community engagement strategies with frontline communities, school districts and community leaders, and testing innovative tactics to respond to and minimize the impacts of politically motivated misinformation campaigns.

States Jed Prickett, Clean Energy Analyst at Alliance for Clean Energy New York and Coalition Member, *"We bring an advocacy voice against those who want to see the mandate rolled back. Our coalition was formed when we were working together to get the bill passed, and now we need to defend it with all the attacks from the legislature. We're still focusing on getting everything implemented, but now there's a bit of playing defense."*

## **Working in City and State-Wide Coalition**

The campaign's sustained policy and implementation success thus far can be attributed to the maximizing of resources, capacity, and expertise through a broad base of committed coalition partners both in New York City and statewide, including but not limited to NYLCV/EF, Alliance for Clean Energy New York, Mothers Out Front, New York Lawyers for Public Interest, and World Resources Institute, each of whom participated in interviews for this case study.

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Mothers Out Front, with coalition participation led by Senior Organizer Sarah Smiley, and NYLCV/EF, with leadership from Community Engagement Manager Juan Torres, ensure that authentic community engagement strategies are embedded in the overall campaign focus.

States Smiley, *"For us, understanding the environmental justice and climate impacts of transitioning to electric school buses and the health impacts for our children, has been motivating for our members. Nobody wants their kids breathing diesel emissions on their bus ride to school. Parents play an important role in talking with their school districts and elevating community voice. Realizing that they can directly impact reducing a district's emissions has encouraged more parents to get involved."*

Lastly, a strong coalition needs dedicated management capacity to keep operations running efficiently and effectively. Starting in the fall of 2023, Lea Giddins, Director of Community and Civic Engagement at NYLCV/EF, began managing the coalition to ensure regular coordination among members and implement strategies to drive the campaign forward.

## **Community Engagement and Organizing**

In the implementation phase, there is an increased strategic focus and investment in building a foundation of community understanding and support for the transition to the electric fleets. Upfront education and outreach, and providing opportunities for concerned members of the public to ask questions and articulate concerns, are recognized as essential to successful outcomes.

States Méndez with New York Lawyers for Public Interest, *"Creating awareness is not a linear path. It is something that's all encompassing and we have to be very strategic in order to do that."*

In retrospect, many coalition members believe it would have been beneficial to have engaged impacted communities and district leaders sooner in the campaign and recognize how the campaign has benefitted as it has evolved to engage both grasstops and grassroots environmental justice communities to garner support across the state. Notably, NYLCV/EF shifted their staffing structure to create a dedicated Community Engagement Manager position to engage and lift the perspectives of communities across the clean school bus campaign.

States Juan Torres, NYLCV/EF Community Engagement Manager: *“A lot of people don’t know about the electric school bus initiative. So we work to enlighten, to share how the buses function. We educate and start where communities are in their learning, not where we are. This is where it gets fun with one-pagers, informational meetings, and community engagement events – such as a recent event the How Things Work Conference held at Bronx Community College or the Air We Share Town Hall at James Baldwin Plaza with the James Baldwin Outdoor Learning Center. I’m also trying to alleviate language barriers and create engagement points that are culturally sensitive. I’m trying to bridge gaps so that all people can be inclusive within this campaign. I think my role signifies a new way that the League can really move the needle on environmental issues.”*

The community engagement and organizing work has also been advanced through the development of shareable toolkits, such as [a Clean Bus Guide](#), which provides facts, an organizing framework, and resources for community groups in New York State and across the country to launch their own local campaigns to promote school bus electrification.

Another unique aspect of the community engagement work includes deep partnership with the team at New York City School Bus Umbrella Services (NYCSBUS) coupled with strong leadership and guidance from its CEO Matt Berlin. NYCSBUS is a mission-driven nonprofit that is committed to making school busing better through innovative technology, data-driven approaches, electrification initiatives, and operational excellence. They are committed to both advancing environmental sustainability and improving the day-to-day lives of students and communities.

States Guadalupe Hernandez, Education and Opportunity Community Organizer with the Office of Public Advocate Jumaane D. Williams, *“This campaign is bridging gaps, not just with student riders and their families, but with those that are operating our buses. I’d like to recognize Matt Berlin and NYCSBUS for really listening and engaging with the community in a way that I don’t think many of us have experienced when it comes to bus companies. Their work has also made families more aware of the impact on our drivers. It is one thing for kids to get on a diesel bus every single day, but also to consider the people that are literally operating these vehicles daily in their jobs. We’re thinking of them.”*

Campaign partners regularly noted that the familiar image of the yellow school bus holds visceral meaning to a lot of people and has contributed to the campaign's success.

States Portis with WE ACT for Environmental Justice, *"The yellow school bus is an iconic image that many people relate to, whether it was a field trip they took as a kid, or knowing someone who is a bus driver or drove their bus to school. And then, if you talk about a dirty diesel school bus going down a street, you can imagine you know what you're looking at. You're seeing that iconic yellow bus with fumes billowing out and people know that it's bad and that it should not be in their neighborhoods. And then they start seeing that there are others mobilizing around this issue and that it can be changed and impacted. This social will bleeds into political will. So this campaign is very much classic grassroots organizing in that sense. And now we can see the bus as something new that is future and forward-looking, but we're still keeping it iconic. For this reason, many manufacturers and designers are trying to keep the buses looking as similar as possible."*

In addition to community-driven support, campaign partners also hope that the aging process of diesel buses can act as a catalyst for the ESB transition and help ease some districts into implementation one bus at a time.

### **Looking Forward: Short and Mid-Term Campaign Goals**

Looking forward, campaign partners are laser focused on a handful of short- and mid-term implementation goals to ensure that resources for the ESB transition are clear and widely accessible:

- Amplify and accelerate community awareness and engagement to motivate school districts to "Vote Yes" on ESB funding opportunities. This includes prioritizing geographic reach, especially where the campaign is experiencing more resistance.
- Support district capacity to build an ESB transition plan and submit applications for funding. Ensuring that every school is connected with NYSERDA is critical to ensure timely planning.
- Push back against misinformation and false narratives at a critical moment when school districts design and vote on annual budgets and the next legislative session begins.
- Continue to pursue opportunities for technology solutions and cross-sector collaborations to ensure that implementation moves forwards.
- Maintain the implementation dates that are in the law and/or reduce the length of any delays to the transition timeline.

### **Call to Action**

The passage of the ESB legislation at both the city and state levels was a huge win in the fight for healthier communities and cleaner transportation in New York State. This case study demonstrates the efficacy of cross-sector coalition partnership and sustained commitment to grassroots and grassroots strategies to push forward the vision for a 100% zero-emission statewide school bus fleet by 2035. Campaign participants hope this case study will provide a positive example for fellow environmental justice leaders working in the ESB space, while demonstrating

successful tactics and strategies for them to achieve similar outcomes on behalf of their communities.

To ensure an equitable and effective implementation of the ESB transition, the campaign will require sustained and flexible 501c3 and c4 funding to continue to engage with a diverse base of supporters, grow and deepen reach in new communities, and identify more inroads to engage and support adoption and implementation across school districts and impacted communities. In addition to grassroots advocacy around the votes, funding for c4 work is helpful for activities like defending the existing law against potential legislative attacks, and advocating for increased funding at the state and federal levels.

In this politically charged environment, the ESB campaign must remain a nonpartisan issue that addresses disproportionate negative public health outcomes for low-income communities and communities of color and promotes cleaner air and a sustainable planet for all. We invite you to learn alongside us and to invest in a brighter future for New Yorkers through the ESB implementation.

## **Gratitude**

We extend our appreciation to all of the contributors to this case study: Lea Giddins (NYLCV/EF); Patrick McClellan (NYLCV/EF); Juan Torres (NYLCV/EF); Devin Callahan (NYLCV/EF); Alia Soomro (NYLCV/EF); Mia Jay-Pachirat (NYLCV/EF); Angela Swatek (NYLCV/EF); Raymond Pultinas (James Baldwin Outdoor Learning Center); Matt Berlin (NYC School Bus Umbrella Services 'NYCSBUS'); Mike Wheeler (NYC School Bus Umbrella Services 'NYCSBUS'); Karunya Sabapathy (NYC School Bus Umbrella Services 'NYCSBUS'); Jeffrey Mercado (Electric School Bus Driver, NYC School Bus Umbrella Services 'NYCSBUS'); Lonnie Portis (WE ACT for Environmental Justice); Guadalupe Hernandez (Office of Public Advocate Jumaane D. Williams); Suhali Méndez (New York Lawyers for Public Interest 'NYLPI'); Sarah Smiley (Mothers Out Front 'MOF'); Deb Peck Kelleher (Alliance for Clean Energy New York 'ACE NY'); Jed Prickett (ACE NY); and Ben Hayman (World Resources Institute 'WRI'). We also extend our deep appreciation to Adriana Espinoza who founded the ESB campaign at NYLCV/EF.



## **ABOUT NYLCV**

NYLCV is the only non-partisan, statewide environmental organization in New York that fights for clean transportation, clean air and water, renewable energy, and open space. For more than thirty-five years, NYLCV has worked to lobby state and local governments on environmental policy, provide objective information to the public, and hold elected officials accountable. We're non-partisan, pragmatic and effective. For more information, visit [www.nylcv.org](http://www.nylcv.org).

NYLCVEF educates New Yorkers about environmental issues and the environmental decision-making processes at the local, regional, state and federal government levels; engages all sectors in open, non-partisan discussion about sustainability policies in order to achieve the environmental breakthroughs that New York needs; and empowers New Yorkers to make environmental change by engaging them in the civic process. For more information, visit [nylcvef.org](http://nylcvef.org).

## **ABOUT CHISPA LCV**

Our mission is to ensure Latine and people of color have a strong voice in the decisions and policies that impact our communities and the environment that we all depend on. We believe it is imperative that the environmental movement better represents the diversity of our nation; it must strive for solutions that confront the legacy of environmental injustices that disproportionately impact communities of color. Learn More: [chispalcv.org](http://chispalcv.org).

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