

**Why Boundaries Matter:
A Study of Five Separate and Unequal Long Island School Districts ***
(Abridged)
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Introduction

If ever there were any doubt that Long Island, New York, is home to some of the most fragmented, segregated and unequal school districts in the United States, the January 2009 *Long Island Index Report*, provides ample evidence that this is indeed the case. The quantifiable inequities across the 125 school districts on Long Island in terms of funding, demographics, and student outcomes highlighted in that report portray how important district boundary lines are, even within relatively small geographic spaces. Building on the *Index's* presentation of quantitative data, this report offers a more in-depth examination of district-level disparities and what they mean in the lives of students, educators and parents across these boundary lines.

Today arguments are made for turning our backs on the problems of segregation and the inequality it perpetuates and focusing instead on how to educate children to high standards “where they are” – be that in all-black and Latino schools with high levels of poverty or in predominantly white and/or Asian schools with high concentrations of wealth. This report shows the limitations of this position by bringing the voices of more than 75 Long Islanders into the discussion and dialogue about public education to clarify what it looks and feels like across school district dividing lines of race, ethnicity, and class. What we hear in these voices – whether they are privileged, affluent white students in a low-needs district or educators struggling to provide an “adequate” education for the poorest students of color in a high-needs district – is how the separateness defines them and their educational opportunities.

As part of a larger Rauch Foundation project to study educational opportunities available to students across Long Island school districts, our research team was asked to collect the in-depth, qualitative data that would help bring the quantitative facts and figures to life. Thus, for six months, beginning July 1 and ending December 31, 2008, our team collected and analyzed qualitative data from five school districts on Long Island. The end result was five mini case studies of these disparate school districts. Most of our data collection consisted of in-depth, open-ended and semi-structured interviews with school district officials, including superintendents, assistant superintendents, school board members and advocates. We also collected documents and downloaded demographic and student achievement/outcome data from each of these districts. In addition, we selected one school from each of the five districts to examine more closely. And finally, we observed school campuses and, when possible, the distribution of students across classrooms on our site visits.

* In order to maintain the confidentiality of the interviews, the names of all districts have been changed to pseudonyms.

District Categories of Segregation and Change/Stability

Beginning with our preliminary analysis of demographic, funding and student outcome data across school districts on Long Island in 2008, we began to explore different ways to illustrate patterns of segregation by race/ethnicity and class over time. In particular, we wanted to highlight places where significant demographic *changes* are occurring across and within school district boundaries. As we illustrate in Table 1 below we devised four categories of districts based on changes in their student populations between 1998 and 2007.

Each category highlights two levels of analysis: stability/instability of the student populations in terms of race/ethnicity and poverty levels, and the extent to which the populations are privileged within the educational system according to the race/ethnicity of the students and their poverty rates. In other words, given broader racial inequality in terms of income and wealth combined with high levels of racial segregation across district boundaries on Long Island, districts that are predominantly white and Asian also tend to be those with the lowest levels of poverty. Those that are predominantly Black and Latino, on the other hand, have much higher rates of poverty.

It is interesting that the two categories containing the largest number of Long Island school districts are #2 stable, relatively affluent and predominantly white and/or Asian, and #4 unstable, with changing race and/or poverty. The prevalence of the first category of districts is not surprising given the affluence on Long Island. What is interesting is that the second largest category of districts is comprised of those that are unstable and experiencing rapid demographic change.

Table 1. Categories of School Districts According to Demographic Stability and Change Nassau and Suffolk County, Long Island 1998-2007					
Category	Stability/Change over time	Race	SES (Free Lunch)	Change over 8 Years	# of LI Districts by Category
1	Stable, Predominantly Black and Latino with Concentrated Poverty	> 88% Black or Latino	> 30% receiving free lunch	< 10% change in Black and Latino	8
2	Stable, Predominantly White and/or Asian with Low Poverty and thus Concentrated Privilege	> 75% White and/or Asian	< 8% receiving free lunch	< 10% change in White and/or Asian	83
3	Stable, Racially and Socio-economically Diverse	<75% of Black/Latino OR White /Asian	Between 15% and 22% with < 3% change	< 10% change for any race	12
4	Unstable, Changing Race and/or Poverty	Not more than 75% of any racial/ethnic group	Between 3% and 26%	> 10% change in White	25

Employing these four categories of school districts, we selected the districts we would study for our in-depth analysis. The five Long Island school districts we studied run the gamut (see Table 2 below) from impoverished, all black and Latino with large numbers of recent immigrant children who speak very little English (Grantsville; Category #1) to those enrolling very affluent, predominantly white and very high achieving students (Belvedere; Category #2). In between, we studied three districts that are more racially/ethnically diverse, but only one of which is stable. Two of these more diverse districts (Lakewood and Leesburg) fit into Category #4 because they have been losing their white and/or more affluent populations over the last 10 years. Meanwhile, the last district (Clearview; Category #3) is the only racially diverse and stable district we studied.

Table 2: Five Long Island Districts Sampled for In-Depth Analysis						
District	Category	% White	% Black	% Latino	% Free Lunch	% Reduced Lunch
Grantsville	1	<1	53	46	65	7
Belvedere	2	97	1	<1	0	0
Clearview	3	64	12	20	15	4
Lakewood	4	14	50	19	27	15
Leesburg	4	43	20	30	20	8

By systematically studying this variety of school districts within just two counties, we were able to examine a wide range of student experiences in suburban school districts today – those that are consistently privileged, those that are consistently underprivileged, those that are experiencing dramatic demographic changes, and those few that are a mixture of all the above and relatively stable.

**Findings across Five Long Island School Districts:
Why Separate is Inherently Unequal**

The Interplay of Public and Private Resources in Separate and Unequal School Districts

The 2009 *Long Island Index* report fully captures the inequality across school districts in terms of their ability to generate revenue from their property and commercial tax bases. The report explains in detail the state and local funding formula as they relate to the wealth of different school districts and thus, the flow of public funding to schools in those districts. Highlighted in that section of the Index report is a careful explanation of why school districts with high concentrations of poverty and thus low property values must increase their tax rates to a much higher level to generate the same local funds for schools that a high income, high property value district could generate more easily with a lower tax rate.

We present data from our qualitative study to help illustrate how these funding and wealth disparities play out in the context of school districts and students’ lives. What we see more clearly from this vantage point are the multiple ways in which public resources and private wealth are often discretely co-mingled to give students who attend schools of concentrated privilege even greater resource advantage.

Districts with Ample Public Resources and Affluent Private Donors and Connections

The interaction, reinforcement and intermingling of public and private resources is best illustrated in the affluent school district we studied, the Belvedere Public Schools, where the educators and students are very clear that what makes their public schools “good” is as much about what the people of Belvedere bring to the district as it is about this affluent community’s ability to generate tax revenues.

The first part of the equation is the Belvedere district’s ample public funds for the regular operating budget of the schools. A repeated theme we heard from the faculty and students in this district is that they had more than enough resources – be it technology, art supplies or science equipment -- to do what they needed to educate their high-achieving students and prepare them for the competitive four-year college application process.

In addition, administrators, teachers and students all spoke at great length about private donations to the school’s athletic programs. As the insightful social worker at Belvedere noted, because the district has more facilities, more students are playing sports with better equipment and better coaches than those at other

public schools. As a result, he noted, the Belvedere students are getting more athletic scholarships to colleges and universities which would not otherwise admit them:

You've got a student who's a B student but he's a star goalie on the lacrosse team. He's going to Rutgers, you know, or something like that, which is a school where his B wouldn't have done it, but his athletic pursuit will get him there, again because of the opportunity that this school may have afforded that student.

Supporting Good Schools by Supporting Good Students

Taking this notion of private resources/support for students to another, closer-to-home level, we also learned through our interviews with educators and students in the Belvedere community the multiple and often subtle, or behind the scenes, ways private resources assure greater academic success for not just the school as a whole, but for individual students. For instance, the social worker at Belvedere High School, who had only been at the school for about a year, had previously worked with students from a low-income community in New York City. In comparing these two experiences, he noted that the main difference is not the kinds of problems or challenges students face in affluent versus poor communities, but rather the types of support systems they have in place outside of school to help them through difficult times.

What I think is different... here, the families have the money to help them get through it... The issues are the same.... They've got the students who are socially awkward, they've got students who need special ed services, they've got parents who are divorcing... But here, if your parents are divorcing, you may have the financial means to go to a therapist outside of school, you know. If you're autistic, your family has gone to the best specialists and they have you with the best medications, and you're going to special camps over the summer to really develop your social skills, and I think that's what separates the districts. It's really the resources.

It is within these similarities that we see different safety nets available to them depending on their family resources.

In this vein of "acting on" a problem – or a perceived problem – nearly everyone we interviewed in this district said the private tutoring industry was thriving in Belvedere despite the stellar academic reputation of the high school and the quality of the teachers employed there. According to the social worker, he knows of Belvedere students who have two or three private tutors a week, and students who have been taking private SAT prep classes since 7th grade. Meanwhile, he noted, "A family in [a poor community where he used to work] whose mom and dad are working minimum jobs, and they're just getting by, they can't say, 'Let's give \$150 to a tutor.' Or, even in that community, \$80 for a tutor, or \$50... I mean, \$50 is the difference between light and heat to them. I think that's the big difference."

Districts with Fewer Public and/or Private Resources Serve Families with the Least

Our description of the privilege and affluence of the Belvedere community provides the necessary backdrop for our discussion of the poorer districts and what they lack compared to Belvedere in terms both tangible and intangible resources. We should preface this by noting that while none of the districts we studied were insolvent, it is clear that the public resources are less ample in some contexts than others on Long Island. When we factor in the social and emotional needs of the students served in districts such as Lakewood and Grantsville in particular, the resource gap seems even wider. As Belvedere's social worker pointed out, it is not always that the problems facing students across these contexts are so disparate, but rather the parents' ability to help "solve" any such problems/issues by purchasing solutions or assistance with their private

resources. It is this type of private, augmented support for students that is lacking in these other school districts, where the need for support is even greater in many respects.

Educators and students in the other districts in our study talked about unmet needs in their schools due to a lack of funding. In particular the lack of technology and support staff such as counselors or social workers as well as the need for better and/or bigger facilities came up frequently, especially in Grantsville, the district serving some of the poorest students on Long Island. We learned through our district- and school-level interviews in Grantsville, for instance, that the school board had been ordered by the state to close two schools due to their state of disrepair – e.g. asbestos, falling ceilings, etc. These school closures created a domino effect of overcrowded schools and classrooms, which in turn has led to a greater reliance on portable classrooms. According to one report, there were 70 portable classrooms in use in the district and some of them were 20 years old. According to this district official, “In our district, space is an issue.”

The lack of facilities in places like Grantsville too often means that classes or programs that would greatly benefit the students are not offered or do not serve students very well. Despite an influx of Latino students, the bilingual education program in the district is lacking. In the elementary school we studied, for instance, there were no bilingual classes for the 5th grade because there was no room for it. “I think it’s a space issue,” the assistant principal said, noting that the staff supports the “best practice” for teaching English Language Learners, but they do not have the resources to make it happen.

In addition to a lack of bilingual education classes and programs, the Grantsville elementary school we studied has no gifted education program because the only elementary-level gifted program is housed at another school. Students must be tested to gain access to this program, which consists of one class each for all the “gifted” 4th and 5th grade students in that district. The assistant principal noted that some of the children who qualify for the gifted class opt instead to remain in their home schools because the district does not transport them from their neighborhood to the school housing the gifted program, which means a parent would have to transport the child every day.

To make the lack of public resources worse, the families served by the Grantsville district lack the private resources that the Belvedere families have to supplement their public school education. As one of the school administrators we interviewed noted, the children served in this district lack basic supplies from home: “They’ll come without a book, without a notebook, without paper, without pencils... our children are coming with less and less.”

The Educational Impact of Separate and Unequal Public and Private Resources

What we learned in these school districts and talking to educators and students is that despite the New York state standards, state exams and state-wide definition of “proficiency” under the federal No Child Left Behind law, there is very little consistency across these five districts in the quality of education students are receiving. The discrepancies have less to do with state mandates, however, than they have to do with local inequalities and the way they are reflected in the educational support systems available to students, educators’ expectations of the students, students’ sense of their academic identity, and the communities’ understanding of their educational rights. Each of these is, in turn, related to the affluence, or lack thereof, of the constituents across these contexts.

State Mandates as the Maximum in Less Privileged Contexts

In the two school districts in our study serving the poorest students – Lakewood and Grantsville – educators talk about curriculum and instruction as driven by the state mandates, which for many students are the hurdle they strive to clear. From the perspective of educators, absent the kind of parental pressure that is central to the experience of educators working in more affluent districts such as Belvedere and in the midst

of serving students who have been mostly disadvantaged in terms of their familial wealth and privilege, meeting the state standards is the goal.

In Lakewood, the principal asked teachers to give tiered assignments geared toward the needs of each student. But, he notes, this can be particularly challenging for more novice teachers, which are the only teachers Lakewood tends to attract. According to the principal: “It’s challenging because, especially we have a lot of new teachers, so it’s easy for me to say small groups, but when you’re working with a small group, what’s the rest of the class doing? As a new teacher, that’s a challenge.”

This example of meeting the students where they need to be met in Lakewood is in stark contrast to what the educators in Belvedere see as appropriate for the needs of their students. There, the chair of the art department puts on a fashion show every year that allows students in her fashion design class to display their creations while drawing in students who have no interest in fashion to be models, set designers, etc. Each show has a theme – e.g. the Italian Renaissance or modern French designs – something that integrates and enhances the curriculum of the art department as well as many other departments in the school and provides students with a form of high-status cultural capital that is not represented on the state test.

It is clear that Belvedere parents are not unique among affluent, white parents in terms of their expectations and the demands they place on their children and their educators. But what makes Belvedere unique among the districts that we studied is the concentration of such parents in one school district, creating a sort of pressure cooker environment – or academic identity -- for their children in which the academic “floor” for the high school is higher than the ceiling in most public high schools and the fear of falling through that floor is great.

Perceptions of “Good” Schools and Their Tangible and Intangible Consequences

Many educators on Long Island are very sensitive to what they perceive to be their districts’ and schools’ reputations. They also, within each given context, have formed some degree of consensus as to what those reputations are. As in the larger body of research on race and education, we found in our study of Long Island that the reputations of schools and school districts are highly correlated with the status of the students who attend them and thus the families associated with them. It is the case that these reputations are also correlated with some objective measures of “school quality” as measured in terms of mostly tangible factors, as mostly poor, black and Latino schools continually lack resources, well-prepared teachers, high-status curriculum, etc. But such bad reputations are, we suggest, more strongly correlated with the race/ethnicity and poverty rates of the students served than with an objective measures of school or district quality per se. In this way, school and district reputations can become self-fulfilling prophecies – with poorer districts unable to attract more affluent residents or more prepared educators. As a result, these ways of “knowing” school districts, through their reputations helps to legitimize the separation and inequality across district that so many people on Long Island say is morally wrong. It is in fact a vicious cycle of bad reputations begetting bad schools and visa versa. One thing that these data on public school districts’ reputations clearly underscores is the harms of racial/ethnic segregation across the disparate villages and hamlets of Long Island.

Nowhere do we see the powerful relationship between race and school district reputation more clearly, however, than in the Leesburg district, which is going through rapid demographic changes as white enrollment continues to drop dramatically. Many of the Leesburg educators, particularly those who have been there a long time, all talk about how this used to be one of the top-ranked districts on Long Island. Yet as one teacher in Leesburg explained, the high school now has a bit of a “bipolar reputation” because it maintains a shrinking group of high-achieving and more affluent white students who are, for the most part, high achieving and who do well in the Intel science competition each year. But the district and high school also have a rising percentage of lower-income black and Latino students who are too often low achieving.

The greatest problem a district like Leesburg faces is that once people perceive it to be a “bad” school district, it has a difficult time changing that external image, which will over time affect its ability to attract families and teachers and political support for the public schools. As one of the Leesburg High School teachers explained, because her school used to have higher test scores and outcome data, that people assume that the reputation of the school is now terrible. She said that she has friends who live in the districts who have children approaching school age. They ask her what they should do, and “I’m like, send them to school;” she tells them it is not a problem.

The Different Reputations of the School Districts Strongly Affects Their Ability to Hire and Retain High-Quality Teachers

Perhaps the worst and most obvious dimension of the self-fulfilling prophecy of negative public school reputations and how they relate to the tangible factors that affect educational opportunities is the way in which the distribution of “good” teachers are distributed across district boundary lines. What we see on Long Island is that the districts and schools that serve poorest, most educationally disadvantaged students often lack the reputations needed to attract the highest-quality teachers or those prepared to teach the highest-level classes. This means that the students who rely most heavily on public schools to provide them the education and support they need – those who lack the private resources, support systems and safety nets that Belvedere parents provide for their children – have access to the least prepared or expert teachers. Furthermore, the lack of teachers who can teach the highest-level courses mean that the chances that any student in these districts will have access to classes such as calculus or physics will be slimmer still than even a low-track student in a school where such courses are offered.

What we have heard quite clearly from district and school-level officials is just how easy it is for affluent districts to hire good teachers, and how challenging it is for poorer districts with many students of color to even get a highly qualified teacher to apply for job openings. The end result is a complicated and never-ending cycle of students with the greatest educational need having access to some of the least qualified teachers because their districts and schools lack the reputation to attract the more qualified teacher candidates.

In our interview with Belvedere’s assistant superintendent of finance, he gave a more in-depth explanation of how this well-respected school district uses its wealth to attract and hire the best teachers:

We can take a teacher with 25 years of experience and bring them into Belvedere and pay them what they were getting in their last school district. We can give them 25 years of steps. Most districts can’t do that; it’s too costly. But we’ll do that. We can get a great math teacher, a great physics teacher and it’s going to cost us \$100,000, and we’ll do it. Where other districts will say, we can’t hire experienced teachers, it’s too costly, let’s hire somebody who just graduated from college and we only have to pay 50,000...

Meanwhile, in Leesburg, with its declining reputation, internal political struggles and instability, recruitment and retention of good teachers is becoming more and more difficult. As one teacher noted, a lot of teachers are choosing not to come to Leesburg anymore because they’re concerned about whether this district will have another teachers’ contract and whether there will be money in the system to pay the teachers. For instance, the assistant principal at Leesburg High School, who had come to work in this district in the last few years, noted that when he was looking for a new job and interviewing for a position, he heard a lot of negative things about Leesburg – that “it was just headed downhill fast... That’s the word on the street... they’re not passing budgets, they’re going downhill. “

Tangible – especially resources – and intangible – especially reputations – factors are not separate and distinct from each other. Quite the contrary is true. One begets the other in a rather vicious cycle of the rich getting richer – or at least, the rich being educated by superior teachers – and the poor suffering from the

fallout of both a lack of funds and a lack of good p.r. to help bring the housing values and thus tax revenue up to provide the kinds of resources that would help recruit the stellar teachers that would in turn boost their reputations. When all of the above is closely tied to issues of race/ethnicity and social-class so that districts that are skewed completely in one direction or another – either virtually all white and Asian and affluent or virtually all black and Latino and poor – provide dramatically different educational opportunities it is even more tragic.

Powerful Political, Economic and Social Forces Push Back Against Efforts to Break or Transcend School District Boundaries on Long Island

As we noted above, the survey findings presented in the *Long Island Index 2009* report suggest that the majority of Long Islanders are in favor of policy changes that could begin to break down the boundaries between separate and unequal public school districts. There is some evidence in our interview data, even some from Belvedere that this highly segregated system of public education is not the best for preparing students for the 21st Century. For instance, as several Belvedere High School seniors noted, there are disadvantages to attending such a racially/ethnically and socio-economically homogeneous school district. As one student explained:

That's my one complaint with Belvedere High School is the lack of diversity. I mean, I can't wait—I'm really looking forward to graduating and going to the next step of my education experience, career... I really want to meet different ethnicities—different kids of different ethnicities. Like, I think everyone's so homogenous in this community.

Beyond the social and social justice arguments for breaking down the barriers between fragmented school districts on Long Island, there are several real financial reasons for change. Basically, what we have learned through our interviews and read in news accounts is that the current system of funding public schools in New York State and especially places like Long Island cannot hold – it will be crushed by its own weight as local communities can no longer sustain the immense tax burden. As a Leesburg board of education member explained, there has been a lot of talk about school district consolidation on Long Island lately, but, he said, “They're not talking about it because of education, which they should be talking about. They're talking about it because of money.”

This board member, like many other officials on Long Island, was quick to point out the inefficiency of the current system with one superintendent and two or three assistant superintendents, plus central office staff, for each district, even if these districts have fewer than a few thousand students in them. The economies of scale are problematic anyway they look at it, and especially when they consider the burden these costs are placing on the local tax payers. In Lakewood, the elementary school district with the lowest per-pupil expenditure of the five we studied, a board of education member noted that even though the tax rate is very high per assessed dollar of property value, the district does not generate as much as it needs because the values of the houses are relatively low. Thus, one of the biggest challenges for school board members is trying to keep costs down. Still, with 89 percent of the district's budget allocated for salaries as negotiated under contract, there is little room for cutting costs. According to this Board member:

That's what we have the least amount of control over because it's based on contractual agreements with unions, it's based on stepped stages that they have with the teachers and all kinds of things, and it's also associated with insurance coverage... it's the part that we have the least amount of control over.

Elderly, retired residents even in the more affluent school districts also have a hard time paying their property taxes, as their incomes remained fixed while the value of their property – and thus their tax bills – have increased. Clearview officials note that more poor families are moving out of that district as property values have skyrocketed, and many long-term, fixed-income residents are struggling to pay the taxes for their homes.

Beyond lip service to these urgent fiscal issues, however, there is very little evidence that the political powers will allow the kind of structural change that would provide some relief for over-burdened taxpayers while also breaking down the political boundaries dividing students by race/ethnicity and social class. According to one Long Island superintendent we interviewed, many of the little school districts should have been merged together a long time ago. Furthermore, he noted that New York State Assembly has the right to consolidate school districts. The main problem with such a political decision on the part of the state legislature is that those who voted for such consolidation would then be out of a job because the people who voted for them are going to be incensed. “Everybody wants their little base of power. This local control is an obsession, but you pay a price for that local control.”

Little Political Support for Change among those with Interests in the Status Quo

In Belvedere, the district in our study most likely to support the status quo, community members and school district officials tend to see school district boundaries as sacrosanct. Resistance to altering these boundaries is often couched in terms of the “ideal size” of a school district, a concept that seems to vary somewhat across boundaries on LI, and can be used to justify quite a range of district sizes. Indeed, the Belvedere superintendent said that her affluent district with only a little more than 2,000 students was just the right size: “We’re small enough so that there is really a culture of caring and connection for each child, and yet you know, at some point, if you’re too small, you lose your ability to offer programs and to meet diverse needs. So I think we’re just right.”

But, according to one of the Leesburg school board members, the current system is highly inefficient:

Do you really need one superintendent for—we now have [fewer than 3,500] kids in our system? And he’s probably costing... a quarter million dollars a year... you mean, he couldn’t handle... six thousand children? Come on... we have an assistant superintendent for curriculum and an assistant superintendent for business, so with their packages, you’re probably at two hundred thousand dollars each. You’re telling me... you can’t handle double? Of course you can. It’s silliness.

Interestingly enough, despite all this talk about “ideal size,” which appears to be a slippery term, and money and control, the issues of race and class are often lurk just below the surface of these conversations. Indeed, the one exception to the no-consolidation rule appears to be when those with economic and political power want to change district boundaries to maintain their distance from poorer students of color.

Racial/Ethnic Diversity at the District and School Level has its Challenges and Rewards

As we noted above in our discussion of how we sampled these districts and the descriptions of each, only one of the five districts in this study, Clearview, is racially diverse and stable. In fact, the racial/ethnic make up of the Clearview district – about 64 percent white, 12 percent Black, and 20 percent Latino -- mirrors that the Long Island County in which it is located. It is in many ways a microcosm of the diversity of suburban New York. And perhaps what is most amazing about Clearview is its relative stability over time. Despite the rise in housing prices there in the mid 2000s and the resulting slight decrease in poor students, particularly Latinos, it remains an extremely unique in terms of its diversity and stability.

In this way, Clearview provides a vision of what Long Island public schools could look like if fewer district boundaries existed and more students crossed the lines of segregation and inequality. What we see in Clearview, however, are two somewhat contradictory findings. On the one hand, the middle and high school in this racially diverse district are symbolic of an age-old lesson from the history of school desegregation policy in the U.S. – namely, once between-school or between-district racial segregation has been alleviated, new racial boundaries are often created within racially diverse schools between classrooms and thus curricular opportunities. The resegregation of otherwise diverse public schools across classrooms via “tracking” or “ability grouping” has been, unfortunately, more the norm than the exception. On the other hand, the issue of racially divided, separate and unequal classrooms in Clearview Middle School and the effort on the part of some educators to do away with some of the rigid tracking and grouping practices there provides an opportunity in which a diverse community like Clearview grapples with broader issues of race and education. Such struggles and conversations do not occur in Belvedere or in Grantsville, because these sites of homogeneity when it comes to racial and socio-economic status are not places where people can see racial differences in terms of student achievement or access to high-status curriculum on a daily basis.

In this way, the story of Clearview is dispiriting and hopeful, full of challenges and promise – all at the same time. But one thing that is crystal clear from our research on Clearview is that the boundaries that have been created between classrooms in the middle and high schools in this district are not, for several reasons, as problematic as the district boundaries that exist between Belvedere and Grantsville. As disturbing as the within-school segregation is in Clearview – the middle school principal equates it to apartheid – it is more malleable and less consequential than the separate universes of Belvedere and Grantsville.

We are not suggesting that the rigid tracking situation in Clearview is ok or that it does not perpetuate racial/ethnic inequality, as virtually all of the white students end up in the high-track classes and virtually all of the students of color end up in the low-track classes. But, we are saying there is far more hope for the future of a racially and ethnically diverse society in Clearview than in Grantsville or Belvedere. This hope is born not only of the more permeable boundaries that exist within diverse schools, but it is also born of the struggle that ensues in schools such as these, as even a small number of educators, parents and students try to make a change because of what they can see with their own eyes and feel in their hearts as they walk down but one hallway in one school. They can see – side by side – the image of separate and unequal education – a view that students in more racially isolated districts cannot see and generally do not think about because they are ensconced in their own distinct and physically removed school districts.

Tracking in Racially Diverse Schools: Another Form of Separate and Unequal

In Clearview, students attend racially/ethnically diverse elementary schools with enrollments that have been balanced via a controlled choice kindergarten assignment policy. With the exception of a one-day-a-week pull-out gifted education program that enrolls a disproportionate number of white students, the elementary students in Clearview are in racially diverse schools and classrooms. Although there is some ability grouping, especially differentiated reading groups, within those elementary school classrooms, there is no rigid separation of students across classrooms until they reach middle school in 6th grade.

Clearview Middle School is another story altogether. There, students are tracked into two levels – honors and regular -- and not allowed to take classes outside their tracks. For the most part, the high tracks and upper level classes are almost exclusively white, while the lower track and less-challenging or non-gifted classes are disproportionately students of color. According to the assistant superintendent of curriculum in this district, “you’d walk into a class, you looked at the students, you knew exactly what kind of class it was based on the race of the students in each.”

According to one of the English teachers, differences between her Regents and honors classes in terms of curriculum are not that great. Still what remains consistent is the potential impact of these high- versus low-track classes in shaping students’ future options in high school. According to the Clearview principal, who

wants to do away with the rigid tracking system in the school, she noted: “Because we call a track ‘honors,’ and I think that sends a loud and clear message to an adolescent that you’re dishonorable if you’re not in honors, and that there are lower expectations.”

One more factor that will work in the Clearview district’s favor in its attempt to tear down the boundaries between tracks and thus classrooms and students is its proximity to and affiliation with a neighboring school district that has successfully detracked its schools years ago. This nearby district, while less racially/ethnically diverse and more white than Clearview, has been through this process and maintains several critical and potentially helpful ties to key educators in the Clearview system. For instance, one of the top administrators in the Clearview district as well as one of the lead teachers in the middle school has had children enrolled in or graduated from this nearby district. One of these educators has two children in the detracking schools – one, a son, who is high achieving and would have been in high-tracked classes had they existed. This teacher’s second child, her daughter, struggles more in school and would most likely have been in a low-track class. What’s interesting is the way in which both students have benefited from the detracked environment of the neighboring Long Island district’s schools:

My daughter is bright, but doesn’t catch everything right away. So she would have classically been one of those Regent’s students here [in Clearview], that would never have made it into honors but would have benefited from being pushed... And I moved to [the neighboring, detracking district]... She’s had a few bumps on the road, as I expected, but overall really doing well. And I think, performing better than if she had not had those high expectations. My son did well, but then he would have anywhere... And I’ve asked him what he felt about, cause he’s one of the brighter ones, right, things come easily, how did he feel having kids who struggle more working together? And he said, ‘it doesn’t bother me.’ He says that he liked [the detracked classrooms], that he felt they added to conversations in the classroom... He never felt it slowed him down.

Meanwhile, this neighboring school district provides a sophisticated system of back up or support classes for students who need extra help to perform well in the higher level classes. According to the teacher quoted above, the students there do not consider it a bad thing to be in the extra help classes. She noted, “The kids don’t see it as bad, cause so many do. It’s just seen as, if you need glasses you wear glasses, if you cut your knee you need a band-aid. It’s not seen as anything negative.”

The one racially/ethnically and socio-economically diverse and stable school district in our study is both a microcosm of the challenges that such district face and the promise of a diverse and vibrant democracy that they hold. These struggles within public schools embody both the hopes and fears of a society faltering at the beginning of the 21st Century, not yet poised to capture the full potential of its increasingly global population – a society that gives much lip service to the idea of equal educational opportunity, but too rigidly divides students based on phenotype and privilege, only to doom those with darker skin and less affluence to dead-end programs and classes.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Throughout the various sections of this report we have documented the many facets and layers of inequality within the educational system and the central role that boundaries play in maintaining those inequalities. Given all these nuances and layers of inequality and how strong the resistance is toward efforts to dismantle the current structures that keep schools and students separate and unequal, we make the following policy recommendations:

1. **Cross-District Cooperation/Collaboration (via BOCES) for Education** – Building on the effective role that BOCES now play in purchasing, we can envision BOCES playing a more educative role in helping students cross school district boundaries and thereby gain exposure to a more diverse mix of students. One way to do this is to expand upon the current BOCES special education or vocational education programs and to lessen the costs of such programs for students in poor districts. Meaningful magnet-like programs could be developed to attract students with shared interests from across district boundaries.
2. **Inter-district Transfers of Students** – Using the eight inter-district school desegregation programs across the country as a model, we would like to see Long Island school districts develop a program that allows students to cross district boundaries to go to school. Such inter-district choice plans would compliment efforts by BOCES to develop regional magnet schools. It is possible that the BOCES would also provide the infrastructure for these choice-oriented programs, including outreach and recruitment, an application process and free transportation across district lines.
3. **Blurring District Boundaries** – If full-blown consolidation of many small, expensive and highly fragmented school districts on Long Island is not a political option at this time, we need to consider when and how it might make sense for the boundaries between some groups of districts to become more porous, allowing the flow of students and teachers across them – if not for whole school days, then for special events, classes and programs.
4. **Support Diverse Districts** – The New York State legislature should take a hard look at the demographic future of this country, state and the suburban communities most members of that body represent. Through such research, state assembly and senate members would see the value of supporting racially and ethnically diverse schools districts. Resources for faculty recruitment and development would be one important area of support. Others would include staff development to help educators address issues of tracking and resegregation within racially and ethnically diverse schools. Funding to support programs geared toward getting more poor and minority parents more involved in the schools and district governance structure would be good as well.
5. **Amend New York State Laws to Provide Fewer Public Funds to Private Schools** – In our research in Leesburg, we learned that the New York laws regulating the use of public money in private schools are entirely too liberal and work against the fundamental First Amendment principle of the separation of church and state.

Clearly, a great deal of work remains to be done in fragmented and segregated spaces such as Long Island, New York. The system of public education, laid down within this context and a central component of maintaining it, provides both the possibility for a solution to inequality as well as powerful excuse for doing nothing. Let's hope that Long Islanders heed the call of both the *Long Island Index Report 2009* and this more qualitative analysis of inequality and choose to take action to make their suburban setting a model for the future of a diverse society and not a throw back to a past of white flight, inequality and hyper segregation created and reinforced during the 20th Century.