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## **New Study Underscores Pervasive Racial and Ethnic Segregation Across Long Island's School Districts**

*Suburban System of Disparate Villages and Hamlets Impacts Students' Equal Access to High Quality Education*

**Garden City, NY (October 1, 2009)** - A *Long Island Index* Special Report, "[Why Boundaries Matter: A Study of Five Separate and Unequal Long Island School Districts](#)," finds alarming disparities among Long Island's school districts. The report, based on a study conducted by Teachers College, Columbia University, aims to understand how Long Island's system of delivering educational services across 125 districts impacts students' access to a high quality education.

The study's author, Amy Stuart Wells, Professor of Sociology and Education at Teachers College, explains, "Although this study is about Long Island's educational system, it is indicative of what is occurring in suburbs across our country. The segregation that occurs here and the accompanying impact on education funding and quality typifies what's happening across America and is a national concern."

Dr. Wells and her colleagues studied five different Long Island school districts, each representing a specific demographic trend on the Island, and conducted interviews with more than 75 school administrators, teachers, students, parents and school board members. In order to maintain the confidentiality of the interviews, the names of the school districts have been changed to pseudonyms.

"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" said Dr. Wells.

The study sheds new light on the following:

- How public school districts with more resources are able to generate higher levels of public funding and further supplement that funding through private resources from parents, community members and other donors who are connected to the district.
- How the inequities become wider in this type of system as wealthier schools have greater ability to offer students wider selections of courses, better teachers and more access to opportunities. "In poorer schools their 'ceiling' is meeting state mandates" said Dr. Wells. "For more affluent schools the academic 'floor' is even higher than the poorer schools' ceiling".
- How the types of support systems that students at wealthier schools typically have in place, inside and outside of school – and that students in less affluent districts often lack - help them through the difficult times. The presence or absence of such supports weighs more heavily than the kinds of problems or challenges students face in affluent versus poor communities.
- How school and district reputations can become self-fulfilling prophecies, with poorer districts unable to attract more affluent residents or more prepared educators. "We found that in some wealthy districts, there were hundreds of applicants for a single teaching job,

while in poorer districts just miles away, schools had difficulty attracting a single applicant for a teaching job” said Dr. Wells. As a result, these ways of “knowing” school districts through their reputations helps to legitimize the separation and inequality across districts that so many people on Long Island say is morally wrong.

Nancy Rauch Douzinas, president of the Rauch Foundation and publisher of the *Long Island Index*, noted that, “If the Island is to rebuild its economic engine and provide the high quality jobs we were once known for, we have to address the economic and structural divide among our school districts. We cannot meet the needs of the future if we continue to allow today’s disparities to continue. Building 125 walls between 125 districts has led to great social injustice, intolerable property tax costs and will ultimately lead to failure”.

In one of the districts studied by the Teachers College research team, the issues of diversity are front and center as the teachers and administrators grapple with whether or not to alter their existing system of separating middle school students into “Honors” and “Regular” classes. In the current system, the Honors classes tend to be disproportionately white while the regular classes are disproportionately African American and Latino. One administrator equates it to “apartheid.”

“The Long Island suburban school system has taken a national problem of separating children to a higher and more damaging level” noted Ann Golob, Director of the *Long Island Index*. “Although we have been re-segregating for the past three decades, many school districts are quietly finding alternatives that open the door to opportunities to more students. De-tracking is one option for districts that have diverse populations but segregated classrooms within the school. But for those districts where homogeneity – whether largely white and Asian or alternatively, African American and Latino – is the norm, a wider set of programs and policies need to be considered.”

Despite the rigidity of the existing school district structure, the authors point to several options that could be adopted by Long Islanders to incorporate greater flexibility and give all students greater exposure to an expanded array of opportunities. These include:

- **Give BOCES (Nassau Board of Cooperative Educational Services) a greater role in helping students cross school district boundaries** and gain exposure to a more diverse mix of students by creating more “magnet” schools or expanded educational programs beyond the current array of vocational, special education and arts programs.
- **Create a series of “choice-oriented programs”**, similar to the ones that exist throughout the country, that allow students to transfer between districts in order to attend a wider variety of schools.
- **Find innovative ways to make school district boundaries more porous** allowing the flow of students and teachers across them for special events, classes and programs.
- **Look to the NYS legislature to create policies and programs that support and sustain integrated educational opportunities.** Resources for faculty recruitment and development to help educators address issues of tracking and re-segregation within racially and ethnically diverse schools.
- **Amend New York State Laws to provide fewer public funds to private schools.** In some districts the proportion of funds that flow out from the public schools

Under the terms of the Long Island Index study, the names of the schools that were the focus of Dr. Wells’ research cannot be released. However, the *Long Island Index* and Teachers College can provide the media access to South Side High School in Rockville Centre, on Long Island, a school where nearly 40% of the school’s black and Hispanic students are candidates for the International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma, a two-year college-credit program similar to Advanced Placement. Fifteen years ago, virtually no students of color at South Side were taking IB or AP courses. Now, thanks to the school’s decision to eliminate tracks (categories that separate those who are college-bound from those deemed not to be) the school averages fewer than five dropouts per year, every student takes accelerated math and nearly all take calculus. Black and

Latino students in Rockville Centre also have higher rates of earning the New York State regents diploma than do white students statewide.

To read more about the South Side High and issues of segregation and school quality in suburbia, visit <http://www.tc.edu/news/article.htm?id=6609>.

“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 20<sup>th</sup> Century,” said Dr. Wells.

[Download “Why Boundaries Matter: A Study of Five Separate and Unequal Long Island School Districts.”](#)

[Read the Long Island Index Special Analysis, “Long Island’s Educational Structure: Resources, Outcomes, Options.”](#)

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**About the Rauch Foundation:** The *Long Island Index* is funded by the Rauch Foundation, a family foundation headquartered in Garden City, New York. In addition to funding the *Long Island Index* for seven years, the Rauch Foundation commissioned The Long Island Profile Report and a series of nine polls on Long Island to determine how the region is faring. The *Long Island Index 2004*, *Long Island Index 2005*, *Long Island Index 2006*, *Long Island Index 2007*, *Long Island Index 2008* and *Long Island Index 2009* are all available for download at [www.longislandindex.org](http://www.longislandindex.org). The *Long Island Index* interactive maps, an online resource with detailed demographic, residential, transportation and educational information, is also accessible from the Index’s website.

**About Teachers College:** Teachers College is the largest graduate school of education in the nation. Teachers College is affiliated with Columbia University, but it is legally and financially independent. The editors of *U.S. News and World Report* have perennially ranked Teachers College among the nation’s leading graduate schools of education.

Through partnerships with policymakers and practitioners at the local, national and international levels, Teachers College is dedicated to promoting excellence and equity in education and overcoming gaps in educational access and achievement between the most and least advantaged groups. Through scholarly programs of teaching, research, and service, the College draws upon the expertise from a diverse community of faculty in education, psychology and health, as well as students and staff from across the country and around the world.

For more information, please visit the college’s Web site at [www.tc.columbia.edu](http://www.tc.columbia.edu).

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