

**What Every Long Islander Should Know:  
Better Education For Less**

By Nancy Rauch Douzinas

It's school budget time, and wrath is in the air. Politicians are raging, taxpayers fuming, students protesting.

The frustration is easy to understand. School budget votes in our region are a lose-lose proposition. Vote against the budget, and the ones we hurt are the children. Vote in favor, and we perpetuate the ruinous tax spiral that is devastating families and crippling our economy.

People are certain that "there must be places we can cut." But individual local school budgets are the wrong places to look. For the most part, when you cut a district budget, you curtail some service.

The real economies are not to be found district by district. If we want to save big money, we need a bigger view.

And there's a bonus. Systemic changes not only save money, they improve educational outcomes at the same time.

Sound impossible? Consider three examples.

**Regional high schools for the gifted and talented.** Think of New York's Stuyvesant High School or Bronx Science. They offer peerless educational opportunity to top-performing children from all across the city.

Some Long Island districts offer similarly exceptional programs. Witness the astonishing proportion of Intel semi-finalists they produce--20% of the nation's total.

But zoom out and see the big picture. Small, expensive programs replicated one-by-one in a few dozen districts . . . drawing their talent only from a tiny minority of Long Island students. Does that make sense?

Imagine a bigger program that served all our kids. We'd get a lot more brains for our buck.

**Inter-District transfers.** Failing schools waste both money and talent. So do empty seats. Why

not solve both problems, by giving students in a failing school the option to transfer to a nearby district with vacant seats? The receiving school garners the state per-pupil education revenue, without a corresponding increase in cost. The transferring kids get the fair chance they are currently denied: to go to schools with the full complement of resources, facilities and a culture that encourages students to reach their highest potential. And Long Island gets more engineers and entrepreneurs, fewer dropouts and social ills.

It's not just theory. Transfer programs have been proving themselves for decades, in places from Boston to Beverly Hills.

**Early childhood programs.** This has got to be America's most tragically wasteful blind spot. After decades of scientific research, the critical importance of early childhood development is now settled fact. We know that helping children in their formative years changes their entire life's path, from better grades and graduation rates straight through to higher salaries, more home ownership, less welfare and less crime. And yet we continue to pay vast sums to deal with the *results* of learning problems—remedial programs, special education, stay-in-school programs, incarceration—instead of attacking the problem at its source.

Here, too, other regions are far ahead of us. How did that happen? Are the big ideas too big for us—America's premier suburb?

Can we rally and start to think as big as the next region? Or will we just keep raging and fuming at each other, while other communities soar?

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