

Pop Quiz on Long Island's Schools

By Nancy Rauch Douzinas

How much do you know about education on Long Island?

You probably know that you spend a ton of money on it. Did you know that the Island's average school tax levy climbed 72%, in constant dollars, from 1998 to 2006?

At the *Long Island Index* we wanted to know where all the money came from and where it went and how it translated into educational outcomes for our children. So we spent last year studying Long Island's educational structure, and have just published the results.

There is a great deal in the report. But for starters, try these four True/False questions.

1. Long Island is unusual in the number of school districts we have.

True. Of 3,066 counties in the country, Suffolk ranks fourth and Nassau seventh in the number of different school districts. Nobody planned it this way. Rather, it is the product of Long Island's piecemeal, community-by-community development.

2. Expenditures vary greatly from one school district to another.

True. Wealthy districts raise almost three times more per student from local taxes. State aid tries to make up the difference, but it doesn't come close. Even with state aid, the richest one-fifth of districts spend 45% more per child—approximately \$8,000 more—than the poorest one-fifth.

3. More money is spent educating disadvantaged children and children with greater learning needs, than well-to-do and middle-income students with average needs.

False. The problem is that children with the greatest learning needs live disproportionately in poorer districts. As a result, the kids who need the most resources are getting the least. (Meanwhile, the wealthiest districts spend much more, but student achievement is no higher than in middle-income districts.) This is just one example of our system's limited flexibility in addressing the varied needs of our students.

4. Long Island schools are racially segregated.

True. It is actually our communities themselves that are segregated. In fact, Long Island is the third most segregated suburb in America. Segregated communities mean segregated schools. The result: half of all Black children on Long Island go to schools that are at least 95% non-White. Half of all Latinos go to schools that are at least 88% non-White.

If you got some of these questions wrong, you're not alone. When we asked people Question 2 in a poll, for example, only 26% got it right.

That tells me that it is time for a serious, sustained conversation about education on Long Island. We need to understand our strengths and weaknesses, how our students are really doing, where all the money is going, how things got to be the way they are, and what options there may be for improvement.

The full report is posted on our website. I hope you will look at it, think about it, and start talking about it with the people you know.

It is a topic whose importance is impossible to overestimate. We all know that education is the ticket to a child's future. It's also the ticket to our region's and our nation's future.

Nancy Rauch Douzinas is president of the Rauch Foundation and convener of the Long Island Index. The Index provides data about the Long Island region, in order to promote informed public debate and sound policy making. For more information visit www.longislandindex.org.