What Every Long Islander Should Know:
Want Better Schools for Long Island?
—Pass it On

By Nancy Rauch Douzinas

As Long Islanders head to the polls this month to vote on school budgets, it is worth taking a few minutes to consider what you *can't* vote on.

If you want to spend as much on educating poor Long Island children as wealthy ones, too bad. That's not on your ballot. If you want Long Island to have regional high schools that foster top talent, like Stuyvesant and Bronx Science in the City, that's not there either.

On matters of educational policy critical to our region, we have no effective say. Our centuries-old tradition of local school control has left us without a framework for considering and choosing what is best for the region as a whole.

The consequences are clear:

- Wide disparities in expenditures, resources for students, and academic achievement;
- Resources not being directed where they are most needed; and,
- A level of school failure that blights children's dreams, mocks our foundational belief in equal opportunity, and threatens regional prosperity.

What do I suggest we do?

That is what a reader asked me in response my column last month. She—like a majority of Long Islanders—favors change. But where do we start?

I should first point out that the *Long Island Index* has no intention of promoting educational policy of any kind. The *Index*'s mission is to promote regional thinking and action. It puts out information on a variety of issues and says: think about this, talk it over, and decide based on informed debate what should best be done.

The essential first step—whatever your idea for improving our education system—is to get the issue onto the public agenda. That means asking questions, stating opinions, raising concerns.

It means mentioning the subject in conversation with friends and colleagues. It means using the web to circulate news and information. We've seen what results that can achieve. If chain emails can circle the globe, then surely information on a topic like this can spread across the Island. The *Index* website has tons of information about education on Long Island, beginning with the Special Report in our 2009 *Index*.

Besides your friends, reach out to officials who can impact education policy: Regents Chancellor Merryl Tisch (RegentTisch@mail.nysed.gov) and Long Island Regent Roger Tilles (RegentTilles@mail.nysed.gov); New York State Education Commissioner Richard Mills (RMills@mail.nysed.gov) and Interim Commissioner Carol Huxley (CHuxley@mail.nysed.gov); and your local school superintendent.

Don't be surprised if some of these people agree with you. Many officials recognize the need for change, but leaders cannot lead until the public is ready to support it. Also, while being informed is important, don't think that you must have all the answers before you can raise a concern. If concerned people get involved, we'll work out the answers together.

Will that really happen? We won't know until we try. We do know that reform starts with people calling for reform, and that it's worked before.

And this we know for sure: continuing the way we've been going will not work at all.

Nancy Rauch Douzinas is president of the Rauch Foundation, a Long Island-based family foundation. The "Long Island Index" provides data about the Long Island region, in order to promote informed public debate and sound policy making. For more information visit our Website: www.longislandindex.org

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