

What Every Long Islander Should Know About All Our Children

By: Nancy Rauch Douzinas

As Long Island's children start back to school, it's a good time to consider what kind of educational experience they are in for. How are Long Island's schools doing?

One true answer is, we are doing well—considerably better than New York State as a whole. That's the plus side.

Another truth is: "It depends on where you live." That one is disturbing, isn't it? How well you succeed ought to depend on how hard you work, or how talented you are—not what school district you live in.

But it does. Group Long Island's schools by economic status—measured by the percent of the students who receive free lunch. Compare them, and you find kids in high-poverty schools lagging behind those in low-poverty schools 75% to 91% on the fourth grade reading test (2005). Graduating at rates of 76% versus 95% (2004).

Most people already know that poverty puts kids at an educational disadvantage. An impoverished home environment starts kids off with a handicap that many never overcome.

But it's not just the poverty level of the *child* that matters. It's also the poverty level of the school.

Rich kids, poor kids, white kids, black kids—they all do worse if their school has a high poverty rate. In fact, a poor child in a middle-class school will, on average, outperform a middle-class child in a poor school.

Poor schools suffer every disadvantage. The cumulative effect of too many struggling students. The lack of parent involvement, vital to a school's success. And the constant loss of top teachers to more affluent areas.

Districts in poor communities lack the resources to overcome these handicaps. Long Island has ten such "high-need" districts, attended by 14% of our schoolchildren. Of these students 76% are Black or Hispanic.

On their own, these islands of poverty face almost insuperable odds. A miraculous success story may make an inspiring movie, but the reality is, it takes *more* than a village to educate a child.

That's why the move is on across the country to combat excessive concentrations of low-income students. Places from San Francisco to Cambridge, Massachusetts are using new magnet schools, redistricting, and other methods to thin out the poverty, so that no school has more than it can handle.

Economic segregation is not inevitable. Traditional small towns were economically mixed. The banker's child and the laborer's child went to the same school. It is suburbia that carved the land into tiny districts, segregated by race and class.

What actually happens when we cross the line that separates our district from the next one over? Anything? Do the kids on the other side matter less? Are their dreams less? Is the contribution they can make—given an equal chance—any less?

Make no mistake. We need for these kids to succeed—as surely as a region needs brains, creativity, and a productive, can-do attitude. An equal chance for every child is not some far off ideal. It's what our region needs . . . as well as what we believe in.

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 click on to special analysis.