

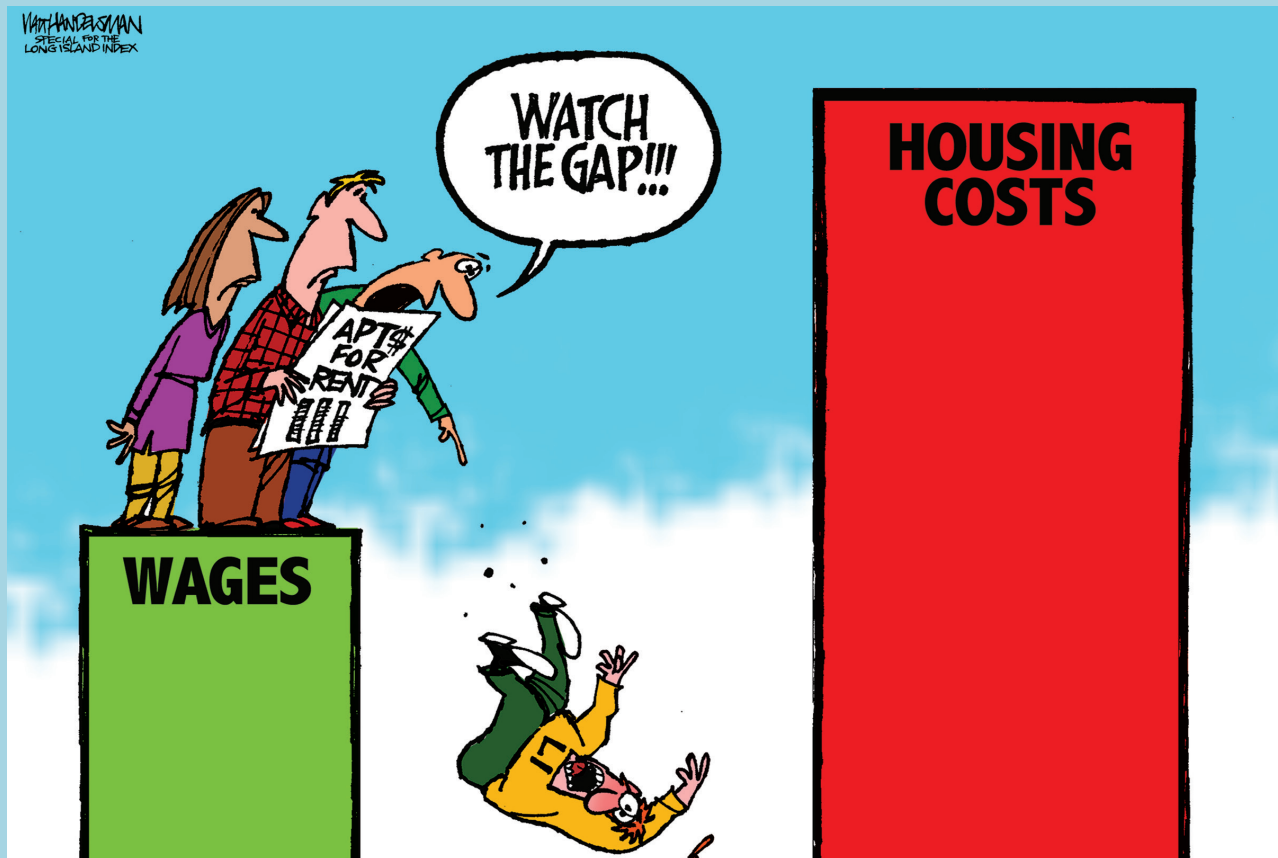
TOM ROGERS

Education and the Economy

In the second half of the 20th century, Long Island was the beneficiary of the region's strong economy, as both the host of a robust defense industry and the archetypical bedroom community for New York City. That economy has in turn built Long Island's many regional assets, including and perhaps especially, its superb public education system. With the decline of the defense industry and growing cost of living, that symbiosis has come under stress. Long Island's educational excellence has come at a price, and it would be delusional to presume it could endure a protracted period of austerity without damage.

Thus, Long Island is confronted with the challenge of reimagining itself as a regional economic powerhouse, not just the beneficiary of the happy coincidence of its location and legacy. But this region is not alone in seeking to establish a high-tech economic presence, and its ability to compete will fall far short of its potential should it suffer from Long Island's chronic affliction of fragmentation. The window of opportunity hasn't closed, but in the prescient words of the Long Island Index, "The Clock is Ticking."

Fortunately, Long Island has internationally-renowned research institutions in the bio-tech, alternative energy, advanced materials engineering, and health care fields that



could be the foundation for this high-tech renaissance. Moreover, its public education system collaborates with these institutions to routinely produce more Intel, Siemens and Regeneron scholars from our two counties than from most other whole states in the country. But this has been driven more by internecine competition than a concerted plan to connect and leverage these assets in service of a regional economic development strategy.

While it's unclear where the leadership will emerge to make this vision a reality, the first steps forward are apparent, if not easy. Though extraordinary, Long Island's education system is far from perfect, as too many of Long Island's educational opportunities and successes are shared unevenly along lines of race and income. This has been Long Island's intractable challenge and regional shame for decades. The situation is exacerbated by fragmentation and underinvestment, so it's clear it won't be solved in the absence of collaboration and resources. A focused regional development strategy could direct investments towards partnerships supporting economic sectors highlighted as regional growth priorities. These priorities could in turn shape the education system. Just as schools focus on teaching New York's unique history, we can be attentive to the unique skills and programs needed to build the region's workforce.

Long Island is a high-cost region. It requires high-wage employment, which in turn requires high levels of skill and education. The education part of that equation and the region's powerhouse industries and research institutions are Long Island's twin advantages. Coupled, they could accelerate Long Island's new economy, provide a pipeline of talent to its emerging industries, and slow its "brain drain" among young people. Long Island's symbiosis between education and the economy can emerge from this stress stronger than ever; but it must evolve, and it can no longer afford to overlook the talent that is every bit as present in disadvantaged communities as it is in the Gold Coast.

Dr. Rogers is the Superintendent of the Syosset Central School District in Nassau County.

