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ABSTRACT

Long Island, New York, including Nassau and Suffolk Counties, is a patchwork of small ethnically, racially, and economically segregated towns organized into 126 school districts. School funding patterns and problems conform to racial, ethnic, and class lines. Predominantly minority school districts generally have higher property tax rates, fewer commercial properties, lower per-pupil spending, and the least satisfactory academic performance as measured by standardized tests. During the last decade, active anti-tax, anti-government, conservative political groups, elected officials, and school boards have emerged in a number of Long Island communities. These groups tend to oppose increased school funding, but support the local property tax system because it allows for greater local control over spending and tax rates. In many communities, the overwhelming issue is the objection to paying to educate "other people's children." Support for costly microdistricts (taxpayers are also opposed to district consolidation) and local control over schools on Long Island is also a result of deep racial and class division. The system that promotes inequalities in education reflects the desire of relatively affluent predominantly White and Asian communities to avoid responsibility for problems in neighboring communities where students are largely African American and Latino. The situation on Long Island has national significance, in that the pattern and politics of Long Island's public school system may well be replicated on a broader scale. In this unjust system, school funding that wins majority support denies equal education to minority children. (Contains 45 references.) (SLD)

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**Educating Other People's Children: Race, Class, Ethnicity, Aging,
and the Politics of School Funding in Long Island, New York**
by Alan Singer, Hofstra University

Since World War II, major social, economic, demographic, and political shifts, stimulated by and including suburbanization, deindustrialization, highway construction, commercial development, party realignment, immigration and internal migration, and racial desegregation and resegregation, have had major impacts on the resources available for public education across the United States, but not on the general way that schools are funded (Spring, 1994). In an increasingly global world, funding remains largely dependent on unequal local resources. This has produced significant funding disparities, both between and within states. In 1990, the New Jersey Supreme Court found that the funding of public schools primarily through local property taxes had produced a system where ". . . the poorer the district and the greater its need, the less the money available, and the worse the education." The court concluded that "Education has failed there, for both the student and the State" (Abbott v. Burke, 1990, Goertz, 1994). The national scope of this unequal funding, and its impact on poor and minority communities, is graphically described by Jonathan Kozol (1991).

The frequent inability of local property taxes to adequately fund public education, especially in an era when communities regularly defeat school budgets, has led to court challenges based on "the equal protection" clause of the 14th amendment and sections of different state constitutions (Barton, 1991; Scheurer, 1993; Picus, 1993). As of March, 1994, 28 states, including Texas (Clark, 1994), Kentucky (Kearney, 1994), New York, and New Jersey, were involved in litigation dealing with the financing of education and 11 states were reviewing the use of local property taxes as the major source of revenue for public education (Monk, 1995).

New York State has periodically examined school financing options without making significant changes in its system of local funding (Monk and Kadamus, 1994). In 1992-93, property taxes raised \$11.4 billion or 91% of local revenues for K-12 public education in New York State. This was 51% of the total K-12 public school funding and represented an 11% increase in local property taxes between 1989 and 1992. (New York State Department of Education, 1993).

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In 1994, the New York State Department of Education, in response to the school funding disparity created by heavy reliance on local property taxes, and growing voter discontent with high tax rates (discontent that contributed to the defeat of local school budgets, helped topple an incumbent governor, and produced Republicans control of both houses of the federal legislative branch), established the New York State Board of Regents Technical Study Group on the Generation of Revenues for Education to gather information, explore funding issues, and evaluate alternative funding proposals. Its reports, prepared by academic members of the committee, attempted a balanced approach to funding reform that generally focused on technical adjustments to the system (Monk, 1995; Powers, 1995). Perhaps the most significant contribution was by Catherine Clark from the Texas Center for Education Research, whose report on a funding initiative in Texas concluded that "What is required to make this system work is the political will to put into place a more aggressive redistribution mechanism than has been present in New York (Monk, 1995)."

Long Island (including Nassau and Suffolk Counties), New York, is a patchwork of small ethnically, racially, and economically segregated towns organized into 126 school districts (Singer, 1995; New York State Department of Education, 1996). In 1993, Nassau County had 37 school districts where between 83 and 99% of its students were listed as white or Asian, 4 school districts where whites and Asians made up approximately 75% of the school population, 2 school districts were white and Asian students where in a small majority, 2 school districts were African American and Latino/a students constituted a majority but where there were significant numbers of white and Asian students (between 30 and 40%), and 4 school districts where African American and Latino/a students made up over 90% of the school population (New York State Board of Regents, 1995 and 1996). School funding patterns and problems conform to racial, ethnic, and class lines. Predominately minority school districts generally have higher property tax rates, fewer taxable commercial properties, the lowest per pupil spending, and the least satisfactory academic performance (as measured on standardized tests) (New York State Education Department, 1996). Many of these economically hard-pressed districts have participated in court challenges to the current system for school funding (Hildebrand, 1995b).

Partly as a result of the proliferation of small districts, Long Island's schools have more high salaried administrators than the rest of New York State combined (Galiber, Halperin and Perry, 1991). However, despite opposition to the high cost of education,

there has generally been limited support for the consolidation of school districts on Long Island, even when proponents argue on the basis of cost-effectiveness (Raywid and Shaheen, 1994). A 1992 study urged a reduction to 66 school districts with a minimum enrollment of 4,000 students. This proposal was rejected despite a projected annual savings of \$140 million in administrative overhead (Long Island Regional Planning Board, 1992; Barbanel, 1992).

During the last decade, active anti-tax, anti-government, conservative political groups, elected officials, and school boards, have emerged in a number of Long Island communities. However, despite their opposition to increased funding for public education, these movements generally support the local property tax system because it allows for greater local control over spending and tax rates (Phillips, 1996; Scudellari, 1994). As a result of organized anti-tax activity, 31% percent of the local school budgets were initially defeated in Spring 1994 and 22% in Spring 1995 (Phillips, 1996; Hildebrand, 1994 and 1995a). One of the adjustments designed to make the local property tax system more effective and politically palatable was a proposal approved by the New York State Legislature to hold all school budget, and a number of school board, elections on Long Island on the same day in 1996. Supporters believed that increased media attention to local school elections would lead to a larger voter turnout and the passage of more budgets (Crossan, 1994). In fact, there was both a high voter turnout and an unusually high percentage of budgets approved (85%) on the first round of voting (McQuiston, 1996; Hildebrand, 1996b).

Despite controversy over school funding and sharp demographic divisions, public opinion polls show there is general support for public education on Long Island. In a 1996 poll, 70% of Long Island residents reported that they selected their homes because of the quality of the local public schools, 86% opposed cuts in academic programs, and more than half were willing to pay higher taxes to improve education. Four out of five Long Islanders gave their schools high grades, and even though schools in predominately African American and Latino/a communities received lower satisfaction ratings, parents in these communities remained optimistic (Evans, 1996).

Analysis of local newspaper coverage of the 1996 Long Island school budget elections, interviews with school officials and voters, and voting results, show that while opposition to school budgets and support for local decision making are generally framed in terms of community control, opposition to excessive taxation by aging populations, fiscal responsibility, effective management, democracy, and even, support for public education, the overwhelming issue in many communities is

opposition to paying for the education of "other people's children" (Hildebrand, 1996a; Eisenberg, 1996; Mohan, Markon and Kowal, 1996).

In recent elections, transitional districts (districts where the population is shifting ethnically, racially, economically, and/or by age) had the most active anti-tax and anti-government political activity, the highest rates of school budget defeats, and the most "austerity budgets." They also have increasing numbers of white families sending their children to non-public or parochial schools. The call for local control and fiscal restraint in these communities masks deep-seated racial and class animosities and increasing conflict between aging white voters and recent immigrants and non-white families.

In Nassau County, six districts defeated school budgets in the first round of the 1996 budget adoption process. Three predominately white districts (Bethpage, student population 90.8% white; Hicksville, student population 76.8% white; and Manhasset, student population 78.6% white) defeated budgets in battles over what appeared to be local issues, but in at least two cases, reflected opposition to funding the education of other people's children. In Hicksville, a majority of voters did not want to fund an alternative high school for the district, while Manhasset voters believed that school officials were not vigorous enough in rooting out and barring students from other communities who were illegally enrolled in their schools (Eisenberg, 1996; Mohan, Markon and Kowal, 1996).

In the other three districts, Elmont, Westbury, and Uniondale, the key factor in the defeat of school budgets was the difference between the racial and ethnic composition of the school population and the overall population of the district. In Elmont, 61% of the student population is non-white, but according to the 1990 census, the town population is over 75% white. In Uniondale, 93% of the student population is non-white, but the town's population is approximately 45% white. In Westbury-New Cassel, only 7.4% of the students are white, but the population of the district is over half white (New York State Education Department, 1996; Mohan, Markon and Kowal, 1996). Significantly, the Malverne-Lakeview school district, with a history of bitter teacher contract negotiations and four defeated budgets in the previous five years, had a high voter turnout and approved its school budget (Mohan and Evans, 1996). In Malverne, where over 60% of the student population is non-white, African American and Latino/a voters now appear to hold an electoral majority.

In Suffolk County, in four of the eleven districts that defeated school budgets on the first round in 1996 (Amityville-North Amityville, Brentwood, Central Islip, and Copiague), white voting majorities defeated funding proposals in districts where non-

white students predominate. In at least one other district (Riverhead), an overwhelmingly white electorate defeated the budget for schools that are over 30% African American (New York State Education Department, 1996; Mohan, Markon and Kowal, 1996).

Support for costly microdistricts and local control over schools on Long island is also a result of deep racial and class division. A system that perpetuates "savage inequalities" in education reflects the desire of relatively affluent, predominately white and Asian communities to avoid responsibility for problems in neighboring communities where students are overwhelmingly African American and Latino/a. Where school district consolidation to relieve overhead costs has taken place, it generally involves communities with exceedingly small African-American student populations like Bellmore, Merrick, North Bellmore, and North Merrick (all under 2%), and Valley Stream (with 3 subdistricts, each under 4%). The Sewanhaka consolidated school district has actually decentralized its secondary schools as one of the communities, Elmont, has become increasingly African American (33%) and Latino/a (14.3%) (New York State Education Department, 1996).

The most savage of the savage inequalities in Nassau County exists in the Roosevelt school district, which was taken over by a New York State oversight committee because of poor student performance and accusations of mismanagement (Sengupta, 1995; Revkin, 1995; Kershaw, 1995; Singer, 1995; Hildebrand, 1995c). Roosevelt is a small school district with 2,833 students, 91.8% of whom are African American. The white population of the district's schools is only .3%. The district has a high property tax rate, the second highest poverty index in the county, spends the highest percentage of its funds on non-operational costs and on special education, and has the least property tax dollars per pupil (New York State Education Department, 1996). In 1993-1994 Roosevelt spent \$10,21 per student with a tax rate of \$40.64 per \$100 of assessed value. In comparison, Manhasset, with a lower tax rate of \$32.96 and lower levels of state aid, was able to spend \$16,138 per student (Markon, 1996).

Despite a recent sense of urgency among New York state education and elected officials, the problems of the Roosevelt school district are not new. Since the late 1960s, when the racial composition of Roosevelt was transformed by a mass and rapid exodus of white families, the district has struggled to educate its children despite limited economic resources, and virtually no local industrial or commercial property. In 1976, state officials were forced to intervene in order to prevent Roosevelt from defaulting on the school district's \$4 million dollars debt (Carvajal, 1996).

In 1969, Ewald Nyquist, the Acting New York State Education, recommended the dissolution of the predominately African American Roosevelt and Wyandanch school districts and their merger with surrounding white districts (Newsday, 1969). At the time, Roosevelt's student body was approximately 80% African American and an estimated one-third of the students were from families receiving public assistance. The previous year, the former State Education Commissioner had argued that the Wyandanch district, where more than 90% of its 2,500 students were non-white, would never have a sufficient local tax base to support quality education. However, when Nyquist made this proposal, it was opposed by the presidents of both the Roosevelt and Wyandanch school boards and by white residents and officials in the surrounding communities. Currently, if Roosevelt were included in a southeastern Nassau County consolidated school district along with with the neighboring more middle class communities of Freeport, Bellmore, Merrick, Wantagh, Seaford, and Massapequa, the consolidated district would have a highly interracial multiethnic school population of approximately 28,500 students, including approximately 70% who are white, 19% who are African American, 9% who are Latino/a, and 2% who are Asian (Singer, 1995).

Despite continuing problems in Roosevelt and other communities, New York state has been reluctant to directly intervene in local school affairs or to promote interdistrict school integration on Long Island, either through judicial or legislative action. In 1982, the State Court of Appeals ruled in *Levittown v. Nyquist* that despite disparities in school funding and student performance, the state had met its obligation to provide "sound basic education." Another case brought by the local chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), other civil rights organizations, and REFIT (Reform Educational Financing Inequities Today), a coalition that included twenty Long Island school districts, was dismissed in 1995 (Rethinking Schools, 1997; Hildebrand, 1995b). Following this defeat, the ACLU shifted its strategy and launched a legal challenge to the property tax system on Long Island.

Robert Berne, director of a 1991 legislative commission that recommended a sweeping overhaul of the state's decentralized school systems, believes that legislative opposition to school reform is rooted in the fact that legislators "are reluctant to usurp the power of other elected officials," especially since school board positions are stepping-stones to higher elective office and sources of patronage for political clubs (Berger, 1995). Legislative resistance to change in this area, however, goes much deeper and is directly related to racial antipathies. Traditionally the New

York state legislature, especially the Long Island delegation, has been hostile to school integration plans. In the 1960s, prompted by white opposition to school integration in Malverne and Great Neck, it approved a Neighborhood School Law that barred involuntary busing and the assignment of students to schools based on race or ethnicity (Human Rights, 1973). A coalition of Long Island's least wealthy school districts, including the overwhelming African American districts of Roosevelt and Hempstead in Nassau County and Wyandanch in Suffolk County, is currently spearheading a legislative campaign to increase state funding for districts with "extraordinary needs" (Markon, 1996). However, elected officials representing predominately white school districts risk voter revolts if they allocate additional state funds to minority school districts or support school consolidation plans that promote racial integration.

The situation on Long Island has broad national significance, especially given recent demographic projections. The United States Census Bureau estimates that children from racial and ethnic minorities will constitute 35% of the public school student population by the year 2000. In addition, between 1990 and 2030, the number of Americans over the age of 65 will double, while the working age population will grow by just 25%. The pattern and politics of Long Island's public school system may well be replicated on a broader scale.

In 1787, James Madison, a participant in the Constitutional Convention, future President of the United States, and the author of Federalist #10, warned about the power of a permanent majority faction to undermine effective government, social justice, and the rights of minorities, through the creation of an unjust system of laws (Rossiter, 1961). I believe we are witnessing Madison's prediction at work on Long Island. In the 1990s, racism, class bias, and aging, have combined to fortify an unjust system for school funding that wins majority support to deny educational justice to minority children.

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