8 Key Facts about Long Island School Districts

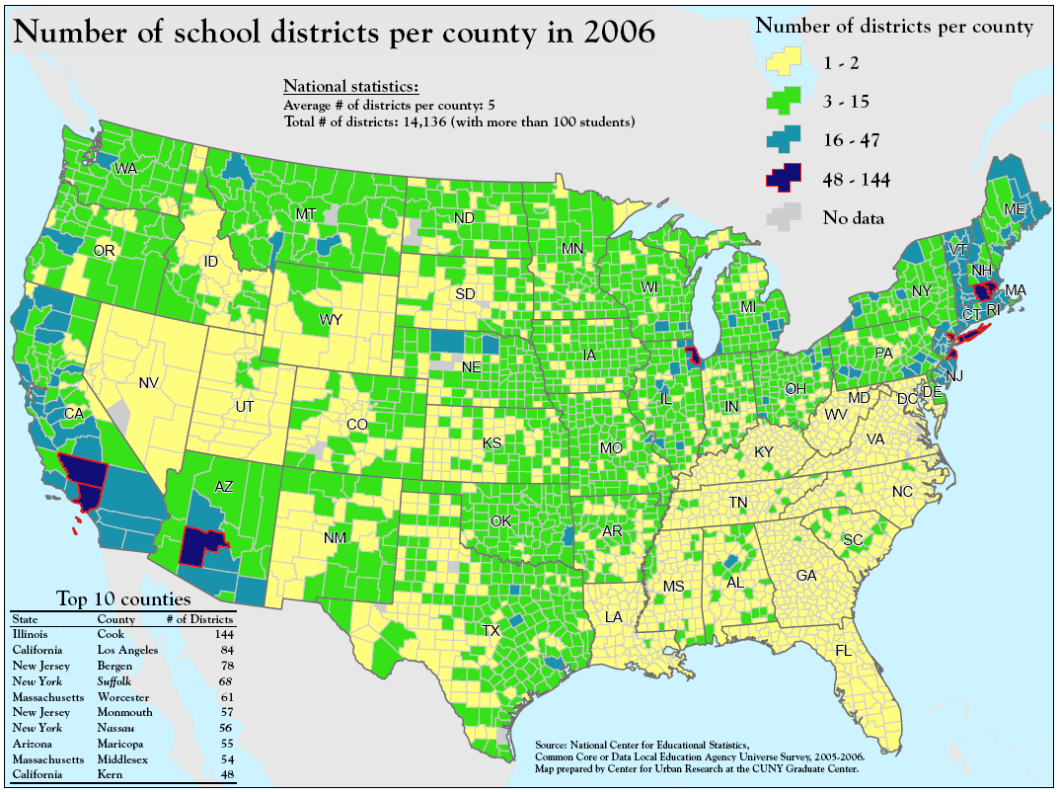
Fact 1: We have a lot of school districts.

In comparison to the rest of the State, and the nation, the most conspicuous feature of Long Island's educational landscape is the number of districts we have.

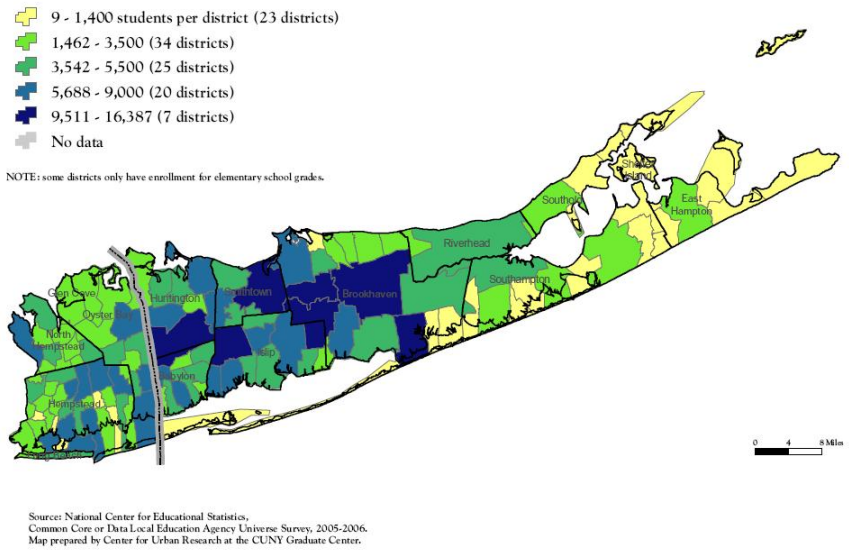
Our historic development has separated Long Island into local districts that vary enormously in size, race, income, and other features. Indeed, our region is atypical, both in how many school districts we have and in how segregated they are.

We currently have 124 school districts. Nassau contains 56 and Suffolk 68, placing them seventh and fourth—out of 3,066 counties in the nation—in the number of districts per county.

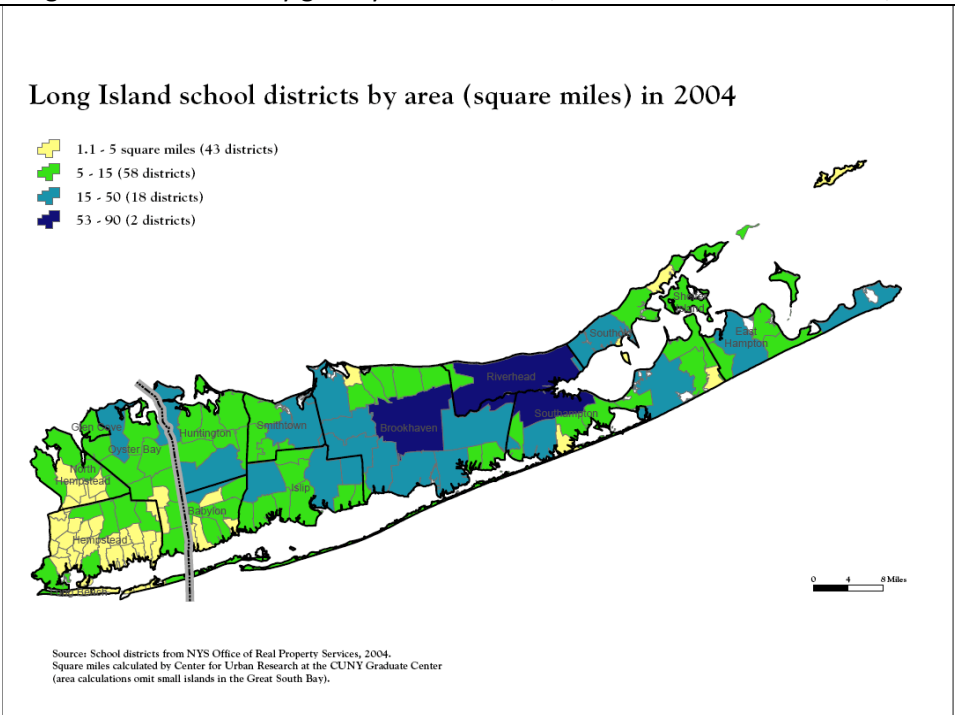
They tend to be small both in the number of students and the geographic area they cover.



In the first three centuries of European settlement in this area, single-school districts and one-room schoolhouses were the norm. By 1905, New York State had accumulated 10,625 districts. Seeing the need to consolidate, the state reorganized in 1947 and again in 1958. By 1965 the number of school districts had been brought down to 792. There the process stopped. Today the overwhelming majority of counties in the state include only 15 districts or less. Long Island is the stark exception.

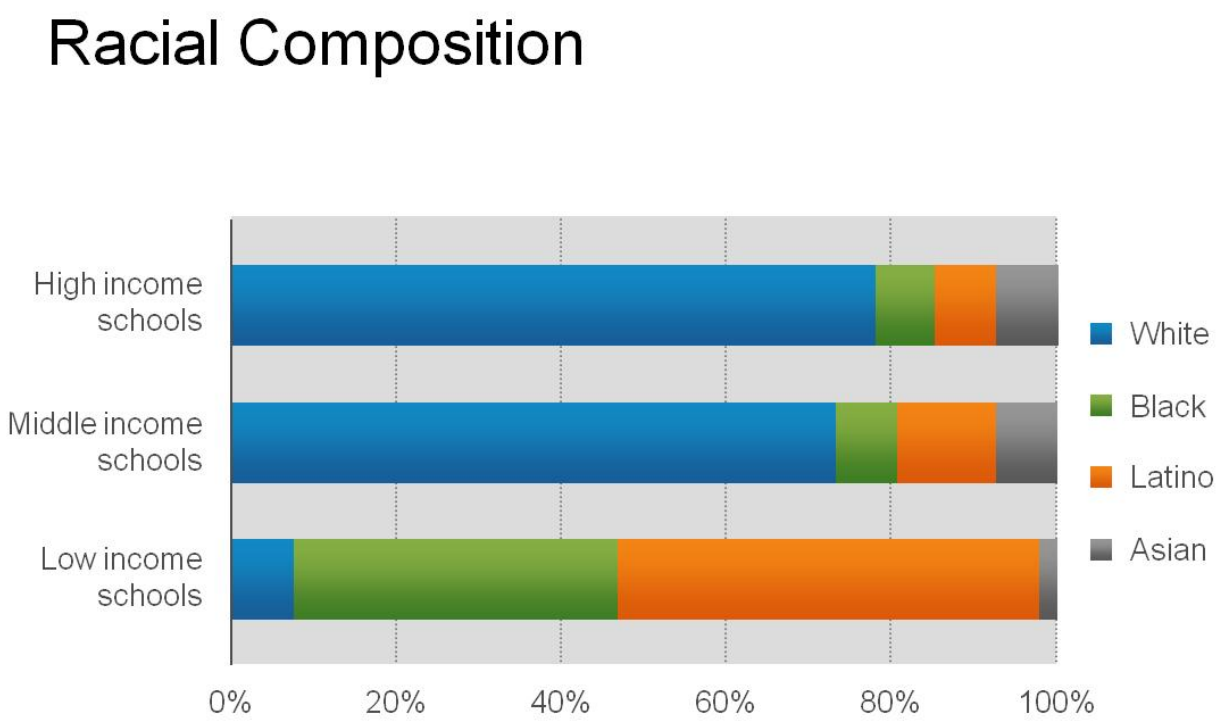


Long Island districts vary greatly in enrollment, but 75% have fewer than 5,500 students.



Thirty-four percent of districts cover less than five square miles. Another 50% cover 5-15 square miles. The smallest district, Roosevelt, is 1.1 square miles.

Fact 2: LI's school districts vary widely in the racial composition of their student population.



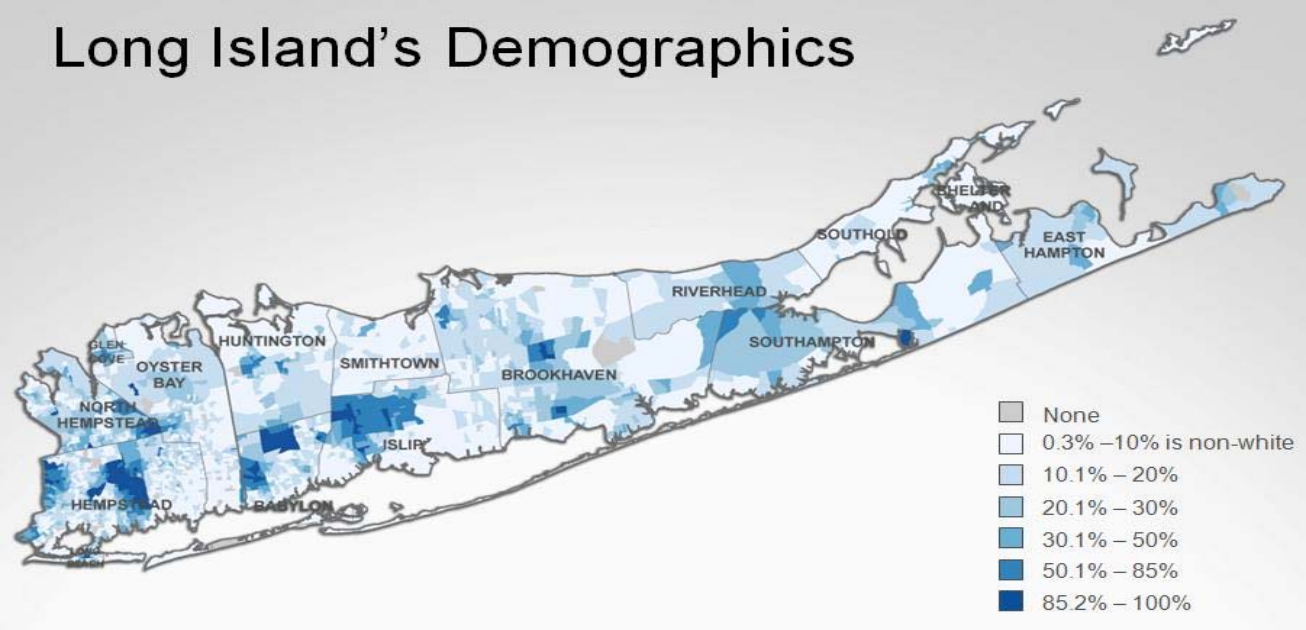
New York State assesses the economic situation at the district level in terms of the discrepancy between "need" and "resource capacity." School districts are thus classified as "low-need," "average-need," and "high-need." Low-need districts are rich in resources and can provide their students with state-of-the-art learning facilities, technology, and faculty. High-need districts are resource-starved and students do not have the same opportunities available to them.

The vast majority of Long Island students attend low- and average-need districts. Only 14% of all Long Island students attend high-need districts. There are, however, extremely large racial and ethnic differences: 76% of all students in high-need districts are black and Hispanic. Moreover, the percentage of black and Hispanic students who are schooled in high-need districts is ten times the percentage of white students who are schooled in high-need districts. Given that education is the central factor for upward mobility in our society, this situation predisposes racial and ethnic minorities to further disadvantage, which in the long run is a societal cost shared by everyone alike. According to research from Columbia University's Teachers College[1]:

- Annual losses exceed $50 billion in federal and state income taxes for all 23,000,000 U.S. high school dropouts ages 18-67.
- Increasing the high school completion rate by just 1 percent for all men ages 20-60 would save the U.S. up to $1.4 billion per year in reduced costs from crime.
- Health-related losses for the estimated 600,000 high school dropouts in 2004 totaled at least $58 billion, or nearly $100,000 per student.

[1] The Social Costs of Inadequate Education, October 2005, The Teachers College, Columbia University http://www.schoolfunding.info/resource_center/research/2005symposium.pdf

Fact 3: Racial segregation in our schools mirrors racial segregation in our housing patterns.



Long Island districts are separated by race as well as by income. African-Americans and Latinos are clustered in areas of such extremely high concentrations, that to achieve racial balance across the region, 74% of blacks would have to move. That makes Long Island the third most racially segregated region in America.[2] Segregated communities mean segregated schools: island-wide, half of all black and Latino students attend schools that are at least 95% students of color.

Segregation patterns emerged in the postwar era from housing development that was often segregated by design. Long Island's most famous suburb, Levittown, is a prime example. The original Levittown deeds forbade occupancy by "any person other than members of the Caucasian race."[3] Despite the Supreme Court's 1949 ruling finding such restrictive covenants unconstitutional, private restrictions remained in effect until the Civil Rights Act of 1968. The impact of these restrictions persists: today 89.3% of Levittown's residents are white, 9.7% are Latino, 4.7% Asian and 0.6% are African-American. Much of Long Island reflects a similar pattern.

By 1965 concerns about segregation had moved the State Education Department along with the New York State Commission for Human Rights to investigate the matter. They found the situation on Long Island particularly worrisome. Throughout the region 21 communities were found to have a very high concentration of nonwhites. According to the 1965 report, as Long Island's population expanded, nonwhites remained an isolated group. The report warned, "If the existing population patterns persist, there will be even greater concentrations of nonwhites in given suburban communities as the over-all increases occur." [4] Forty-plus years later, this prediction stands confirmed. According to a 2008 ERASE Racism report, 39% of African Americans and 21% of Latinos said that they or an immediate family member had experienced housing discrimination on Long Island.[5]

[2] U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000.
[3] john powell, Institute on Race and Poverty, *Racism and the Opportunity Divide on Long Island* (Briefing paper prepared for *ERASE Racism*, 2002), p. 5.
[4] Robert P. O'Reilly, Racial and Social Class Isolation in the Schools: Implications for Educational Policy and Programs, 1970, Praeger Publishers, New York, page 61.
[5] *Black and Latino Experiences with Discrimination on Long Island*, ERASE Racism, prepared by Center for Survey Research at Stony Brook University, 2008

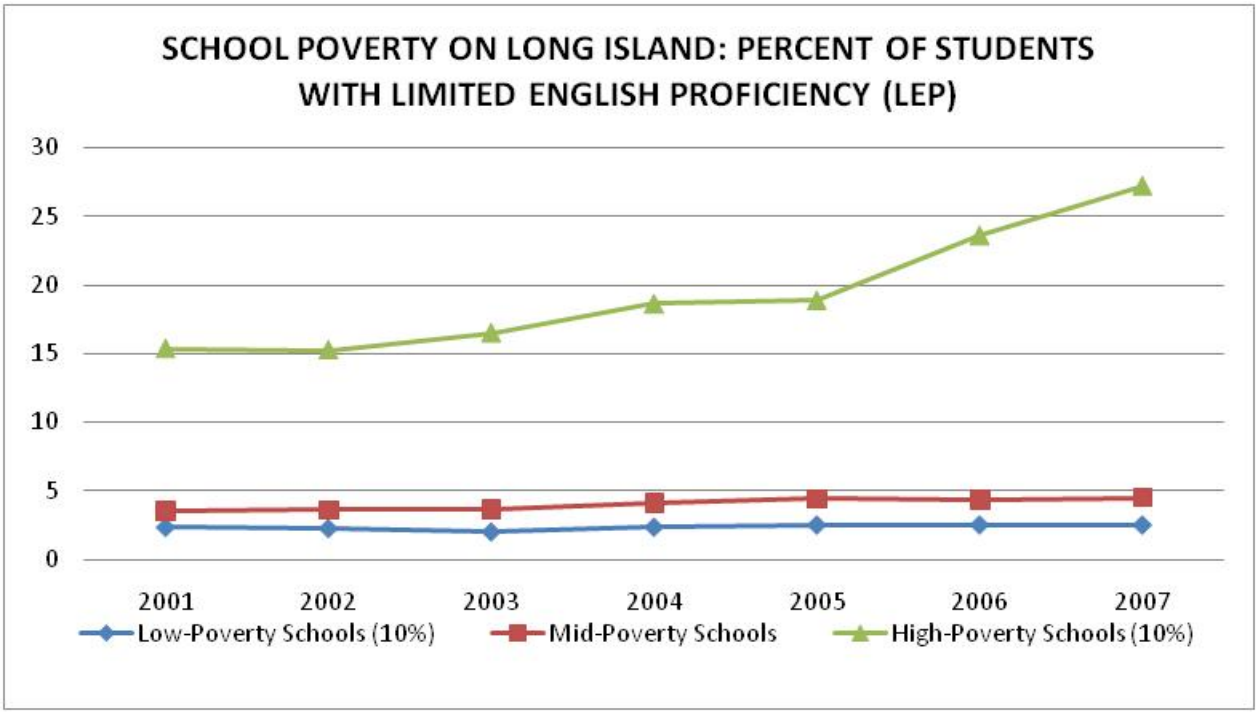
Fact 4: School spending varies greatly between districts.

School Spending Per Pupil

On average, almost $8,000 more is spent each year on a child in one of the wealthiest districts than a child in one of the poorest.

- Lower expenditures translate into substantial educational disadvantages for Long Island's poorest schools. Comparing key features in Long Island schools, Hofstra University researchers discovered: Schools in the poorest communities have larger numbers of students than those in wealthier communities: an average of over 800 compared to about 600.
- The poorest communities have higher student-teacher ratios: 15:1, compared to 13:1 in the wealthiest districts.
- Almost all teachers, 97%, have a Masters degree or higher in schools in the wealthiest communities, compared to 82% in the poorest. In some of the latter schools, only 50% of teachers have a Masters degree.
- Schools in the wealthiest districts have twice as many computers and essential educational tools, as schools in the poorest districts.
- Wealthy districts also provide newer text books, better facilities, more Advanced Placement courses and more specialized classes, such as art and music.

Fact 5: Poorer schools have to spend more on ESL programs than wealthier districts leaving fewer funds available for other programs.



One major obstacle to student achievement is Limited English Proficiency. LEP students need special instruction, which can add to school costs. The problem is aggravated because the poorest schools have the highest percentages of LEP students—five times the percentages of low- and mid-poverty schools. In other words, the schools with the most LEP students have the least resources to help them.

Fact 6: Poor districts have to tax themselves more than wealthier districts in order to raise the same amount of money.

The disparity can be seen in an analysis provided by the Fiscal Policy Institute. They asked how much, in each Long Island district, taxes would have to rise on a $450,000 home in order to increase revenues by $250 per pupil. The Institute found:

- The tax increase needed depends on the number of students in the district and the overall wealth of the community (*i.e.*, more homes with higher property values).
- In districts with high wealth-per-pupil a relatively small tax increase will significantly raise per-pupil revenues. Where wealth-per-pupil is low, a much greater tax increase is needed.
- It would cost a Fire Island taxpayer $1.72 per $450,000 home to raise the funds; in Brentwood the cost would be $325.67.
- When districts of similar size are compared, poor districts must increase taxes up to 6.5 times as much as wealthy districts, in order to raise the same per-pupil revenue.

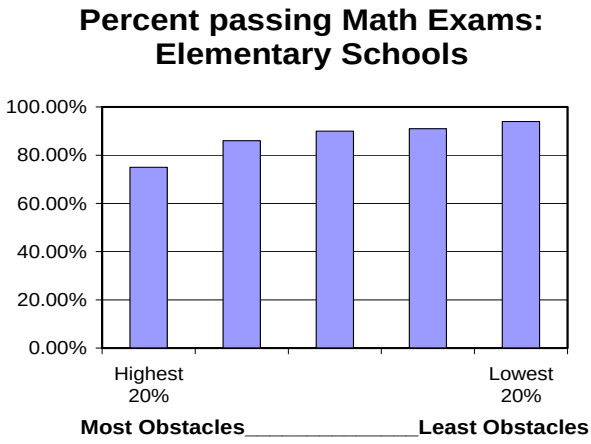
	# Students in District	NYS Defined Need Level	Tax Increase	Percent Higher in High Need Districts
Wyandanch Union Free School District	2,254	3	$ 314.39	658%
Locust Valley Central School District	2,284	6	$ 47.81	
Roosevelt Union Free School District	2,945	3	$ 303.92	397%
Mineola Union Free School District	2,865	6	$ 76.57	
Hempstead Union Free School District	6,913	3	$ 312.35	374%
Syosset Central School District	6,677	6	$ 83.48	
William Floyd Union Free School District	10,191	3	$ 270.27	207%
Smithtown Central School District	10,541	6	$ 130.28	

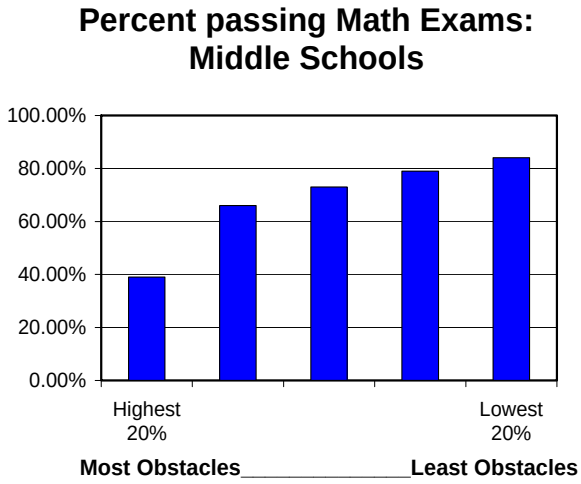
NYS Defined Need Level
3 = High Need Districts
6 = Low Need Districts

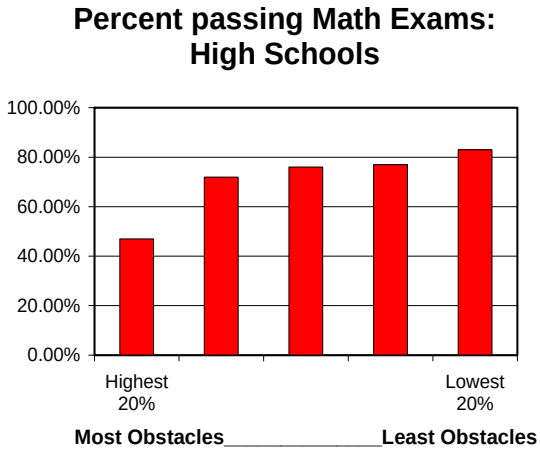
These categories are based on a measure of a district's ability to meet the needs of its students with local resources. This measure is caluclated by dividing a district's estimated poverty percentage by its Combined Wealth Ratio.

When districts of similar size are compared, poorer districts must increase taxes up to 6.5 times as much as wealthier districts to achieve the same increase in per-pupil revenue.

Fact 7: Students in schools with high rates of poverty face the most obstacles in achieving high scholastic results. Further, the gap gets wider as students move from elementary school to middle school to high school.







*The seemingly lower gap in high school math scores is misleading: many underperforming students have dropped out of school by then and do not take the test.

Long Island school districts differ greatly not only in their resources, but also in their needs. Some schools face special educational hurdles, including high poverty, high population of students with Limited English Proficiency (LEP), and a high degree of racial segregation – whites and Asians separated from blacks and Latinos.

The researchers grouped the schools from those with the greatest obstacles to those with the least, and correlated the obstacles with academic achievement. They found that achievement in high-obstacle schools consistently lagged behind that in low-obstacle schools.

- Students in the highest-obstacle group showed by far the poorest performance. Gaps between other groups were slight.
- The gap widens as students grow older. By eighth grade the difference in math proficiency reaches 45 percentage points—2.5 times the fourth grade gap.
- Similar patterns were found for scores on English examinations, graduation rates, and overall college readiness.

Fact 8: There are alternatives!

Option: Reduce the number of districts

"You have a whole system reacting to a problem." That's how one town mayor explained the major advantage of Northern Virginia's schools.

Fairfax and neighboring Loudon County in the suburbs of Northern Virginia (NVA) resemble Long Island, in both levels of affluence and levels of poverty—and in exceptional student achievement. The big difference is that in NVA each county has a single consolidated school system.

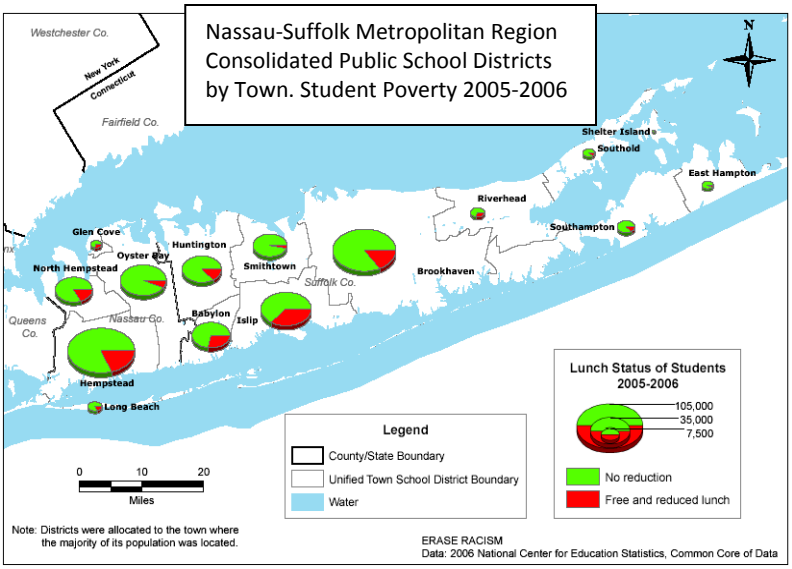
That gives them the ability to focus resources where they are needed–adding more ESL teachers in schools with high immigrant populations, for example, or reducing class sizes where necessary to meet the needs of struggling students.

"I believe we must support these students to ensure they graduate with the same skills as their peers," says Fairfax Superintendent Jack Dale. There is no question that Long Island superintendents share his goals. They simply do not command the overall level of resources, or the flexibility to put them where they're needed.

Closer to Home

The New York State Commission on Property Tax Cap recently proposed consolidating districts with fewer than 1,000 students, as a way to reduce school costs and taxes. The plan would authorize the State Commissioner to require consolidation of districts up to 2,000 students.

ERASE Racism examined the effect of consolidating Long Island's districts along town and city lines. This would produce a total of 15 districts, which would be far less segregated by race and income. The new districts would greatly reduce differences in per-pupil spending, and provide the flexibility to direct resources more effectively.



If districts followed town and city boundaries, none would have an overwhelming proportion of poor students. Also, more resources would be available to target specific needs.

Option: Eliminate Funding Disparities

Funding inequalities exist in many states. Vermont had huge inequities between towns with ski resorts, industrial plants, malls, or vacation homes, which tend to have few children, and towns with small tax bases that have many children.

In 1997, in response to a lawsuit, the state supreme court ordered that these "gross inequities in education opportunities" end.

In designing a new system, the state sought greater statewide equity while allowing communities to make their own decisions about funding their schools.

At its simplest, here's how it works:

- There are no longer local school taxes. Public education is funded by state taxes deposited in the state Education Fund.
- School taxes on primary residences are based on property value or household income, whichever is less. A base per-pupil spending level and base tax rates (on both property and income) are set by the legislature for primary residences.
- Local school boards may propose, and communities may elect to spend above the base level. Residential tax rates (property and income) in each community increase proportionally as voted spending per pupil increases above the base.
- The legislature sets one school property tax rate –not variable with local school spending –for all non-residential property (land, businesses, second homes) statewide.

The system, which has been tinkered with over the years, has largely succeeded in eliminating disparities between districts, while preserving local control. Work continues to address differences in educational achievement including the issue of higher-need districts receiving more funding to successfully address their needs.

Option: Pool Commercial Taxes

In communities with a large number of commercial properties, schools can be very well funded, while homeowners' tax burden is light. In places with little commercial development, residents often pay crushing property taxes and still schools remain underfunded. Homeowners in Uniondale, for example, pay only 29% of the school district tax levy, while those in districts such as Roosevelt, Mount Sinai, and Herricks shoulder more than 90%.

Overall, in regions where school districts are large, revenue disparities are less glaring. But even where districts are small, inequities can be reduced by sharing or "pooling" commercial taxes among neighboring districts.

Commercial tax pooling was most famously implemented in the Minneapolis-St. Paul region, where the Mall of America and other commercial development brought in huge revenues to Bloomington, while nearby communities languished. The Fiscal Disparities Act in 1975 brought a seven-county area into a tax-sharing pool. Existing commercial revenues were left untouched, but each county contributes 40% of the *growth* of its commercial sector, with the pool distributed based on population and property values. Now in its fourth decade, the program, known as "The Minnesota Miracle," has reduced disparities and is credited with saving older towns from insolvency.[6]

Harvey Levinson, former Chairman of Nassau County's Board of Assessors has raised the idea of pooling in relation to the proposed Nassau Hub. If all of the added tax revenues from such development went to one school district—Uniondale—homeowners there could see their taxes cut in half, while residents in neighboring communities would get no relief at all. Levinson suggests that the benefits be more widely distributed, with Uniondale receiving extra shares to offset local impacts from the development.

The idea of tax pooling appeals to Long Islanders. In a *Long Island Index* survey, 73% said they would support "a proposal to pool commercial property taxes and distribute them equally throughout the county's school districts."

[6] Myron Orfield and Nicholas Wallace, "The Minnesota Disparities Act of 1971: The Twin Cities' Struggle and Blueprint for Regional Cooperation," *William Mitchell Law Review*, Volume 33, Number 2, March 7, 2007, pages 591-612.

Option: De-track Schools

Pursue equity. Excellence will follow, believes Carol Corbett Burris, principal of South Side High School in Rockville Centre. She speaks from experience.

Administrators in Rockville Centre were troubled by the persistent achievement gap between on the one hand, blacks and Latinos, and on the other, whites and Asian-Americans. They were troubled, too, by the over-representation of blacks and Latinos in low-achieving classes.

And so in the late 1990's they started de-tracking their classes. Instead of isolating all the "gifted" students in one class, the "slow learners" in another, they mixed the classes by ability and race, and they taught a new, more rigorous curriculum to everyone.

What happened to achievement?

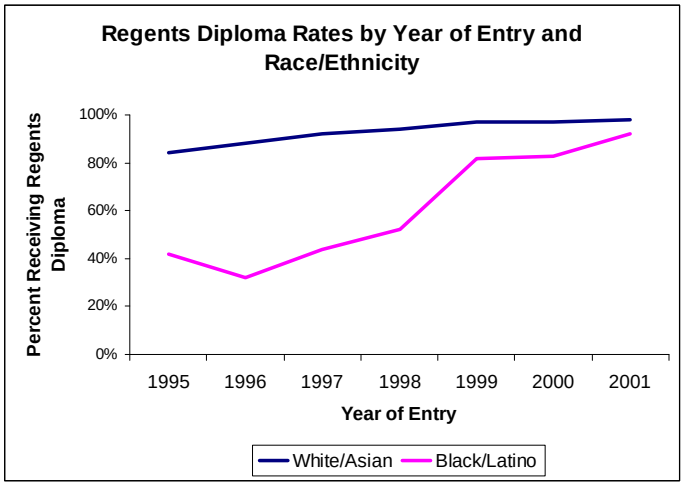
Intuition might tell you that the low-track students might go up, but the high-track students would go down. That's not what educational research shows, however.

And it's not what happened in Rockville Center.

- In 2000, the last year biology classes were tracked, 48% of black and Latino students passed the State Regents exam, and 85% of white and Asian-American students. In 2001, with heterogeneous classes and a more rigorous curriculum, the pass rate for blacks and Latinos shot up to 77%. What about the whites and Asian-Americans? They climbed to 94%.
- When South Side opened Advanced Placement calculus to all its students, enrollment jumped 40%. Despite all those extra "low achievers," the class average on the AP exam went up.

And so it went in class after class. All groups went up. And the achievement gap closed.

Burris draws a lesson from her experience. Give all students access to first-class learning opportunities, she concludes, and everyone wins.



In Rockville Centre, when heterogeneously grouped classes were introduced, blacks and Latinos dramatically closed the achievement gap.

Option: Support Models of Successfully Integrated Schools

Reforms to create racially and economically integrated schools can take many forms: schools that already have a racially diverse student body can focus on actively integrating classes and modifying lessons to suit different achievement levels, as in the example of Rockville Centre, or new schools can be developed that offer admissions to students across boundary lines, such as the magnet school model. Of course supporting models of successfully integrated schools are not limited to these two options, but because of their proven success, they are alternatives that should be considered for Long Island.

Magnet schools are high-standard public schools that greatly benefit students in districts that lack the resources to offer in-depth instruction in science, mathematics, or the arts. The specialized programs allow students to develop their strengths, no matter what that strength may be.

While wealthier districts are able to nurture their students, through AP programs, special art programs, and the like, even wealthy schools can't do everything, and top districts vary in what they offer:

- One district may have an unbelievable music program: it would be perfect for Angela, but too bad—she lives in the next village over.
- Over 20% of the semi-finalists in Intel's national Science Talent Search in the last ten years have come from Long Island schools—but half of them came from just seven districts. Imagine what Long Island's kids would do if they all had access to what's going on in those seven districts.

Indeed, when Governor Cuomo came to Hauppauge to drum up support for a high school of technology for gifted students, he emphasized the role of such schools in growing a corps of top graduates with the talent to rejuvenate the business sector. Cuomo said of Long Island, "You either make this place a high-tech capital of the United States or it won't develop."[7]

Opposition comes mainly from the top districts, which fear that such schools would skim off their best students, as well as state aid based on enrollment. But experience elsewhere shows that students in districts with solid programs for the gifted and talented usually stay there. Most of the children in high-performance schools come from the districts, both rural and urban, where educational resources are limited.[8]

When Long Islanders were asked whether they would support a magnet school to provide in-depth instruction in science, mathematics, or the arts, two-thirds said that they would. When asked if they would support the creation of such a school in *their own* district, support did not waver—63% said that they would.

[7] "Cuomo Pledges Technology School for Talented," *New York Times*, August 25, 1994.
[8] Pearl R. Kane, "Send Gifted Kids to High School Together," *Newsday*, Section: Viewpoints, December 5, 1988, page 51.

Option: Create Voluntary Inter-district Transfer Programs

Seven regions across the country promote educational opportunity through Voluntary Inter-District Transfer programs.

Students from struggling schools, typically in urban areas, attend school in nearby suburban districts. The programs are voluntary for both the transferring students and the receiving schools. Yet the programs have been running for 45 years, and have grown in size—to as many as 8,000 children, and as many as 37 districts.

These are win-win programs, in which both the transferring students and the receiving schools benefit. A study of Boston's METCO program found that academic achievement for the transfer students closely mirrored the high achievement of the suburban students. The transfer students attend college at nearly the same rate as their suburban classmates, and at a rate 10% higher than the statewide average. 100% of METCO seniors passed the 10th grade state achievement exams in English and math, compared to 75% in the Boston city schools.[9] In a 1997 evaluation of METCO, researchers found that 82% of students surveyed reported a good or excellent experience with the program.[10]

Geographically, transfer programs would be quite practical on Long Island: the small size of our districts would make transportation manageable.

Our poll asked Long Islanders what they thought of offering a limited number of children in failing school districts the chance to attend better schools in nearby districts where space is available: 67% were in favor and only 27% were opposed. When asked if they would favor such a plan in their own school district, support did not significantly erode: 64% were in favor and only 30% opposed.

[9] METCO Program publication, *Education Policy Initiatives,* January 19, 2007; http://www.metcoinc.org/METCO_Policy_Initiatives_Updated_1-19-07.pdf

[10] "METCO Study Finds Broad Support from Parents/Students," *The Harvard University Gazette,* September 25, 1997; http://www.hno.harvard.edu/gazette/1997/09.25/METCOStudyFinds.html.