

Alan Singer  
Assistant Professor Department of Curriculum and Teaching  
Hofstra University School of Education  
Hempstead, New York 11550  
H- 718/768-7239 W- 516/463-5853

Attention: Marty Hollander, Newsday Viewpoints  
Phone 516 843-2919 FAX 516/843-2986

**"What Kind of Future Do We Want?"**

Alan Singer, Hofstra University  
(121-38-1731)

2 pages to follow

## **"What Kind of Future Do We Want?"**

Alan Singer, Hofstra University

In November the United States elects a President, but the ballot Long Islanders cast on May 21 may be their most important one this year. Results in school board elections and in local school budget battles will send a message to the rest of the country about the future of public education and will strongly influence positions that candidates take in the Presidential, Congressional and State elections this fall.

On May 21, Long Island voters will answer two fundamental questions: "Who are our children?" and "How do we insure our country's future?" We will decide whether the education of all children is an essential investment in our common future and whether to commit ourselves to pay the necessary cost of that education or to limit our individual fiscal responsibilities, elect conservative boards, and defeat school budgets. As a teacher, parent, and citizen, I am convinced that we must take a stand for children and affirm our support for public schools.

Public schools have always been important to the people of Long Island. According to a Newday poll (published on April 21, 1996), 70% of Long Island residents selected their homes because of the quality of the local schools, 86% oppose cuts in academic programs, and over half are willing to pay more to improve education. Four out of five Long Islanders give their local schools a high grade. And even though schools in predominately African American and Latino/a communities receive a lower satisfaction rating, parents in these communities remain optimistic for the future.

But despite these overwhelmingly positive responses, school budgets are threatened because of the region's uncertain economic future, the high cost of a top-flight public education system, and low voter turnout. School budgets are defeated because they are one of the few areas where citizens can directly express their broader disenchantment with our society. In addition, many older voters and people who send their children to private or parochial schools, don't want to pay to educate "other people's children."

But there are severe consequences for cuts in schools, consequences which we all must live with if we vote "no" on May 21. Overcrowded, understaffed schools breed hopelessness, racial and ethnic tension, and violence. Cuts in school budgets today will mean a poorly prepared work force, an uneducated

citizenry, and expanded poverty, crime and higher prison costs tomorrow. Partly as a result of decades of budget cut in social programs, the United States already has the largest and most expensive prison system in the industrialized world. Is this the future we want for our children?

During the last twenty years there has been a growing gap between wealth and poverty in the United States. The middle-class is squeezed by corporate down-sizing and lay-offs and its numbers are shrinking. Individual efforts alone cannot protect our families. Public education offers possibility to all children and is the best way to prepare them for our rapidly changing world.

The vote in communities like Malverne, Westbury, and Brentwood is especially important because voters in these towns have regularly defeated school budgets in recent years. The towns have significant African American and Latino/a student populations, but voting is dominated by an older white electorate with fewer children in the public schools. This group of voters must decide whether they want short term tax savings or will support community development.

Long Island has a unique opportunity this year. A "yes" vote on school budgets and for pro-education school boards will be interpreted as a call for increased state and Federal investment in schools and as support for a more liberal, caring society that takes responsibility for all of its children. In his 1961 Presidential Inauguration speech, John F. Kennedy promised that Americans would "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty." It is long past time that we extend that promise to all of our children by providing them with a quality public education. A "yes" vote on May 21 is a good way to start.