

ELIMINATE FUNDING INEQUITIES

Put LI students on equal footing

BY ALAN SINGER

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On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court declared "in the field of public education, the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." The historic decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* was a major step in the struggle for African-American civil rights.

Yet 50 years later, school segregation in the United States is intensifying and school systems, especially in suburban communities such as those on Long Island, remain devastatingly unequal. As New York tries to come to terms with the court decision in the Campaign for Fiscal Equity case that demands state intervention to provide all students with a "sound basic education," it is time to consider radical solutions.

Just this week the Zarb commission, appointed by Gov. George Pataki, recommended the state allocate an additional \$2.5 billion to \$5.6 billion to address school funding inequities.

The need for radical solutions is highlighted by school closings in the financially strapped, racially segregated, academically low-performing Hempstead school system. Hempstead High School is closed for a week because of an asbestos scare. The same building was closed for three months in 1990. At least two elementary schools in the district are in dire need of repair, and one of them is now closed.

Residents of the school district, with little income to spare, voted in December, 2003 to reject a \$177-million bond to pay for reconstruction costs. In a county where a majority of graduating seniors earn New York State-endorsed Regents diplomas, only 6 percent of the graduates of Hempstead High School meet this standard.

The details of any radical reorganization of Long Island school systems to provide an equitable education to all students will need to be worked out by parents, educators and the public. But, in the spirit of the *Brown* and Campaign for Fiscal Equity court decisions, here's a possible broad outline for a plan.

In the short term, the state should take over and take responsibility for more fiscally troubled and academically failing schools. I am not proposing what happened in Roosevelt, where the state essentially blamed the community for the problems of its schools and provided little in the way of additional resources. Roosevelt was kept on life support to avoid state and county responsibility for educating its children.

The next step would be countywide school funding plans to equalize resources. The Zarb commission complained of the difficulty in establishing the cost of an equitable education. But there actually is an easily applicable standard. Every child should get what the children of Jericho receive.

In Jericho, many students with special needs are provided teachers who travel with them from class to class and work with them on a one-on-one basis. Many classrooms have two regularly assigned licensed teachers so that "no child is left behind." Students in danger of failing attend special support classes where groups of six to eight students receive extra help.

This will not be cheap. Jericho budgets roughly twice as much per child more than is spent on children in poorer districts.

A longer-term proposal is to finally end racial and economic segregation on Long Island by creating consolidated school districts. If the Hempstead schools were merged with the surrounding school districts

of Garden City, Mineola, Carle Place, Herricks and West Hempstead, there would be one school district with approximately 20,000 students.

Fifty-five percent of the students would be white, 23 percent African-American or Caribbean, 14 percent Latino, and 8 percent of Asian ancestry. A similar plan could combine the Wyandanch schools with neighboring largely white districts.

Such combined school districts would allow all of their students to receive not only an equitable education, but also one that exposed them to the social diversity of Long Island and prepared them to live and work in a multicultural world. This project could be facilitated by the creation of magnet high schools that would draw students from each of the communities. Schools of education at Long Island universities could be recruited to support the effort.