

## Quit stalling on equitable education funding

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Fifty years after the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* that "separate but equal schools" are inherently unequal, New York State finally may be adopting a more equitable school finance plan.

Yesterday, the special masters, a three-member court-appointed panel, recommended that, starting in 2008-2009, New York pay an additional \$14 billion over four years to improve New York City schools. The panel also recommended an additional package of nearly \$10 billion for capital improvements. State Supreme Court Justice Leland DeGrasse is scheduled to make a final decision on this report in January. If only it were a final decision.

The state's political leaders, especially those representing suburban and rural constituencies, have fought against the suit brought by the Campaign for Fiscal Equity for more than a decade. They act as if support for a plan to provide a "sound, basic education" to every New York child is tantamount to political suicide.

Gov. George Pataki appealed the initial court ruling and his administration is expected to continue fighting against these recommendations in the courts. Pataki and state educational officials originally argued that no additional money was needed to improve New York City schools because an eighth-grade education was deemed sufficient to function successfully in our society. Instead of our schools preparing all students for college and professional careers, they thought that some children, mainly those from poor, minority groups and immigrant families, only needed to be trained to work at McDonald's or Wal-Mart.

Instead of dragging their feet, our elected officials should endorse the court panel's recommendations and immediately start to figure out how the principles embodied in the decision can be used to improve education across the state - not just in New York City, where the money is so desperately needed.

This ruling could definitely benefit Long Island, where there is a checkerboard of 126 racially and economically segregated mini-school districts. It is a system that wastes valuable educational resources on high overhead because of unnecessary and costly administrators and central district offices and failure to use the economy of scale to purchase materials and build facilities. This system is partly responsible for constantly rising school taxes.

The plaintiffs in the case - the Campaign for Fiscal Equity - have demanded that the state continually re-evaluate the amount of money needed to provide all students with a "sound, basic education." On Long Island that standard has already been established by some of the more affluent school districts. Basically, if a specific level of funding is needed to provide the kind of quality education demanded by parents in Roslyn and Jericho, it should be provided for the children of Hempstead and Roosevelt. According to a 2002 New York State report, the Roosevelt school district spent only \$5,749 per pupil on instructional expenses for K-12 students in regular education classes. Great Neck, Manhasset, Oyster Bay and Jericho spent more than \$10,000 per student. This money allows them to have smaller classes and provide additional academic support for students who are having difficulty. One way to rectify these inequities

would be to have a county-wide system for school funding. The Jericho standard should also be applied in New York City and around the state.

Too many New Yorkers have opposed school funding equity in the past, preferring to spend money locally on their own children. This way of organizing education has contributed to the creation of a large, marginally literate underclass, ill-prepared for active citizenship in a democracy and the occupational demands of the 21st century. Our entire society is weakened by it.

This is a historic moment for the people of New York State. We have a chance to reverse decades of inequity and develop a school funding system that can meet the needs of all of our students. Fifty years after the Brown decision, it is past time that our political leaders right this wrong.