

LONG ISLAND TOPIC

Disparities wear down ailing school districts

BY ALAN SINGER

Alan Singer is an education professor at Hofstra University.

July 31, 2005

Critics of the U.S. occupation of Iraq describe it as a quagmire: Like quicksand it sucks you in deeper and deeper with no escape route. The New York State Department of Education is trapped in just such a sinkhole in the Roosevelt School District, which it placed under state oversight in 1995.

At the time, Gov. George Pataki promised the children of Roosevelt that "we care about them and want them to have the opportunity to learn." But the state's intervention, which became a full takeover in 2002, has been unable to solve the entrenched problems of low student performance on standardized tests, inadequate local financial resources and constant political infighting in the community. After a decade of blundering, the education department is probably tempted to declare victory and just pull out.

This explains why there is no state takeover in Hempstead, where the school board's dysfunction is at least as bad as anything Roosevelt ever experienced. State officials know that a takeover won't work, though the chaos on the school board is already forcing at least some intervention from Albany.

When the Hempstead school board fired the long-term superintendent, Nathaniel Clay, last December and replaced him with Susan Johnson, the former director of personnel, State Education Commissioner Richard Mills ordered Clay's reinstatement. The board continued to support Johnson, but now Clay has returned to the superintendency.

These battles have so disrupted the functioning of the Hempstead school board and the district's central office that Mills has issued a legally binding order threatening to remove the board unless it attends to routine administrative matters such as approving the budget, teacher assignments and the purchase of textbooks before the start of the new school year.

But don't expect more involvement from the state, which desperately doesn't want a second Roosevelt on its hands. Except for the fact that the takeover in Roosevelt has been ineffective, this might seem unfair to Hempstead. The parallels in the political, demographic and academic conditions in the two school districts are remarkably similar. In both cases, repeated failures to improve education fed into debilitating factional disputes on the school boards. In both districts more than 99 percent of the student population is nonwhite, with high rates of poverty. Both communities face gang-related problems.

Sixty-six percent of the students in Hempstead and 75 percent of the students in Roosevelt who took the most recent state mathematics Regents examination failed. Hempstead ranked 55th among Nassau's 56 school districts. Roosevelt ranked last. Students in Roosevelt and Hempstead schools also rank last in the county on the global history exam, graduation rates and number of students who earned Regents diplomas.

By contrast, in 31 Nassau County school districts, at least 90 percent of the students passed the math test. Each of these districts is overwhelmingly white, its families are considerably more affluent than those in Roosevelt or Hempstead, and the districts spend more money per capita on students in regular education classes.

This is the real unfairness. And it transcends the ineptness of the school boards.

The problems in Roosevelt and Hempstead cannot be blamed on the teachers or students either. I visit Hempstead's secondary schools on a regular basis in my capacity as a teacher educator at Hofstra University. The teachers I meet with are generally hardworking, well prepared and caring. Their students are often grappling with learning English, working after school to help support their families, and trying to overcome discouragement bred by years of attending isolated, segregated, second-class schools. Some do succeed despite the odds, while others escape to private schools or simply disappear.

Unfortunately, administrators and politicians are committed to finding an inexpensive quick fix to major school and social problems, a quick fix that does not exist. It makes no difference whether Nathaniel Clay or Susan Johnson, who keep replacing each other, is superintendent in Hempstead. Nowhere in the United States has anyone discovered a miracle solution to the problems facing isolated, underfinanced, mostly minority school districts.

As we have learned in Roosevelt, the answer is not in a state takeover, but finding a way to end racial and economic segregation on Long Island. The best solution is to create consolidated school districts. For example, if the Hempstead schools 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 would be white, 23 percent African-American or Caribbean, 14 percent Latino, and 8 percent Asian. A similar plan could combine the Roosevelt and Wyandanch school districts with neighboring largely white districts.

In June 1987, President Ronald Reagan went to Germany, where he demanded that Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev "tear down this wall," the Berlin Wall, and end the Cold War. It is time we tear down the walls that separate Long Island school districts into racially and economically segregated enclaves. The current system is inefficient, wasteful and immoral. It fails too many of our children. It should be abandoned.

Copyright (c) 2005, Newsday, Inc.