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Rebuilding Roosevelt's Schools Requires More Radical Solutions

Despite claims by Governor Pataki and State Legislators, the state take-over and reorganization of the Roosevelt Union Free School District promises very little change to the children of Roosevelt and poor and minority families in other districts across New York State. It is a narrow and inadequate administrative solution to what are essentially broad and complex social, educational and economic problems.

By blaming the low level education offered to the children of Roosevelt on local mismanagement, the take-over plan maintains the myth that local control and funding of schools provides all of New York State's children with access to high quality education. In reality, it is designed to excuse the more affluent school districts in Nassau County and New York State from participating in the greater changes that are necessary if we are going to improve education for the children of Roosevelt and other districts like it.

Criticism of the leadership of the Roosevelt school district is certainly well deserved. Buildings are in decay, the teaching staff is demoralized and children are performing below the level of their peers in neighboring districts. However, the take-over plan does not address the underlying demographic and economic situation behind the educational crisis. The town of Roosevelt has little taxable commercial property to supplement high residential property taxes. In addition, the district, which is nearly 100% African American and Latino/a, has the highest poverty index in Nassau County, the highest rate of unemployment and the largest percentage of its population receiving public assistance. While Roosevelt's children probably have the greatest needs of any students in Nassau County, the district has the fewest teachers per student and is able to spend the least on their education. In a number of ways, Roosevelt's demographic profile is more like an inner city neighborhood than a suburban community.

Conditions in the Roosevelt schools should not surprise anyone. In the book Savage Inequalities, published in 1991, Jonathan Kozol highlighted Nassau County and the town of Roosevelt to show how prosperous suburban counties across the country maintain local district boundary lines that create a checkerboard pattern of racially and economically segregated schools. Because most school funding is local, poorer and minority districts with greater needs and fewer available resources, end up providing inferior education. Affluent, predominately white, communities like Jericho and Great Neck are able to spend approximately 90% more on each child than is spent on children attending Roosevelt's schools. Incredibly, the state take-over plan does not provide Roosevelt with any additional state dollars.

If Nassau County and New York State are going to improve education in Roosevelt, we must start by recognizing that the current school system does not educate all of our children. Radical solutions are necessary. Assumptions about what constitutes good education must be questioned. District boundaries need to be reorganized. Additional money will have to be spent.

Real change will not be easy, especially given the current political climate in the United States, but Nassau County is in a unique position to accomplish it. A six step program for improving education in Roosevelt and in surrounding communities is outlined below.

1- A first step in rebuilding the Roosevelt schools would be to equalize per pupil expenditures across Nassau County. There is no ethical justification for a school funding system that allocates \$12,428 per pupil to educate children in Great Neck while providing only \$6,557 per student for the children of Roosevelt. Equitable funding should be a basic principle in any school reform plan.

2- The state and county governments should work with local communities to create a consolidated school district for southeastern Nassau County. While boundaries can be negotiated, the communities of Roosevelt, Freeport, Bellmore, Merrick, Wantagh, Seaford and Massapequa easily form a single geographic entity.

There are numerous local precedents for this type of consolidation. Smaller Nassau communities like Bellmore and Merrick and the towns in the Sewanaka District currently pool resources to save money on overhead and administrative costs and the Nassau Board of Cooperative Educational Services

already provides county-wide vocational and special education programs that are too expensive for individual districts to operate.

A consolidated Southeastern Nassau District including the towns listed above would be manageable with approximately 28,500 students. Its highly interracial student body would be 70% white, 19% African and Caribbean American, 9% Latino/a and 2% other (primarily Asian).

3- Schools in a consolidated district could be organized in a number of different ways to promote racial and ethnic diversity. Small thematic magnet programs would encourage maximum school choice for parents and students. The district could experiment with ways to assign children and grades to school buildings in order to minimize the need to transport very young children while at the same time expanding opportunities for culturally diverse classrooms. One model is to have early elementary schools run from kindergarten through 2nd grade, using another site for 3rd and 4th graders, and expanding middle schools to include 5th through 8th grade.

4- Nassau County needs to more effectively utilize one of its greatest resources, its colleges and universities. For example, a state or county supported and financed partnership between a consolidated district and the Hofstra University School of Education would make it possible to create experimental Laboratory Schools utilizing the latest educational ideas and technologies. The additional resources available in these schools would help them eliminate tracking, create more democratic student centered classrooms, and develop culturally-relevant multicultural curriculum. At the same time, the University-School District partnership would be preparing a new generation of outstanding young teachers for the entire county.

5- Even in the most effective schools, there are going to be conflicts between students and students who are at risk of falling behind or dropping out. The University-School District partnership and BOCES can develop and deliver conflict resolution programs and extracurricular activities that bring students together across their differences. They can also provide the tutoring, guidance, work-study, vocational, college-bound and support programs needed to keep all of our students on track and in school.

6- Planning, creating and maintaining this consolidated district is going to require inspirational and visionary leadership and a high level of participation and cooperation by parents, students, teachers and other community residents. To win support for the plan, to insure that communities

remain stable, to respond to taxpayer revolts, and to maintain the interracial character of the student body, Nassau County and the state are going to have to involve everyone in the reorganization process and in the long-term governance of the schools.

While these changes are not easily accomplish or inexpensive, they will bring tremendous educational and social benefits. Once other communities see the advantages of consolidation, more school districts will want to merge. The South Eastern Nassau Consolidated School District can become a model for interracial quality education for the rest of the county, for New York State and for the entire country.

A comprehensive reorganization plan like the one outlined here is a way that New York State can keep the promise Governor Pataki made to the children of Roosevelt; the promise that "we care about them and want them to have the opportunity to learn."

State Board of Regents to appoint a special panel that will work with community residents to draw up plans to reorganize education in the district. UnAppoint special panel with community participation to draw up plan. Roosevelt Union Free School District. Local school board will remain in control as long as it cooperates with plan. Potential can be removed. First state authorized takeover. Narrow technical solution to fundamental social problem.

Given commitment to cutting education budgets and support for local control, the swift action by the Governor and State Legislature to reorganize the Roosevelt School district is puzzling, until we realize it is not designed to help the children of Roosevelt. is puzzling, it is the first take-over in state history, have cut education funding, not expanded. especially since the supposed beneficiaries of the take-over are minority youth. Believes in local control. However, it is not so puzzling when we realize that the take-over is not designed to help them. It is a narrow, technical social to major social problem. Provides no money o rebuild the district. It is intended to insulate the rest of Nassau County from the need for greater change.

Unfortunately for the children of Roosevelt and other poor or minority school districts around New York State, is not intended to help them.

This is not a plan to save Roosevelt. It is a plan to maintain Savage Inequalities without jeopardizing a fundamentally unfair system. Not designed to improve Roosevelt. Designed to protect other districts and communities from participating in broader reforms. Pataki says "I believe in local control." Does not even provide any money. Claim that all reform can be done with existing resources.

I suspect that assuming responsibility for education is a major challenge that New York State and Nassau County are not ready to face. The State Court of Appeals recently ruled that children are not entitled to equal education under the state constitution and many of the people who complain about conditions in Roosevelt oppose politically unpopular decisions like redrawing district lines and equalizing school funding. They do not want to jeopardize their own safe haven communities and segregated high achieving schools. To show how limited the demand is for change, proposed legislation authorizing the take-over of Roosevelt's schools mandates that the costs be paid for by Roosevelt's taxpayers.

Suddenly, the quality of education in Roosevelt is in the news. In May, the (Daniel Domenech) acting Superintendent of the Nassau Board of Cooperative Educational Services charged the district "with child neglect, possibly with abuse." Placed blame on local school board. The State Education Department wants to take control of Roosevelt's schools away from its elected school board, an unprecedented action in New York. State Senator Norman Levy, a Republican, and Assemblywoman Earlene Hill, a Democrat, have even joined forces in support of legislation authorizing a state take-over (though Assembly Democrats and Senate Republicans disagree about the details of the plan).

In the short term, Roosevelt's schools desperately need to be rebuilt. In the long term, the savage educational inequalities in our society must be eliminated. But I confess that ultimately, I don't expect New York State or Nassau County to take any significant action.

The Governor and the Legislature acted in uncharacteristic swiftness in response to a heavily publicized report by the acting Superintendent of the Nassau Board of Cooperative Educational Services that charged the Roosevelt school board with "child neglect, possibly with abuse."

(according to Newsday, Jericho spends \$12,780 and Great Neck spends \$12,428 compared to the \$6,557 spent by Roosevelt

Goal is to preserve Long Island checkerboard pattern and preserve middle class white enclaves. Coalition of representatives from these communities. Unchallenged premises by Roosevelt officials who want to retain political control, little concern with education. Local control and democracy, choice used as an excuse to educate the majority and middle class while abandoning those without.

Within the current bounds of law and legal interpretation. De facto vs. de jure and state Supreme Court. But legal and fair are not the same thing. Expect a lot of finger pointing, elevation of local residents and political factions opposed to long term groups, some quick flash reform, a declaration of success and gradual return to business as usual. Reminds me of Animal farm..

When he signed the bill authorizing a state take-over of the Roosevelt Union Free School district, Governor George Pataki claimed he was sending a message "to the parents and students in Roosevelt School District that we care about them and want them to have the opportunity to learn." The Governor blamed the problems in Roosevelt on mismanagement by the local school board and warned "every other school district in the state that we are not going to just sit back and let them fail our future, let them fail our students."