

**THE LONG ISLAND CENTER FOR  
SOCIO-ECONOMIC POLICY**

**TOWN-WIDE SCHOOL DISTRICTS:  
A CASE FOR LONG ISLAND EDUCATION AT LOWER COSTS**

**PREPARED BY**

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## **I: INTRODUCTION**

As the new school year is upon us, there are some serious student achievements and budgetary challenges that Long Island's school district administrators need to confront.

The indications of the need for improved student academic achievement came with test results released in June and August of 2011. In June it was revealed that only 87.6 percent of the Long Island Senior Class of 2010 graduated high school, below the No Child Left Behind high school graduation standard of 90 percent. Additionally, approximately 52 percent of the Long Island Class of 2010 met state Regent exam standards.

In August it was disclosed that 64.2 percent of Long Island students in grades 3-8 passed state English tests given during the Spring of 2011; the second straight year Long Island student's English test grades fell. Math test results for Long Island students in the same grades improved slightly to 74.6 percent. The 2011 64.2 percent passing English was down from 66.7 percent in the 2009-10 school year, with the 2011 math passing percent of 72.6 increasing from the prior year. While these test scores were disappointing, for high need low wealth school districts such as Longwood, Brentwood, Roosevelt, Uniondale and Wyandanch were even lower with the 2011 passing grades below 55 percent.

Portending further struggles for student improved academic achievement is that the disappointing 2011 student academic achievement results occurred before the massive teacher cuts in the 2011/2012 Long Island school budgets that will impact students and their expected academic achievement improvement in the upcoming school year.

Making the task of improving these test results more challenging are the school district finances. How do Long Island school districts meet current state standards for improving student academic achievement, implement standards to be used in evaluating teachers, and operate within the recently imposed two percent cap on school budgets that are now burdened by the recently increased contribution requirements to the state pension plan?

The property tax cap will begin in the 2012/2013 school year and will limit annual increases in a district's property-tax collections to two percent or the rate of inflation, whichever is lower. School District residents can pierce the two percent cap with a 60

percent majority vote, essentially voting to raise their own taxes even more than will occur under the tax cap.

The additional pension requirement was recently announced by New York State Comptroller Tom DiNapoli who said that local governments would have to pay 18.9 percent of salaries into the state's employee pension for the 2012/13 budget year. School districts would fall into this category and find that their retirement fund contribution requirement would increase from the current 16.3 percent of school district salaries.

The recent school budget vote approving most of the budgets submitted by Long Islands 124 school districts raises more questions than it answers. While school administrators point to the 96 percent passing rate as affirming that voters want to have a say in their schools and support modest increases in school budgets, the voter turnout also suggests that most Long Islanders eligible to vote might not have been interested in the school vote.

The 2011/2012 school budget vote could also indicate that Long Island school boards and administrators did not want to confront the festering taxpayer anger but rather show that they were listening to taxpayers. Thus the 2011/2012 school budgets did not replicate the property tax increases of prior years which were often at percent increases greater than the wage increases received by most Long Islanders.

However one year of modest school budget increases doesn't make for a trend in controlling school costs, nor does it guarantee that once taxpayer frustration wanes future school budgets will not return to the budget increase levels of prior years. Old habits are hard to break and that is enough rationale for a tax cap preventing future large school tax increases.

However, the tax cap will only be in place until 2016, when the State Legislature and Governor can either rescind or extend it. This leaves Long Island school districts waiting for an improved state economy to generate more state aid to education to recover the teacher reductions and generate the intensive pedagogical efforts necessary for increasing the expected student academic achievement. Furthermore, school districts would be unrealistic to think that they can tread water waiting for 2016 and then ask State legislatures for more aid so they can return to the days of taxing and spending. The

percent of Long Island property taxes to regional income is reaching levels that are becoming unaffordable to homeowners.

Thus the educational community must shoulder the responsibility and act because waiting for tomorrow expecting better financial news is wasted time and often that tomorrow never comes. The only alternative then is to seriously look at the structure of how Long Island school districts provide education and determine if there is a less costly way of educating Long Island's children.

## **II: A CASE FOR TOWNWIDE SCHOOL DISTRICTS**

### **Local School Board Control and Improved Student Academic Achievement**

Long Islander's hold on tenaciously to the concept of local control of their school districts; however it must be asked whether that local control has impacted the quality of education necessary to achieve improved high school graduation rates. The latest student academic achievement results released in June and August 2011 suggests that local school board control does not deliver the results that taxpayer are paying for

To measure the impact of school boards on high school graduation rates, research was conducted for high schools in three economic regions in New York State where some of the schools met the No Child Left Behind Act standard of 90 percent graduation rate and other schools had graduation rates approximately one standard deviation below the mean graduation rate for the three economic regions, or below 80 percent. The regions selected because of their distinguishable economic differences were western, central, and downstate New York encompassing the counties of Erie, Niagara, Orleans, Genesee, Wyoming, Monroe, Livingston, Wayne, and Ontario; Albany, Schoharie, Saratoga, Schenectady, Greene, Columbia, and Renssalaer; and Nassau and Suffolk (Cantor, 2010).

Survey responses from school superintendents, school business officials, and school board presidents revealed that their financial practices were comprised of budgeting, legal and accounting compliance, and financial management (Cantor, 2010).

The survey results also revealed that there was no significant difference between the school district superintendents, school business officials, and school board presidents as to the budgeting, legal and accounting, and financial management practices in high schools with 80 percent or lower graduation rates and those high schools having

graduation rates of 90 percent or higher (Cantor, 2010). New York State set a goal of 90 percent of the students graduating in each high school as a result of the No child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

However other data based on the New York State School Report Card for the aforementioned school districts did indicate a strong correlation between high schools not meeting the NCLB standard of 90 percent graduation rate and students in poverty. A step wise regression analysis indicated that 65 percent of the variance in the high school graduation rate was predicted by the percent of students in poverty, 10 percent of the variance was predicted by the qualified teacher ratio. Three percent by English as Second Language students, and two percent by special needs students (Cantor, 2010).

Critical to local control is that the analysis did not indicate any correlation between high school graduation rates and the financial practices of local school district superintendents, local school board presidents, and local school business officials (Cantor, 2010).

### **What Matters in Student Academic Achievement if Local Control Doesn't?**

If local control has no impact on student academic achievement, then what matters in educational achievement and improvement? Literature reflects that money does matter in education. There is a consistent positive relationship between basic school resources and student achievement; however these positive relationships do follow the economic principle of marginal diminishing returns. The marginal educational improvement return on each educational investment dollar diminishes after reaching its maximum rate of return (Baker, 2005).

To this extent, district size also matters and is evident in economies of scale that exist in public education. In high schools of approximately 600 to 900 students, the cost of students achieving a set of outcomes tends to be maximized. The costs for achieving average student performance increases for districts with fewer than 2,000 pupils and sharply increases for districts with fewer than 300 students. The sharp increase in costs for smaller districts (300 students) occurs because these districts must operate with much smaller class sizes, often requiring more teachers and resulting in higher per pupil costs. Additionally, certain administration, facility, and operational overhead costs exist for

districts of all sizes, and thus make up a larger share of the smaller school district budget. Thus smaller districts need greater financial and human resources per pupil to achieve similar outcomes (Baker, 2005).

The following analysis confirms Baker's conclusion.

### **Town-wide School Districts: Savings from Eliminating Local District Management Methodology**

To illustrate the potential taxpayer savings, town-wide school districts were created for Suffolk County's five western towns. These were the Towns of Huntington, Babylon, Islip, Smithtown and Brookhaven. These towns were selected because they represent the largest towns in Suffolk County and thus would represent a majority of Suffolk County's education spending. The local school districts within each town-wide school district came from information accumulated by the former Long Island Regional Planning Board and from the Suffolk County Planning Department.

Savings were identified in Table 1 from the elimination of the costs of local school district administrators. The costs comprised of the local school board budgets and the compensation of superintendents and deputy superintendents for business, curriculum, administration, human resources, personnel, and instruction. In a town-wide school district structure, these administrative functions would be replaced by a town-wide school board, district superintendent, and deputy superintendents for business and curriculum at a significantly lower cost. The responsibility and accountability for the budget and for implementation of school curriculum, instructional supervision, and student academic achievement would rest with each building principal. Current school budgets have support staff necessary for the building principal to assume this responsibility.

The budgetary information for school superintendents and deputy superintendents for business, curriculum, instruction, and human resources was derived from the 2011/2012 school budgets approved by voters in May 2011 as posted on the school district web sites. When not available, that latest school district web site posting's of the compensation information was used.

Not included in this analysis, but of note, is that every school district has a budget for legal, public relations, maintenance of records, and human resources which could yield

additional savings if these expenses were eliminated at the local school district level and consolidated at a town-wide school district level.

### **Administration Savings by Creating Town-wide School Districts**

Table 1 illustrates potential savings to taxpayers of \$32.1 million by creating town-wide school districts in the Western Suffolk County Towns of Babylon, Huntington, Brookhaven, Islip, and Smithtown. The savings represents .61 percent of the \$5.3 billion education budgets for these towns for the 2011/2012 school year. It is also 31 percent of the two percent cap on new spending enacted by the New York State legislature and signed into law by Governor Cuomo. That is a significant percentage of the cap. While superintendents note that they will have to make do with the new tax cap, or eliminate teaching positions and classes, creating town-wide school districts will generate new dollars for classroom instruction by putting dollars where they will impact children's learning the most.

As illustrated in Table 1, a Babylon Town School District with a budget of \$861.3 million will generate savings of .63 percent or \$5.4 million. Because budget data for Wyandanch was not available for this analysis, the adjusted savings are .67 percent of the aggregate budget excluding Wyandanch. Huntington savings of \$6.5 million would be .68 percent of its \$968.9 million education budget. In Brookhaven, the largest town and largest school district the \$11.97 million in savings represents .62 percent of the \$1.94 billion education spending. An Islip Town school district with a \$1.1 billion education budget would save \$5.8 million or .51 percent. The \$2.4 million savings in a Smithtown school district is .61 percent of the \$388.6 million of education spending.

**Table 1: ADMINISTRATIVE SAVINGS GENERATED BY FORMING TOWNWIDE SCHOOL DISTRICTS**

2011-2012									
<u>School District</u>	<u>Budget (a)</u>	<u>Superint</u>	<u>A/S Busin</u>	<u>A/S Curr</u>	<u>A/S Instr</u>	<u>Bd of Ed</u>	<u>A/S Admi</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>% Budget</u>
<b><u>Babylon School District</u></b>									
Amityville	77,612,773	302,971	136,500		168,912	84,000		692,383	0.892
Babylon	46,086,988	290,047	156,485	142,120		10,200		598,852	1.299
Copiague(b)	101,902,840	232,979	169,664	162,401	169,664	10,000	162,401	907,109	0.890
Deer Park	97,801,071	198,610	144,200	166,996		31,500	128,750	670,056	0.685
East Farmingdle	146,957,711	242,903	172,214	171,488		34,271		620,876	0.422
Lindenhurst	140,152,477	205,000	150,000	175,000		16,150	122,515	668,665	0.477
North Babylon(b)	103,659,700	175,251	149,196	151,234		10,000	110,000	595,681	0.575
West Babylon	93,975,510	212,500	140,000	88,585		47,263	144,813	633,161	0.674
Wyandanch	<u>53,180,000</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0.000</u>
<b><u>Babylon School District Total</u></b>	<b><u>861,329,070</u></b>	<b><u>1,860,261</u></b>	<b><u>1,218,259</u></b>	<b><u>1,057,824</u></b>	<b><u>338,576</u></b>	<b><u>243,384</u></b>	<b><u>668,479</u></b>	<b><u>5,386,783</u></b>	<b><u>0.625</u></b>
<b><u>Huntington School district</u></b>									
CldSprngHarb(b)	58,420,903	257,667	173,870			25,000	220,845	677,382	1.159
Commack	166,081,826	264,900	189,102	195,405		43,450	135,000	827,857	0.498
Elwood	53,949,930	281,743	150,574	103,500	146,565	4,760	87,975	775,117	1.437
HalfHollowHils(b)	215,978,880	243,992	181,021	178,171	167,686	8,867	171,110	950,847	0.440
Harborfields (b)	73,975,620	216,236	167,548			45,300	188,374	617,458	0.835
Huntington	109,037,301	266,629	177,256	387,240		3,900	170,222	1,005,247	0.922
Northport	151,178,758	241,700	139,365		244,986	93,770	192,809	912,630	0.604
So.Huntington(b)	<u>140,255,037</u>	<u>185,285</u>	<u>110,000</u>	<u>146,235</u>	<u>152,284</u>	<u>35,269</u>	<u>140,235</u>	<u>769,308</u>	<u>0.549</u>
<b><u>Huntington Schl District Total</u></b>	<b><u>968,878,255</u></b>	<b><u>1,958,152</u></b>	<b><u>1,288,736</u></b>	<b><u>1,010,551</u></b>	<b><u>711,521</u></b>	<b><u>260,316</u></b>	<b><u>1,306,570</u></b>	<b><u>6,535,846</u></b>	<b><u>0.675</u></b>
<b><u>Brookhaven School District</u></b>									
Bayport-Blue Pt	63,663,681	280,193	178,580		134,295	43,020		636,088	0.999
Center Moriches	36,704,388	230,000	150,800	190,960		7,500	175,000	754,260	2.055
Comsewogue	76,558,768	206,750	151,893	175,000		9,495		543,138	0.709
EastMoriches (b)	24,085,123	149,000						149,000	0.619
Eastport (a)	82,595,650	225,000	177,373	153,849		11,040	161,521	728,783	0.882
Fire Island	5,988,833	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Longwood	205,600,000	250,438	91,450	255,000		85,833	281,450	964,171	0.469
MiddleCountry(b)	211,302,498	185,026	146,739	121,725		15,807	148,280	617,577	0.292
Miller Place (b)	64,252,252	196,379	177,455		117,622	27,653	186,312	705,421	1.098
Mount Sinai (b)	54,921,905	219,212	161,698			7,000	215,012	602,922	1.098
Patchog-Medfrd	159,971,975	229,375	188,700		153,000	11,225	145,546	727,846	0.455
Port Jefferson	37,354,521	228,550	182,500			18,050		429,100	1.149
Rocky Point	69,509,578	222,540	151,670	170,000	77,000	9,850		631,060	0.908
Sachem	287,834,125	223,500	211,150	161,285	147,701	22,400	146,479	912,515	0.317
Shorhm-WadRiv	59,976,799	216,520	135,000	146,347		4,815	135,000	637,682	1.063
South Country	113,995,963	286,819	370,800	175,049		5000	180,250	1,017,918	0.893
South Manor(a)									
Three Village	174,585,266	209,800	193,351	149,145	176,191	51,000	160,000	939,487	0.538
William Floyd	<u>208,134,194</u>	<u>213,899</u>	<u>322,945</u>	<u>227,008</u>		<u>29,115</u>	<u>182,702</u>	<u>975,669</u>	<u>0.469</u>
<b><u>Brookhaven Schl District Total</u></b>	<b><u>1,937,035,519</u></b>	<b><u>3,773,001</u></b>	<b><u>2,992,104</u></b>	<b><u>1,925,368</u></b>	<b><u>805,809</u></b>	<b><u>358,803</u></b>	<b><u>2,117,552</u></b>	<b><u>11,972,637</u></b>	<b><u>0.618</u></b>



**Islip School District**

Bayshore	142,419,999	289,505	134,295	166,680		47,920		638,400	0.448
Brentwood (b)	311,477,042	219,405	189,226	194,632		53,485	148,997	805,745	0.259
Central Islip	167,085,064	218,400	140,608	577,280	202,693	25,000		1,163,981	0.697
Connetquot	164,910,433	231,500	162,398	172,598		30,837	162,000	759,333	0.460
East Islip (b)	103,929,639	186,891	150,000	146,454	152,830	7,000		643,175	0.619
Islip (b)	68,711,390	202,902	140,069			7,000	140,069	490,040	0.713
Sayville	81,779,400	239,905	213,609	200,146		23,721	171,801	849,182	1.038
West Islip (b)	<u>107,143,770</u>	<u>193,535</u>	<u>149,642</u>	<u>122,421</u>		<u>10,000</u>		<u>475,598</u>	<u>0.444</u>
<b><u>Islip School District Total</u></b>	<b><u>1,147,456,737</u></b>	<b><u>1,782,043</u></b>	<b><u>1,279,847</u></b>	<b><u>1,580,211</u></b>	<b><u>355,523</u></b>	<b><u>204,963</u></b>	<b><u>622,867</u></b>	<b><u>5,825,454</u></b>	<b><u>0.508</u></b>

**Smithtown School District**

Hauppauge	97,176,503	279,006	149,247	160,000		12,694	135,000	735,947	0.757
Kings Park	79,111,079	212,050	135,000			22,050	176,700	545,800	0.690
Smithtown	<u>212,361,284</u>	<u>219,400</u>	<u>351,598</u>	<u>132,984</u>	<u>176,600</u>	<u>23,290</u>	<u>170,299</u>	<u>1,074,171</u>	<u>0.506</u>
<b><u>Smithtown Schl District Total</u></b>	<b><u>388,648,866</u></b>	<b><u>710,456</u></b>	<b><u>635,845</u></b>	<b><u>292,984</u></b>	<b><u>176,600</u></b>	<b><u>58,034</u></b>	<b><u>481,999</u></b>	<b><u>2,355,918</u></b>	<b><u>0.606</u></b>

<b><u>Suffolk Cty Total</u></b>	<b><u>5,303,348,447</u></b>	<b><u>10,083,913</u></b>	<b><u>7,414,791</u></b>	<b><u>5,866,938</u></b>	<b><u>2,388,029</u></b>	<b><u>1,125,500</u></b>	<b><u>5,197,467</u></b>	<b><u>32,076,638</u></b>	<b><u>0.605</u></b>
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32,076,638

Notes: (a) Source: Long Island Business News, *Doing Business on Long Island*-August 2011, School Districts, Newsday.

(b) Source: 2008/2009 School Year Budget Data-[WWW.longislandschools.com](http://WWW.longislandschools.com). Remaining data taken from 2011/2012 school budgets available on each school district web-site.

**The Structure: Lower Education Costs with More Accountability**

As the Towns of Babylon, Islip, Brookhaven, Huntington and Smithtown create town-wide school districts, with each current local school district eliminating all central administration, these functions would be replaced by individuals at a town-wide central school district.

The teachers within each town-wide school district would be compensated based on collective bargaining on a town-wide basis. Tenure, seniority, and benefits would be maintained on a town-wide basis similar to the arrangement that New York City teachers have within the five boroughs. This would provide for teacher mobility so they can work in the communities of their choosing. Currently a teacher, when moving from one school district to another will find that they lose their tenure and seniority, and have different salaries and benefits.

Building principals at all schools within the town-wide school district will have to prepare and manage their budgets and be accountable for student's academic

improvement and in meeting state education standards. In the budgets reviewed for this analysis funding is available to support the building principal in this task.

Since the research results discussed earlier in this report indicate that the financial practices of school superintendents, business officials and school boards do not influence high school graduation rates there is little rationale for not eliminating them at the local level and create a town-wide school district with a town-wide school board. Added incentive to eliminate local boards of education is that they cost the districts in the five western Suffolk County towns an average of \$27,000 per district or an aggregate of \$1.1 million to operate. Eliminating these boards should generate material savings net of what a town-wide board would cost to hold meetings.

While there will be one town-wide school board to replace the local school boards, each school principal will have a parent/teacher advisory committee to monitor educational activities of each school and provide input as to the education and budgetary process. As for representation on the town-wide school board the electoral lines for current school districts would remain only for the purposes of electing members to the town-wide school board. There are funds allocated in each school budget for these elections.

The town-wide school board, after public hearings would authorize a budget that is based on submissions from building principals. The two percent tax cap will be applicable on a town-wide school district basis as well as the current rules on piercing the cap. This should bring more equity between low wealth and high need school districts and high wealth and low need school districts because tax revenues from commercial properties within a town-wide school district would be spread among all schools and students.

### **III:CONCLUSION**

This discussion offers broad policy alternatives to the current educational system which has had chronic financial problems for so many years. W. Edwards Deming, the total quality management guru noted that management and the system are often the problem, not the workers, and that chronic problems require structural solutions. Deming would offer that teachers are not the problem but the system in which they teach and the

managers who guide them are. Further Deming would argue that changing the structure in which teachers educate, such as town-wide school districts would improve the end result of a better education for Long Island's children at a lower cost.

Consolidation of school districts is an idea that has not been accepted by Long Island residents. The Elwood school district is the most recent example of opposition to school consolidation. Town-wide school districts that centralize administrative functions while enhancing community and neighborhood schools should be evaluated on a rationale basis since it is a concept whose time has come. Long Islanders can no longer afford to spend any more on education.

Forming town-wide school districts that save taxpayer dollars and bring more accountability for student achievement is what most Long Islanders have said they want. Then why for the sake of efficiency not explore eliminating a layer of bureaucracy that carries its own administration costs which research has shown does not improve student academic achievement. Consolidating town-wide administrative costs that save taxpayers millions of dollars while not impacting local education is worth exploring.

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He is a Certified Public Accountant in private practice; Director of the Long Island Center for Socio-Economic Policy, a consulting economist and economic development consultant to public officials, counties, towns, villages, Industrial Development Agencies, and communities; and Chairman of the Suffolk County Judicial Facilities Agency which financed the acquisition of the Cohalan State Court Complex and the construction of the Suffolk County Jail in Yaphank. He provides economic and business commentary on television and radio; is Co-host of Focus 55, a public affairs program on Channel 55, is a columnist for the Long Island Business News, Long Island's largest business weekly, and Networking Newspaper for Women, has appeared in the New York Times, Newsday, and LI Pulse, and has been syndicated nationally by Newsday, Bridge News and Knight-Ridder/Tribune News Service. He is an Honorary Member of Delta Mu Delta - The National Honor Society in Business Administration and has been recognized by the National Association of Counties for innovative uses of Industrial Revenue Bonds, for international trade promotion initiatives, for downtown revitalization policies, and for minority business incubator initiatives. He was invited by Dr. William Julius Wilson of Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government to present his paper entitled *Race Neutral Sustainable Economic Development*. He is the author of the recently published *Long Island, The Global Economy and Race: The Aging of America's First Suburb*.

