



**Why Boundaries Matter:  
A Study of Five Separate and Unequal  
Long Island School Districts**

Final Report to the *Long Island Index*

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Teachers College, Columbia University

Center for Understanding Race and Education (CURE)

Amy Stuart Wells, Principal Investigator

Bianca Baldrige, Jacquelyn Duran, Richard Lofton, Allison Roda,  
Miya Warner, Terrenda White & Courtney Grzesikowski, Research Associates

If ever there were any doubt that Long Island, New York, is home to some of the most fragmented, segregated and unequal school districts in the United States, the January 2009 *Long Island Index Report*, provides ample evidence that this is indeed the case. The quantifiable inequities across the 125 school districts on Long Island in terms of funding, demographics, and student outcomes highlighted in that report portray how important district boundary lines are, even within relatively small geographic spaces. Building on the *Index's* presentation of quantitative data, this report offers a more in-depth examination of district-level disparities and what they mean in the lives of students, educators and parents across these boundary lines.

Although the spatial separation of students across district boundaries has not been the central -- or even peripheral -- focus of education policymakers for the last three decades, we argue that the social science evidence on the consequences of such separation warrants a renewed consideration of these issues. Indeed, in the current era of education reform, with its strong emphasis on standards, accountability and market-based policies, little attention has been paid to the relationship between place and opportunity or the way in which "place" is circumscribed by race/ethnicity and poverty to profoundly affect students' educational experiences.

Furthermore, even as the policy gaze has drifted away from these issues, research evidence is mounting that separate can never be equal in public education because of the tight connection between public schools and their larger contexts. This is particularly the case when those larger contexts are restricted by boundaries that demarcate different property values, tax rates, public revenues, private resources, working conditions, family income and wealth, parental educational levels and political clout. All of these factors, which are both internal and external to the schools themselves, profoundly affect the day-to-day experiences of children. As a result, we cannot lose sight of why we care about issues of segregation by race/ethnicity or socio-economic status, particularly as the school-age population in this country becomes increasingly diverse and as more African American, Latino and immigrant families migrate from cities to the suburbs.

Arguments for turning our backs on the problems of segregation and the inequality it perpetuates and focusing instead on how to educate children to high standards "where they are" -- be that in all-black and Latino schools with high levels of poverty or in predominantly white and/or Asian schools with high concentrations of wealth -- resonate with current conceptions of what is "wrong" with public education and how we can fix it. This report attempts to build a bridge between the plethora of data documenting the high degree of segregation and inequality in places like Long Island and our nation's collective understanding of the "problems" facing public education today. We do this by bringing the voices of more than 75 Long Islanders into the discussion and dialogue about public education and what it looks and feels like across school district dividing lines of race, ethnicity, and class. What we hear in these voices -- whether they are privileged, affluent white students in a low-needs district or educators struggling to provide an "adequate" education for the poorest students of color in a high-needs district -- is how the separateness defines them and their educational opportunities.

We have learned that school district boundaries in places like Long Island matter a great deal to the students and educators who toil within them each day and to the parents and other property owners who purchase homes in a housing market that is partly defined by their existence. The strong relationship between the disparate educational experiences of children

whose schools and opportunities are divided by these boundaries and the unequal values of the property their parents purchase is perhaps the single most important challenge to the so-called American Dream that we can document. The fact that these disparities are so starkly defined by race/ethnicity and social class should give us pause in a country that likes to think of itself as “post-racial” and “colorblind.”

*This report documents the multiple ways in which place and race/ethnicity matter in terms of students’ educational opportunities, and how the two combined and intertwined as they are today in districts, schools and classrooms, define students’ and educators’ sense of possibility and self-worth in a manner unlikely to ever be undone. These deep-seated messages become ingrained in the students’ identities and in the reputations of their schools, districts and communities – allowing a self-fulfilling prophecy to play itself out as students matriculate through the educational system with starkly different opportunities, outcomes and connections to higher education. These ingrained differences in identities and reputations, then, become part of the everyday common sense that legitimizes the current fragmented and segregated system. In a vicious cycle, the resulting inequality becomes, for those on the more affluent and privileged side of the divide, the ammunition for their resistance to change the boundaries or even to allow students to cross them.*

These complex issues are only understood through the kind of qualitative data that this research brings to bear on the subject of school district fragmentation and segregation. Through the eyes of Long Islanders in five disparate school districts we can see these connections and relationships. This analysis, therefore, helps us understand why -- despite survey data from Long Island showing members of all racial/ethnic groups state that something should be done to break down the barriers across district boundaries -- those with the most power and privilege preserve the boundaries around their school districts and thus around other districts as well (*The Long Island Index*, 2009). This form of double consciousness -- bemoaning inequality while perpetuating the insidious system that maintains it -- represents the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’s version of the American Dilemma (see DuBois, 2003; Myrdal, 1946).

### **Long Island in Perspective:** **Changing Urban-Suburban Contexts**

The dilemma described above is not unfolding in a static society. Rather, in the last two decades we have seen tremendous change in urban-suburban migration patterns of different racial/ethnic groups across the country. This instability and movement suggests that this moment in history, a moment of rapid change in residential patterns, presents both possibility and caution. The result of the demographic shifts described in more detail below could be either greater racial/ethnic and socio-economic integration or a renewed system of segregation and inequality. National, state and local policy decisions made in the coming months and years can influence this direction.

#### **Overview of Urban-Suburban Migration Patterns**

Since the late 1980s, metropolitan areas across the country have experienced dramatic demographic changes as a growing number of middle-class black and Latino families have left urban communities for the suburbs or have bypassed urban ethnic enclaves altogether when immigrating to the U.S. In some instances, these new suburbanites are more middle class, and are seeking the same lifestyle changes whites sought decades earlier -- larger homes with yards, lower crime rates, less noise and dirt, and, perhaps most importantly, better public schools. In other

instances, black and Latino migrants to the suburbs are being pushed out of urban housing markets to make way for more affluent residents drawn to the excitement of city living. Indeed, after a half century of white flight to the suburbs, a trickle of upper-middle class and affluent whites are moving back into urban centers, lured by the convenience, excitement and culture of city living. Attracted to gentrified communities of coffee shops and theatres, this 21<sup>st</sup> century urban aristocracy is driving up home prices in select city neighborhoods, pushing lower income residents – mostly black and Latino – into outlying urban and inner-ring suburb communities (Freeman, 2006). Meanwhile, many whites who remain in the suburbs are becoming more concentrated in fewer, more exclusive suburban and exurban communities.

This pattern of “trading places” along race and class lines and over urban-suburban boundaries has shaken the 50-year-old paradigm of cities versus suburbs -- one poor, with high-rise housing projects and dire need, and the other middle-class or better with single-family homes and peaceful neighborhoods. By the late 1960s, a common understanding in the U.S. was that cities were undesirable and suburbs were places to which those with resources and access fled. These images had strong racial overtones, as one of the central distinctions between cities and suburbs throughout the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the skin color of those who were moving into and out of these separate and unequal spaces.

By 1980, many cities had become predominantly African American and/or Latino, with 67 percent of blacks and 50 percent of Latinos, but only 24 percent of whites,<sup>1</sup> living in central cities. Yet by 2000, new trends were clearly developing as the percentage of blacks living in central cities had declined to 53 percent, with nearly 40 percent living in the suburbs. As of 1999, 48 percent of immigrants, most of whom were from Central America, lived in suburbs, whereas 47 percent lived in cities and 5 percent in rural areas (Frey, 2001). In fact, the percentage of racial and ethnic minorities living in the suburbs overall increased in the 1990s from less than 20 percent to more than 25 percent of all suburbanites (Katz and Lang, 2003). And by 2005, there were 1 million more poor people living in suburbs than in cities in the U.S., although poverty rates in the cities were still higher (Berube and Kneebone, 2006).

In a somewhat parallel fashion, beginning slowly in the 1980s but accelerating in recent years, highly skilled, highly paid and mostly white professionals who work in downtown firms in so-called global cities such as New York, San Francisco and Boston, have opted out of long daily commutes by living in nearby urban, and often gentrified, neighborhoods (Sassen, 2006). Even in smaller, industrial cities where downtown business districts have not yet rebounded after the exodus of firms to suburban office parks, a trickle of affluent and middle-class whites are inhabiting gentrified city neighborhoods, closer to shopping, museums and entertainment (Lees, Slayter, Wyly, 2008). City life, once considered by most whites as dangerous, dirty and crowded, is now increasingly associated with excitement, fun and convenience (see Leinberger, 2008).

Data from the 100 largest cities in the U.S. from 1990 to 2000 shows that overall, white and African American populations declined, while Hispanic populations grew (see Katz and Lang, 2003). But researchers also find tremendous variation in urban population shifts across contexts

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term “white” to describe “whites not of Hispanic origin” unless otherwise noted. We also use the terms “black” and “African American” interchangeably, as we do with “Latino” and “Hispanic,” knowing that people who identify with these racial/ethnic groups are not uniform in their preference for one term or the other.

depending on the local economy and housing stock. Also, the trend of whites returning to certain, global cities appear to have increased since 2000. For instance, recent census data show that the percentage of people who identify as “White, not Hispanic” increased in Manhattan between 2000 and 2006, while it declined in nearby suburban Nassau County. Meanwhile, the broader census category of “White,” which could include people who also identify as a member of one or more ethnic groups, has shown the largest increase in Manhattan – 28 percent since 2000 -- while it has grown only 1 percent in Nassau County. During the same six-year time period, the Hispanic population declined by 2 percent in Manhattan, but increased by 20 percent in Nassau. In terms of African Americans and Asians, Manhattan and Nassau County both experienced an increase between 2000 and 2006, with the percentage increase of Asians in Nassau almost twice as large as in Manhattan.

These 2000-2006 data from the New York metro area coupled with similar urban-suburban data from other parts of the country demonstrate that national trends of increasing racial and ethnic diversity in suburbs and uneven developments in the cities -- depending on local demographic, economic and social factors -- continue. Furthermore, recent news reports suggest that while the economic downturn of 2008-09 may have slowed these trends to some extent, it has not completely halted them (Leinberger, 2008; McGeehan, 2008). And increasingly, journalists and researchers are writing about the growing number of distressed suburbs – those that are coming to resemble poor inner city communities with aging infrastructure, population declines, and deteriorating schools and commercial corridors (Leinberger, 2008; Lucy and Phillips, 2003).

In 2008 Leinberger wrote in the Atlantic Monthly that the sub-prime mortgage crisis and the resulting wave of foreclosures have intensified social problems in suburbs. But he also argues that the decline in suburban neighborhoods did not begin with the mortgage crisis and will not end with it as more people with high incomes seek the excitement of city living:

A structural change is under way in the housing market – a major shift in the way many Americans want to live and work. It has shaped the current downturn, steering some of the worst problems away from the cities and toward the suburban fringes. And its effects will be felt more strongly, and more broadly, as the years pass. Its ultimate impact on the suburbs, and the cities, will be profound (Leinberger, 2008).

Despite the migration of some affluent whites into gentrified urban spaces, it is true that the vast majority of whites, particularly those in metro areas of less-gentrified cities, do remain in the suburbs. Meanwhile, research suggests that when white families do remain in the suburbs, they are fleeing those suburban communities that are attracting large numbers of blacks and Latinos (or sometimes Asians) and are congregating in predominantly white and more affluent suburbs – often further out from the cities and black and/or Latino inner ring suburbs (Frey, 2002). Indeed, it is increasingly clear that simplistic understandings of “city” versus “suburban” spaces will not hold, as *both* now contain pockets of poverty and affluence across racially and ethnically segregated and distinct spaces.

In fact, perhaps the most consistent finding to emerge from the preliminary “trading places” evidence of urban-suburban migration patterns is that the one factor that remains constant in both cities and suburbs is racial and social class segregation. African Americans, in particular, remain highly segregated in urban *and* suburban contexts. It is true that segregation usually lessens to some degree when blacks or Latinos first move into predominantly white

suburbs or whites move into mostly black or Latino gentrifying urban neighborhoods. But over time, these neighborhoods, more often than not, re-segregate as whites leave changing suburbs and minorities are priced out of gentrified urban spaces (Farley and Squires, 2005; Freeman, 2006; Sethi and Somanathan, 2004).

Thus, what remains fairly constant over time despite these demographic shifts and migration patterns is racial and ethnic segregation. In fact, there is growing evidence that racial segregation has lessened very little since its peak years in the early 1970s. Meanwhile, socio-economic segregation has worsened, due in large part to growing income inequality in the U.S. and the ability of affluent families to buy luxury homes in separate, sometimes gated, communities in high-priced suburban or city enclaves (Bernstein, McNichol, & Lyons, 2006; Drier, Mollenkoph & Swanstrom, 2004). Overall, these demographic changes within metropolitan areas suggest that both neighborhoods and paradigms about “cities” versus “suburbs” are rapidly evolving in ways we cannot yet completely comprehend, but in ways that continue to divide our increasingly diverse country along racial and social class lines.

#### Public Schools amid Urban-Suburban Change

As demographers and sociologists are documenting the racial/ethnic and socio-economic changes in residential populations taking place across urban-suburban boundaries in the U.S. metro areas, educational researchers are also beginning to understand school and district-level demographic changes related to these larger trends. What this quantitative educational research demonstrates is two phenomena:

1. In the last 30 years there has been a rapid growth in the black and Latino student populations in the suburban public schools, particularly in those suburbs outside of large cities (Orfield and Frankenberg, 2008; Orfield and Lee, 2009).
2. Suburban public schools are highly fragmented and racially/ethnically segregated and becoming more so as successive waves of students of color move into suburban counties (Bishoff, 2008; Orfield and Frankenberg, 2008; Reardon and Yun, 2001).

In terms of the first trend, the evidence is clear that suburban school districts outside of large cities now enroll nearly the same, and sometimes more, black, Latino and Asian students as the central city school districts do. In fact, as of 2005-06, *more* Asian students -- 39 versus 25 percent -- attend school in the suburbs of a large city than attend city schools. Similarly, 30 percent of all Latino students enrolled in public schools in the U.S. are attending suburban schools outside large cities, versus 29 percent in central city schools. And, while the data for African American students reveal their suburban migration to be slower, 25 percent are now enrolled in suburban schools outside large cities versus nearly 29 percent in urban public schools (see Orfield and Frankenberg, 2008).

Yet as more students of color enroll in suburban public schools, we see repeated patterns of white flight (or at least white decline related to a host of factors, including an aging white population overall) from these suburban school districts. In fact, according to Orfield and Frankenberg (2008), the rate of extreme racial segregation (90 and 100 percent minority schools) for black and Latino students between 1991 and 2005 increased faster in suburban than urban school districts. For example, during that 14-year period, the percentage of African American students in such hyper segregated schools increased 4.4 percent in central city schools, but 13

percent in schools in the suburbs of large cities. Meanwhile, for Latino students, the parallel increase was 8 percent in urban schools and 11 percent in suburban schools.

Similarly, Reardon and Yun (2001; forthcoming) have shown that since the mid-1980s, increases in black, Latino and Asian enrollments shares in suburban schools are strongly and positively related to increases in suburban school segregation levels. Thus, as more students of color are now living in suburbs, the patterns of racial/ethnic segregation that developed in urban school districts decades ago are repeating themselves in the suburban context.

In fact, this process of suburbanization and segregation of students of color may help explain recent findings related to *between* versus *within* school district segregation patterns. In other words, 40 or 50 years ago when students were more concentrated within metropolitan areas in urban school districts, these districts had, on average, more diverse – racially, ethnically and socio-economically -- student populations, even as these students were often segregated from one another into separate schools and/or classrooms. Yet, as white families fled large urban school districts between 1950 and 1980 and enrolled their children in separate suburban school districts, the form and structure of school segregation as it relates to school district boundaries evolved over time. And, in the last two decades, with more black, Latino and Asian students migrating into suburban communities as well, the pattern of increasing suburban segregation described by Reardon and Yun (2001) is the result of growing *between* versus *within* school district segregation. In fact, according to Clotfelter (2004), the greater part of school segregation — 84 percent as of 2000 -- is now *between* and not *within* school districts. In other words, students of color and white students are now more likely to be enrolled in schools in different districts altogether.

Given the research on fragmentation in suburbia none of this above-mentioned evidence is entirely surprising, as segregation can be created and maintained more effectively across geographically smaller district boundaries. For instance, Bishoff's (2008) work clearly demonstrates the strong positive relationship between school district fragmentation and racial segregation. This district-level fragmentation is particularly prevalent in the northeast and Midwest, where separate urban and suburban districts are the norm, and within suburban counties, the pattern of many distinct and small school districts is common.

Our analysis of both change and stability in school district student population in Nassau and Suffolk, therefore, mirrors what national research suggests is the norm in suburban education. On Long Island, however, the level of fragmentation, segregation and thus inequality based on a number of indicators is more extreme than its location in the northeast alone would suggest. In fact, Bischoff (2008) notes that the New York/New Jersey metro area is one of the most fragmented areas in the nation. More specifically, in terms of Nassau and Suffolk counties on Long Island, Bishoff (2008) reports that compared to a national average school district fragmentation level of .72 -- the probability that any two randomly selected students within the same county live in different school districts -- these two Long Island counties have a fragmentation score of .986 combined (p. 16).

Clearly, there are few sites better suited for systematic data collection on the impact of segregation and inequality on students' lives than Long Island, New York. It is an extreme example of what is, unfortunately, a prevailing norm in this country, particularly in the most fragmented regions.

### **Our Study of Five Long Island School Districts**

As part of a larger Rauch Foundation project to study educational opportunities available to students across Long Island school districts for the 2009 *Index* report, our research team was asked to collect the in-depth, qualitative data that would help bring the quantitative facts and figures to life. Thus, for six months, beginning July 1 and ending December 31, 2008, our team worked closely with the *Long Island Index* staff and other collaborators from various universities in the New York metro area on the Index report, examining public school segregation and inequality in Nassau and Suffolk Counties, New York.

More specifically, for our piece of this larger project, we set out to better understand the role that public schools play in the urban-suburban migration patterns we described above. Not only did we know, at the outset of this project, very little about the impact of these changes on public education systems and educators' ability and willingness to serve rapidly changing student populations. We also knew very little about the impact of public schools – their reputations, resources and enrollments in particular – on the movement or stability of families across urban and suburban school district boundary lines.

What we did know from quantitative analyses is that, as with the data on residential segregation, racial segregation in public schools appears to persist across urban and suburban contexts (see Reardon and Yun, 2001), and the distribution of “tangible” educational resources – e.g. public funding, qualified teachers, supplies and good facilities, etc. – roughly correlates with the race, affluence and privilege of the students served (*Long Island Index*, 2009). In other words, we knew that those with the most advantages in terms of their families' affluence and parents' backgrounds tend to have access to the most public educational resources. Meanwhile, those students from the most impoverished families and backgrounds tend to have the least in terms of these publicly funded tangible resources.

What we did not know before we set out to conduct this research is what that looks like “on the ground” and across different contexts. We also did not fully understand the complex relationship between the public and private or the tangible and “intangible” resources, and how these different “variables” are intertwined and interconnected. By intangible resources we mean status, reputation, prestige and symbolic meaning of a school district and its schools. These “resources,” as the U.S. Supreme Court has noted on numerous occasions, can impact students experiences not only while they are in school, but many years after (see Kluger, 2004).

Our initial empirical examination of these issues in local contexts as part of our *Long Island Index* pilot research was part of a newly launched national study we are conducting at Teachers College to examine the role of public education in demographic changes occurring across urban-suburban contexts in four metro areas in the U.S., including New York. For the *Index* research, our team collected and analyzed qualitative data from five school districts on Long Island. The end result was five mini case studies of these disparate school districts. Most of our data collection consisted of in-depth, open-ended and semi-structured interviews with school district officials, including superintendents, assistant superintendents, school board members and advocates. We also collected documents and downloaded demographic and student achievement/outcome data from each of these districts.

In addition, we selected one school from each of the five districts to examine more closely. These schools varied in terms of grade levels across the five districts, resulting in a sample of two high schools, one middle school and two elementary schools. At the school level, we also collected



relevant documents and interviewed principals, assistant principals and teachers. When possible and applicable we also interviewed guidance counselors, social workers, and other specialists, such as deans of discipline and special education coordinators. Furthermore, in the two high schools and the one middle school we were also able to interview students. At the two high schools we were also able to interview parents and observe meetings of school boards and PTAs. And finally, we observed school campuses and, when possible, the distribution of students across classrooms on our site visits.

All in all, between August and the end of December 2008, we conducted more than 25 site visits total to district offices and schools in these five school districts. We completed in-depth interviews with more than 75 participants – mainly school district officials, school administrators, teachers and students. All of the interviews except for two that were formally “off the record” were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Even as we were winding down the data collection process, we began our data analysis by coding transcripts, documents and field notes according to emerging themes. We submitted an interim report to the *Long Island Index* in November 2008. This report constitutes our final analysis and writing from this project.

We believe that our research complemented the research of other collaborators to the larger *Index* project by capturing, through in-depth interviews and observations, the day-to-day experiences of students and educators within separate and unequal public schools in the suburban Long Island counties. Our goal was to understand some of the “how” and “why” behind the numbers presented in the *Long Island Index* report.

#### District Categories of Segregation and Change/Stability

Beginning with our preliminary analysis of demographic, funding and student outcome data across school districts on Long Island in 2008, we began to explore different ways to illustrate patterns of segregation by race/ethnicity and class over time. In particular, we wanted to highlight places where significant demographic *changes* are occurring across and within school district boundaries. As we illustrate in Table 1 below we devised four categories of districts based on changes in their student populations between 1998 and 2007.

Each category highlights two levels of analysis: 1. stability/instability of the student populations in terms of race/ethnicity and poverty levels, and 2. the extent to which the populations are privileged within the educational system according to the race/ethnicity of the students and their poverty rates. In other words, given broader racial inequality in terms of income and wealth combined with high levels of racial segregation across district boundaries on Long Island, districts that are predominantly white and Asian also tend to be those with the lowest levels of poverty. Those that are predominantly Black and Latino, on the other hand, have much higher rates of poverty.

Thus, the four categories we created broke down, according to the data, in the following way: Three categories of districts are stable, with relatively little change over time, but very different in terms of their demographics – 1. Districts that are predominantly African American and Latino with more than one-third of the students receiving free lunch, 2. Districts that are predominantly white and Asian and more affluent, and 3. Districts that are racially and socio-economically diverse. The fourth category of districts are those that are unstable and changing demographically – generally from predominantly white to predominantly black and/or Latino. In some cases, however, these are districts that are changing from predominantly white to

predominantly Asian. (See Table 1 for details on the categories and tallies of LI districts by category.)

<b>Table 1.</b> <b>Categories of School Districts According to Demographic Stability and Change</b> <b>Nassau and Suffolk County, Long Island 1998-2007</b>					
<b>Category</b>	<b>Stability/Change over time</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>SES (Free Lunch)</b>	<b>Change over 8 Years</b>	<b>Number of LI Districts by Category</b>
1	Stable, Predominantly Black and Latino with Concentrated Poverty	> 88% Black or Latino	> 30% receiving free lunch	< 10% change in Black and Latino	Nassau: 5 Suffolk: 3 <b>Total LI: 8</b>
2	Stable, Predominantly White and/or Asian with Low Poverty and thus Concentrated Privilege	> 75% White and/or Asian	< 8% receiving free lunch	< 10% change in White and/or Asian	Nassau: 34 Suffolk: 49 <b>Total LI: 83</b>
3	Stable, Racially and Socio-economically Diverse	<75% of Black/Latino OR White /Asian	Between 15% and 22% with < 3% change	< 10% change for any race	Nassau: 4 Suffolk: 8 <b>Total LI: 12</b>
4	Unstable, Changing Race and/or Poverty	Not more than 75% of any racial/ethnic group	Between 3% and 26%	> 10% change in White	Nassau: 13 Suffolk: 12 <b>Total LI: 25</b>

It is interesting that the two categories containing the largest number of Long Island school districts are #2 stable, relatively affluent and predominantly white and/or Asian, and #4 unstable, with changing race and/or poverty. The prevalence of the first category of districts is not surprising given the affluence on Long Island. What is interesting is that the second largest category of districts is comprised of those that are unstable and experiencing rapid demographic change. This speaks to the framework of changing urban-suburban demographics established above.

#### Five Long Island Districts Sampled for In-Depth Analysis

Employing these four categories of school districts, we selected the districts we would study for our in-depth analysis. In order to capture the disparate experiences and opportunities for children across unequal school district contexts, we purposefully sampled for diversity in terms of the quantitative data on district level resources and student outcomes as well as their placement within these four categories. Thus, the five Long Island school districts we studied run the gamut (see Table 2 below) from impoverished, all black and Latino with large numbers of

recent immigrant children who speak very little English (Grantsville; Category #1) to those enrolling very affluent, predominantly white and very high achieving students (Belvedere; Category #2). In between, we studied three districts that are more racially/ethnically diverse, but only one of which is stable. Two of these more diverse districts (Lakewood and Leesburg) fit into Category #4 because they have been losing their white and/or more affluent populations over the last 10 years. Meanwhile, the last district (Clearview; Category #3) is the only racially diverse and stable district we studied.

**Table 2:  
Five Long Island Districts Sampled for In-Depth Analysis**

District	Category	% White	% Black	% Latino	% Free Lunch	% Reduced Lunch
Grantsville	1	<1	53	46	65	7
Belvedere	2	97	1	<1	0	0
Clearview	3	64	12	20	15	4
Lakewood	4	14	50	19	27	15
Leesburg	4	43	20	30	20	8

By systematically studying this variety of school districts within just two counties, we were able to examine a wide range of student experiences in suburban school districts today – those that are consistently privileged, those that are consistently underprivileged, those that are experiencing dramatic demographic changes, and those few that are a mixture of all the above and relatively stable. Table 3 below provides some important information related to funding and student outcomes that speak to both the descriptions of the districts and the findings that emerged across them.

**Table 3.**  
**Per-pupil Funding and Student Outcome Data**

District	Category	Per-Pupil Funding	Percent of Students scoring a 3 or 4 on the 8 <sup>th</sup> grade math test	Percent graduating with a Regents Diploma	Percent going to 4-year college
Grantsville	1	\$20,000	18	42	32
Belvedere	2	\$21,000	88	98	95
Clearview	3	\$22,000	78	79	61
Lakewood*	4	\$14,000	n/a	n/a	n/a
Leesburg	4	\$25,000	56	78	66

\* Lakewood is an elementary school district, whose students feed into a larger, consolidated high school district. Elementary school districts usually have lower average per-pupil funding than K-12 or high school districts.

Below we briefly describe each of the five districts from our study. We have used pseudonyms to maintain the confidentiality of the districts and all those who work and attend school within them. Following these descriptions is the findings section of the report in which we weave the central themes from our research throughout the interview and observational data from our study.

#### **The Grantsville School District:**

##### **Stable, Predominantly Black and Latino with Concentrated Poverty**

The Grantsville School District is representative of a Category #1 district, with its 99 percent Black and Latino student population, 65 percent of whom come from families so poor that they qualify for free lunches. And yet, while Grantsville has been poor and non-white for decades, it is becoming increasingly diverse in terms of its Black/Latino mix. Like many Category 1 school districts on Long Island and elsewhere, Grantsville is a once-predominantly African American community with a rapidly growing Central American population. In fact, as of 2007, 53 percent of Grantsville's 6,000 students were Black, down from nearly 67 percent in 1999. Meanwhile, the Latino population has grown rapidly, to 46 percent from 32 percent in 1999. Since the late 1990s, the percent of students who are white has been less than 1.

Another dimension of diversity within the Grantsville district is the household incomes of the residents of the district – not just those who send their children to the public schools. For

instance, 2000 Census data show that of the 12,695 households within the school district, approximately 1,900 have a household income of less than \$10,000 a year. Meanwhile, the majority of the households have an annual income between \$50,000 and \$100,000. The fact that the vast majority students – nearly three-fourths -- enrolled in Grantsville's public schools qualify for free or reduced-price lunch suggests that there are many households in the district that either have no school-age children in them or have children enrolled in private schools.

This mismatch between the poverty rates of the students enrolled and the income of the households residing within the district may contribute to the lack of political support for -- and public accountability to -- this district. Furthermore, the concentrated poverty within the district, which in turn relates to and perpetuates the lack of support and accountability, no doubt is also related to some of the dismal academic outcomes of Grantsville's students. For instance, in 2006, less than 10 percent of the district's 4<sup>th</sup> graders earned a 4 on the state math test. Test scores for the middle school students were even worse, with only 1 percent of the 8<sup>th</sup> graders receiving a score of 4 on the state reading test; only 18 percent earned a 3 or 4 on the math test. At the high school level, only 42 percent of the graduating seniors in 2006 earned a Regent's Diploma, and only 32 percent attended four-year colleges.

The Grantsville School District has had a difficult time attracting and keeping highly qualified teachers. In fact, less than half of the teachers in two of the district's four elementary schools hold master's degrees. About half of the teachers in the remaining schools hold master's degrees, which is comparable to the other districts we studied (see below). Some parents have advocated for more remedial courses, adding enrichment courses, and improved training for teachers and administrators.

In terms of its public, tax-generated funds, Grantsville is not the lowest revenue generating district in our study. In fact, among these five districts, Grantsville ranks second to the bottom, after Lakewood, but only one notch below the Belvedere Public Schools, the most affluent community across the districts we studied, in its per pupil funding. Now barely above \$20,000 per pupil, Grantsville is in the lower half, but far from the poorest district in terms of its public funding on Long Island. Furthermore, the Grantsville schools have many corporate and university partnerships that generate some additional funds for specific programs. And yet because of the lack of private resources from affluent constituents and the high degree of academic and social need of the students who attend Grantsville schools, the resources available are clearly not enough. Furthermore, many come with so many strings attached – e.g. those that come from corporate partners -- that they cannot be used in the most helpful manner.

To make matters worse, in part because of the poor academic outcomes and in part because of media coverage of disruptions in the high school in particular, much of the public attention the Grantsville School District has garnered in the last decade or so has been extremely negative. Many observers have deemed the district to be a complete, dysfunctional failure. There is a high turnover rate among the district's administration and board. Furthermore, there is currently much conflict between board members, not only in regard to the educational experiences of the students the district serves, but also over the financial management of the board and the school district itself. More recently, there has been an increased effort by local community-based actors and outside school management groups to create more charter schools to serve the Grantsville students in a school context where, it is argued, community members can have more control. This has led to a high degree of tension between community leaders, parents,

teachers, and school board members about whether to provide more resources to charter schools at the expense of public schools.

In short, the struggling Grantsville School District finds itself in a crucial period of transition at a time when it lacks the leadership needed to deal with the most critical issues it faces, namely its increasing population of English language learners and the extreme educational and social needs of its predominantly poor Black and Hispanic student populations.

### **The Belvedere Public Schools:**

#### **A Stable, Predominantly White and Mostly Affluent School District of Concentrated Privilege**

Tucked away in a beautiful, leafy corner of Long Island, the Belvedere community is described by its residents as a “village” or a “hamlet.” Both socially and economically elite, Belvedere is home to doctors, lawyers, and top Wall Street executives. Indeed, in 2000, roughly 40 percent of the Belvedere households had annual incomes of over \$200,000. We suspect, based on interviews and observations in the district, that this number is much higher now.

The school district that serves this privileged community – the Belvedere Public Schools – is often described by its constituents as more private than public. Enrolling a little more than 2000 students in four schools, the Belvedere district has a reputation both for academic excellence and a lack of racial or economic diversity. Indeed, during the 2005-06 school year, the district’s student population was 97 percent White, and not one student qualified for free or reduced price lunch. Not a single teacher in the Belvedere School District is uncertified, and only two are teaching outside of their subject area. At the high school level, more than half of Belvedere’s teachers hold a Masters degree or higher.

In terms of resources, the Belvedere School District’s per-pupil funding is far from the highest on Long Island – and in fact is only \$1,000 per pupil per year higher than Grantsville’s at about \$21,000. But as we describe below, this public, per-pupil funding is often augmented by considerable private donations from wealthy parents and/or community members. Furthermore, as we describe below, while students in this district are privileged to a large extent, many still face social and developmental problems and issues. Yet, what these students have that other students in poorer districts lack is a safety net of private services and supports. For instance, their parents, unlike those in Grantsville, can not only donate ample private funds and resources to the public schools but they also provide their own children with the sort of private tutoring and support systems that helps them through troubled times.

Not surprisingly, given their advantaged student body and ample resources, academic achievement in the Belvedere School District is consistently high. On the fourth grade New York State English Language Arts (ELA) exam, for example, a full 90 percent of Belvedere’s students scored 3s or 4s. In fact, one in five fourth graders received a 4 on that exam. On the eighth grade state math exam, 88 percent of the students received a score of 3 or 4. The four-year high school graduation rate is 96 percent, and upon completion of high school, 98 percent of Belvedere’s high school graduates earned a Regents diploma and 77 percent earned an Advanced Regents diploma. Finally, an amazing 95 percent of Belvedere graduates went on to a four-year college.

At the same time, Belvedere students told us that they often feel enormous pressure – from their parents in particular -- to become successful. One of the many ways this pressure manifests itself is in the students’ decisions to enroll in as many AP classes, sports, extra-curricular activities, etc. as they possibly can in order to distinguish their college applications from the

masses of other hopefuls. Many Belvedere educators and students bemoan the level of stress and anxiety students feel to excel in high school. The students in particular talk about high school as simply a “means” to an end – a ticket to getting into a “top” university upon graduation. Students talk about how little sleep they get, particularly their junior year of high school, when the worst of the AP class crunch occurs. The educators at the high school note that it is not unusual for students arrive in the morning with coffee or Red Bull caffeinated beverage in their hands, talking about having been up much of the night.

While Belvedere students and staff enjoy the benefits of a school district that has far more public and private resources than a Category 1 district such as Grantsville, privilege, it seems, also has its price, which is manifest in highly stressed out students who both lament that they have gone to high school in a social “bubble” far removed from the sort of racial and ethnic diversity that would prepare them for life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and, what’s more, they describe their years in high school as simply a means to an end.

### **The Clearview School District:**

#### **One of Only a Handful of Racially Diverse and Stable Districts on Long Island**

Two of the most defining characteristics of the Clearview School District on Long Island are one, its racial/ethnic diversity, and two, the stability of that diversity over time. Mirroring the overall demographics of the county in which it resides, Clearview is about 64 percent white, 20 percent Latino, 12 percent black, and 4 percent Asian. While many suburban school districts with such a racial/ethnic make up are in the midst of a rapid transition, gaining Black and Latino students and losing whites, Clearview’s racial/ethnic make up has remained relatively unchanged since the mid- to late-1990s. This may be in part due to its relatively low poverty rate and the strong working- and middle-class identity of the community. Only 4 percent of Clearview’s students qualified for free lunch in 2007, and a large portion of families in the district -- about 44 percent – had 2000 annual incomes between \$50,000 and \$125,000.

Meanwhile, the vast majority of Clearview teachers are highly qualified, with more than half of them holding Master’s degrees and only two teachers in the whole district teaching outside of their areas of specialization. Furthermore, Clearview is not a poor school district in terms of its per-pupil funding. In fact, it ranks second among the five districts we are studying in per-pupil funds – higher than the hugely affluent Belvedere – at about \$22,000. Thus, it is not surprising that the educators who work there say they have most or all of what they need in terms of resources.

Furthermore, given that the Clearview district is more racially and ethnically diverse than most on Long Island, it stands out in a sea of districts defined by racial segregation. In fact, it is one of the few places on Long Island where officials and educators tout racial and ethnic diversity as one of their district’s assets, and the district is seen as improving – an up and coming school system that is attracting more families -- and not on the decline. Furthermore, the administration also uses a kindergarten choice program to try to balance the racial and ethnic make up of each of the district’s four elementary schools. Students from each of these four schools then feed into the district’s one middle school and high school.

Yet, when we scratch beneath the surface a bit more, we see that there are limits to the degree of support for “diversity” in Clearview. For instance, in the middle school, students are tracked based primarily on elementary teachers’ recommendations into advanced and regular

classes that have important implications for their high school course placement and thus their access to college. This tracking system divides the diverse student body along racial lines with most of the black and Latino students in the regular track and most of the white and Asian students in the advanced program.

Educators in the district who advocate for an end to the rigid tracking system, which is slightly more fluid in the high school than the middle school, argue that less tracking and greater access for all students to the higher-level curriculum would boost overall student academic outcomes, which seem lack luster given the low level of poverty there. For instance, in 2007, only 79 percent of the high school seniors earned a Regents diploma, and only 61 percent of the Clearview High School graduates went on to four-year colleges.

Furthermore, there is ample evidence that these achievement rates are racially divided, and they become more so in the middle school years, when the tracking system begins. Thus, while there is very little or no black-white and Latino-white test score gap in elementary school, it becomes quite substantial by 8<sup>th</sup> grade, when 82 percent of white students but only 34 percent of black students and 56 percent of Latino students received scores of 3s or 4s on the 8<sup>th</sup> grade English-Language Arts exam.

Clearly, both the challenge and the promise of the Clearview School District is its racial/ethnic diversity. It presents the promise of a district that is both stable and diverse, which is a rarity in a fragmented suburban county. At the same time, the major challenge of this district is to make all of its assets, privilege and resources work for all its students.

#### **The Lakewood School District:**

##### **Unstable with Changing Racial Demographics and Poverty Rates**

The Lakewood community on Long Island has been described as a mecca of recent immigrants and a melting pot of different racial/ethnic groups and international diversity. The Lakewood School District is the only public institution that must serve members of all these racial/ethnic groups and try to prepare them for the hugely diverse society they are becoming a part of as they grow. The district has an unstable racial and social composition that has been changing in recent years with a slight increase in students of all minority groups and a sharp decline in the white population. Lakewood has also seen the number of students on free and reduced price lunch increase over the past decade. Given this diversity and rapidly changing racial/ethnic and socio-economic make up, perhaps the most remarkable feature of this district is the variability across its schools in terms of overall enrollment, student demographics and test scores. In other words, Lakewood is both the most racially/ethnically diverse and the most divided district we studied. And yet, this pre-K – 6<sup>th</sup> grade elementary school district does appear to be effectively (at least as measured by test scores) educating its ethnically and culturally varied student body, and closing the racial/ethnic achievement gap in some areas. Much of this may be due to the immigrant status of many students and families of color in this district, as they are not yet disillusioned with the ideal of the American Dream.

Overall, only about 14 percent of Lakewood's approximately 4,200 elementary school students are white, down from nearly 27 percent in 1999. Meanwhile, the district is 50 percent African American, up only slightly from about 46 percent at the end of the 1990s. The Latino student population now constitutes about 19 percent of the total, up from about 16 percent ten years ago. The Asian population is now 14 percent of the total, up from about 11 percent ten



years ago. Yet when we look at how these different racial/ethnic groups are distributed across Lakewood's six public schools, we see how the schools mirror the residential segregation and the existence of multiple separate ethnic enclaves. Thus, within this incredibly diverse school district, we see high levels of racial/ethnic segregation across its six elementary schools.

For instance, although the district as a whole is only 14 percent white, two of its elementary schools have student populations that are about half white while the other four schools are less than ten percent white. The proportion of Black, Latino and students of other races also varies widely across school buildings, with some elementary schools almost completely black and/or Latino and others mostly Asian, which in Lakewood means primarily of Indian decent. Furthermore, the overall enrollment also varies tremendously across schools, with the smallest school enrolling only 400 students and the largest school enrolling nearly 1000 students. Meanwhile, more similar and consistent across Lakewood's schools are factors such as teacher characteristics and English Language Learners (ELL) populations. Considering the number of Hispanic students, the district has a relatively low number of ELL students compared to other districts.

Lakewood can best be described as a working-class to middle-class immigrant community, with more than 60 percent of households earning an annual income greater than \$50,000 as of 2000, but less than 13 percent with incomes greater than \$100,000. The vast majority of homes are owner-occupied and not rented, but according to *The New York Times*, the area has become more run-down in recent years with movie theatres and other small retail outlets going out of business to be replaced by discount stores. Mirroring this lack of extreme poverty or wealth, the percentage of Lakewood students who qualify for free or reduced price lunch is relatively low – 42 percent -- considering the proportion of minority students. Yet, a more disturbing statistic is that in the late 1990s, when there were more white students and few students of color, the free and reduced price lunch rate was only 26 percent. Interestingly enough, by 2007, the school with the greatest proportion of non-white students actually had the second-lowest percentage of students receiving free or reduced priced lunch. This may well relate to Lakewood's large percentage of working-class immigrant families, many of which are families of color. These statistics illustrate a contrast between Lakewood and other Long Island districts in which 85 percent or more of the enrollment is students of color. In most, if not all, of these districts, the percentage of students receiving free and reduced price lunch is much greater.

In terms of per-pupil funding, Lakewood is actually the most poorly funded school district in our pilot study. With an average funding level of about \$14,000 per pupil, it is on the very bottom of the list of the school districts on Long Island in terms of tax-generated public resources. As we noted above, this low level of funding is somewhat offset by the fact that Lakewood is an elementary school district and thus has somewhat costs per pupil than a K-12 or a high school district. But also, the fact that it is an elementary district means that its local tax revenue must be shared with the larger high school district into which its students matriculate. Meanwhile, Lakewood has a limited capacity for generating private resources and yet the needs of its students are greater than those in more affluent districts. Still, on a brighter note, those who work within the district believe that what resources the district has are well spent.

Test scores, both school-wide and by sub group, also vary widely between schools. In one Lakewood school with a student population that is about half white, one-third black students and about one-fourth receiving free or reduced price lunch, every fourth grade student passed the ELA

English test with a score of 3 or 4, and 25 percent of the students received a 4. On the 4<sup>th</sup> grade math test, every economically disadvantaged student received a 3 or 4, while 95 percent of black students and 96 percent of white students earned scores of 3 or 4. At the Lakewood school with the highest proportion of white students and the lowest proportion of black students, less than 70 percent of fourth graders passed the ELA and only 4 percent received a score of four. Math scores at this school were slightly higher with all black fourth graders passing the math test, 73 percent of white and economically advantaged students passing, and only 57 percent of Hispanic students passing. In fact, Hispanic fourth graders at this school scored slightly better on the ELA than they did on the math. Thus, in Lakewood, race seems to be a weaker predictor of standardized test achievement than in other districts. The many reasons why are related, we believe, not only to the larger percentage of immigrant families but also a can-do attitude within the school system, making this predominantly black and Latino school district an anomaly in terms of outcomes, but not always in terms of the challenges it faces to maintain those outcomes.

**Leesburg Union School District:  
Unstable with Changing Racial Demographics and Poverty Rates**

While the Leesburg Union School District, like Lakewood, also fits into Category #4 above – those districts with changing racial demographics and poverty rates – it offers a very different story of a district in flux. Just looking quickly at Leesburg’s current demographics from a distance, the district appears to be a little microcosm of the United States. Its Long Island location allows for a mix of residents of different religions, ethnic/racial groups and social classes in this school district. The public school student population is about 43 percent white, 30 percent Latino, 20 percent black, and 7 percent Asian. Not only is this district racially diverse, it also has profound social class differences, with 20 percent of the student population eligible for reduced lunch and 8 percent receiving free lunch in 2007. In addition to these less affluent families, there is also a strong middle- and upper-middle class population. In 2000, 66 percent of the annual household incomes were between \$50,000 and \$125,000.

This racially and socio-economically diverse school district has, in the past anyway, attracted a highly qualified teaching force. It is estimated that almost half of the teachers have Master’s degrees and only one teacher in the district is teaching outside of his or her area of specialization. Many of the teachers and administrators grew up in Leesburg and graduated from Leesburg High School and thus have seen the changes in the district over the last few decades.

The most visible change these long-term Leesburg residents have seen is in the district’s student population, which has both shrunk dramatically in size and become increasingly black and Latino. In the last decade, for instance, the total student population has decreased from 3,700 in 1998 to 3,200 by 2007. During that same time period, the percentage of white students declined from 61 percent of the student population to 43 percent. In 1998, there were 2,271 white students, and by 2007 there were only 1,363. Meanwhile, the percentage of students who are black has remained fairly steady, growing only slightly from 17 to 20 percent. Latinos are the only racial/ethnic group to gain significantly as a percentage of the student population, from 17 to 30 percent of the total during that same decade.

As the student population has changed, so has the population of the town and thus the demographic and political make up of the school board. Interestingly enough, the school board’s demographic changes do not mirror those of the students; in fact, they have moved in the

opposite direction becoming more racially, ethnically, and socio-economically homogeneous. Basically, by the early 2000s, the all-white school board was made up almost entirely of members whose own children attend private schools. As of 2009, all but one of the seven Leesburg school board members was a private school parent. The seventh board member no longer had children in the public schools and regularly agreed with the decisions and direction of the other six members. Thus, the school board was fairly unanimous on most major decisions – especially the use of public funds for private schools. This Board, comprised mostly of members who never have nor ever will enroll their own children in public schools, are left to make major decisions that profoundly impact the increasingly black and brown public school student population. One of their main agenda items over the years has been to use New York State’s generous policies regarding public support for students enrolled in private schools to allocate Leesburg public education funds to special education services, textbooks, and transportation in the private religious schools where the Board members and their constituents send their children.

This siphoning off of public funds for private schools is taking place in the context of one of the highest-spending school districts in the state. Of the five districts we studied, Leesburg ranked first in terms of its per-pupil funding at about \$25,000 per pupil. But if that funding were broken down to show what percentage is going to support public versus private school students – data that are not forthcoming from the school district – we suspect that the per-pupil expenditure for the public school students is far lower than that.

The private school parents’ success at getting elected to the school board and then allocating more and more of the public funds to students attending private schools has caused many Leesburg residences to accuse the board of ruining the public schools. Angry members of the district’s PTA argue that these district leaders do not represent the families that use the public schools and have thus “sucked the money out” of the public schools for private schools and their students. School board members, on the other hand, respond to such accusations by claiming that they are bringing “change” to the district by ensuring that all students learn. They accuse the almost exclusively white PTA members of not wanting to help all students, particularly the Latino and African American students. Meanwhile, the PTA members claim that the school board only wants to help those in private schools.

There is evidence that within the increasingly racially and ethnically diverse public schools, white parents and students demand and thus drive a rather rigid tracking and ability grouping process that resegregates students by race and class into high- and low-level classes. Furthermore, there is some evidence that this tracking and grouping system has had a negative effect on black and Latino students test scores over their time in the school system. For instance, at the elementary grade level there is no academic gap between neither black and white nor Latino and white students, however, by 8<sup>th</sup> grade we see dramatic differences in students’ performance across race and ethnic lines when about 78 percent of whites received 3s or 4s on their English-Language Arts exam as opposed to only 36 percent of African Americans and 31 percent of Latinos. When it comes to math, 75 percent of white students in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade received 3s or 4s, while only 29 percent of African Americans and 42 percent of Latinos received such scores.

Thus despite the Leesburg school board’s claim that it wants to ensure all students learn, there is clear evidence that it has not achieved that goal. Instead, today we see a school board that is racially homogenous, a large percent of whites leaving the school district, and African

American and Latino students falling academically further behind as they matriculate through the school district.

### **Findings across Five Long Island School Districts:**

#### **Why Separate is Inherently Unequal**

These profiles of the five districts in our study illustrate many of the most critical distinctions across school district boundary lines on Long Island. Issues of resources, demographics, teacher qualifications, and the political support for public schools are all pronounced in even the briefest descriptions of public schools in diverse suburban counties. But these distinctions are only salient in their interactions with the daily lives of students, educators and parents in these contexts. What has been lacking in the educational research literature is clear evidence of the ways in which the people nested within these school districts make sense of these distinctions and internalize them as they come to understand what it means to be a resident or graduate of district X versus district Y. *Furthermore, what is missing is a deeper analysis of how perceptions or understandings – the sense making of everyday existence -- of school and district quality relate to the demographic and political terrain of their surrounding communities and then how, in a vicious cycle, these perceptions help to legitimize the separate and unequal educational opportunities available to students across these boundary lines.*

In its landmark 1954 ruling in the school desegregation cases that became *Brown v. Board of Education*, the U.S. Supreme Court discussed both “tangible” and “intangible” educational factors that made racially separate schools “unequal.” The tangible factors were those we can see and touch – books, facilities, transportation, etc. The intangible factors were actually described in far more detail in many of the pre-*Brown* federal court decisions on racial segregation in higher education. In these rulings the Supreme Court articulated such factors as the honor, status and reputation of a university and its faculty that make a degree from such an institution more valuable than a degree from elsewhere. The powerful social networks formed with other students in prestigious universities represent yet another “intangible” factor that helps people gain access to jobs and opportunities down the road. What the federal judges were addressing in these pre-*Brown* cases was the relationship between the prestige and privilege of an educational institution and the ways in which such institutions bequeath their status to their graduates. Indeed, these intangible factors explain why separate is inherently unequal.

Although the U.S. Supreme Court justices did not clearly articulate what these intangible factors looked like in K-12 public schools, their ruling in *Brown* clearly implied that they mattered there as well – at least in the hearts and minds of the children excluded from access to high-status, predominantly white schools. Part of the problem of thinking about the intertwined relationship between tangible and intangible factors in public education is that the K-12 system as a whole is much larger and more regulated by state and federal requirements than the higher education system. Thus, there is some pretense that a high school diploma is a high school diploma – or in New York State, that a Regents Diploma is a Regents Diploma -- no matter what high school issues it. And yet we know intuitively that this is not the case at all – that there is a reason why parents will pay an extra \$200,000 for a similar house on a different side of a school district boundary. Thus, while we can analyze the quantitative data on per-pupil expenditures or the number of smart boards in a school, we still do not know enough about the relationship

between those tangible factors and students' (and educators' and parents') interpretation of what it means to be enrolled in one school or district versus another – or what it says about them, their potential and how the rest of the world will define them.

At the same time, most Americans are uncomfortable, at an abstract level anyway, with the degree of inequality within the public education system. This inequality across district boundaries is more obvious in places like Long Island where the degree of school district fragmentation, as we noted above, is quite high. In fact, 75 percent of LI school districts enroll 5,500 or fewer students. This means the inequality is bounded in relatively small geographic packages, and thus, the idea of crossing those boundaries (or eventually making them more pliable) may not seem logistically insurmountable. Meanwhile, the inefficiency of the fragmented educational system is quite clear, and it appears to be on the brink of collapsing of its own weight as local property taxes rise to levels that more and more residents cannot afford.

Survey data from the *Long Island Index Report 2009* reveal that a clear majority of Long Island residents are in favor of various policy proposals that would either help individuals cross these boundaries or chip away at the boundaries themselves. For example, 66 percent of Long Islanders favor the creation of inter-district magnet schools of choice, and more than 60 percent favor various proposals for allowing students to transfer to schools across district boundaries. More surprisingly, however, the survey found that 64 percent favor school district consolidation, and 73 percent favor some sort of pooling of property taxes across school district boundaries.

*These data strongly suggest that a critical mass of Long Islanders is ready for a change, that the majority of residents recognize that the current system cannot hold. And yet, what we have captured in this report of how people understand public education on Long Island from the ground level up is that their day to day lives are mired in the current system of separate and unequal districts and schools. The resistance to change from this perspective is quite striking, as district officials, educators, parents and students in the most privileged contexts tout the benefits of local control and the “goodness” of the affluent people they associate with in their district context. The intangible factors weigh heavy on how those in affluent communities understand what they “get” out of segregation. Even in the less privileged contexts, however, there is not a groundswell of support among those in power for giving up “turf” – in fact, there is quite the opposite.*

*Furthermore, we have learned by studying five school districts that vary in terms of their degree of racial/ethnic diversity and stability as well as prior research on within district and within school segregation is that boundaries between school districts are only one form boundaries that divide students along race and class lines. We also saw, particularly, in the racially diverse and stable school district, Clearview, that rigid tracking practices create a high degree of segregation across school corridors and classrooms. Still, as we describe in more detail below, such within-school boundaries, while problematic on several levels, seem more malleable and surmountable than the more rigid and consequential boundaries across separate and unequal school districts. At least students within the same district and school have access, at least theoretically, to many of the tangible and intangible resources there, unlike students who are separated by rigid district boundary lines.*

And yet it is these very district boundary lines that appear to be the most difficult to change. In fact, the interaction between what people know in the abstract is the “right” thing to do and how people make sense of the structures they say should change is what we set out to

better understand in five school districts on Long Island. This report is our initial effort to articulate what we learned. Our findings are meant to highlight the “on the ground” obstacles to the kind of meaningful change that is now supported by a growing consensus that issues of fragmentation and isolation need to be addressed.

Finding #1: The Interplay of Public and Private Resources  
in Separate and Unequal School Districts

The 2009 *Long Island Index* report fully captures the inequality across school districts in terms of their ability to generate revenue from their property and commercial tax bases. The report explains in detail the state and local funding formula as they relate to the wealth of different school districts and thus, the flow of public funding to schools in those districts. Highlighted in that section of the Index report is a careful explanation of why school districts with high concentrations of poverty and thus low property values must increase their tax rates to a much higher level to generate the same local funds for schools that a high income, high property value district could generate more easily with a lower tax rate.

The evidence is clear that when it comes to public funding for public schools, the cards are stacked against those who live in poor communities. Furthermore, in terms of these public revenues, it appears that the rich are getting richer and the poor are barely holding their own. According to the *Index* report (2009), between 1995 and 2005, the gap in per-pupil revenues between the wealthiest 10 percent of the districts and poorest increased from \$8,756 to \$11,032 in constant dollars. By 2005, the wealthiest districts on Long Island were spending in excess of \$27,000 per pupil, while the poorest districts were spending, on average, around \$15,000 per pupil. And, as in the case of Lakeview, with its \$14,000 per pupil expenditure, some districts spend even less. While \$15,000 or even \$14,000 is a decent funding level compared to many schools in other parts of the country, the physical proximity of well-funded to not-as-well-funded districts within Nassau and Suffolk counties makes the comparison more stark.

Furthermore, even the revised 2006 New York State school funding formula, which was intended to offset some of this inequality, has been undermined by supplemental state funding for more affluent districts due to the political weight these district carry in Albany (see *Long Island Index*, 2009). The contrast in living conditions and household income for students in the best-versus worst-funded public schools on Long Island makes the funding disparities even worse.

It is clear, therefore, that residents of high-wealth districts on Long Island have strong incentives to maintain the status quo because of the fiscal advantages it provides for their children. Even though the current funding system and its on-going reliance on local funds is highly inefficient in a heavily fragmented context, and even though the burden of high property taxes on Long Island is now more than many residents can bear, the relative advantage of living in an affluent community is real from the perspective of public resources.

In this section of the report we present analysis from our qualitative study to help illustrate how these funding and wealth disparities play out in the context of school districts and students' lives. What we see more clearly from this vantage point are the multiple ways in which public resources and private wealth are often discretely co-mingled to give students who attend schools of concentrated privilege even greater resource advantage. In other words, a public education system in which those with more resources are able to generate higher levels of public funding creates inequality in and of itself. But when that system is supplemented and reinforced

by private resources – both tangible and intangible -- from parents, community members and other donors who are connected to the district through social networks, the mounting inequities are even more appalling. *While most people know about this co-mingling of public and private resources at an intuitive level, if not from systematic research, it is important to document the extent to which such layered inequality becomes part of the process of how people make sense of separate and unequal educational opportunities. Indeed, what we learned is that this understanding becomes a mechanism through which the system is legitimized and maintained by those with the power to change it.*

### **The Tale of Concentrated Privilege:**

#### **Districts with Ample Public Resources *and* Affluent Private Donors and Connections**

The interaction, reinforcement and intermingling of public and private resources is best illustrated in the affluent school district we studied, the Belvedere Public Schools, where the educators and students are very clear that what makes their public schools “good” is as much about what the people of Belvedere bring to the district as it is about this affluent community’s ability to generate tax revenues.

The first part of the equation is the Belvedere district’s ample public funds for the regular operating budget of the schools. As we noted above, Belvedere ranks in the middle of our sample of five school districts in terms of its public funding level, at about \$20,000 per pupil. But what is interesting about this particular district is that because it is such an elite residential enclave, it lacks a large commercial or industrial tax base. Still, it generates enough property tax from its wealthy residents to make up for most of that loss and maintain a per-pupil funding level that is close to the Long Island median of a little more than \$21,000.

A repeated theme we heard from the faculty and students in this district is that they had more than enough resources – be it technology, art supplies or science equipment -- to do what they needed to educate their high-achieving students and prepare them for the competitive four-year college application process.

#### *The Tangled Web of Public and Private Resources within the “Good” Community*

*In Belvedere, the lack of need when it comes to what the district provides for the educators and the students is intertwined and co-mingled with what it is that parents and students already have in this community to such a degree that it is difficult to disentangle the two.* The primary and most blatant example of this commingling of public and private resources is the size and scope of private donations that parents and other community members make to the schools. In fact, when we were conducting site visits to Belvedere High School, the school was completing the construction of its second Astroturf athletic field. Both this new turf field and a second, slightly older one had been made possible through gifts from parents of students in the district. The cost of the first field a few years prior had been \$1 million. The estimated cost of the second field, which was to include an adjacent parking lot, was closer to \$2 million.

The high school’s assistant principal explained, in the context of talking about how Belvedere is a special “different” place where the educators’ needs are consistently met either by the public funds or parents’ generous donations to the district:

I know the first turf [Astroturf field] was a million, and two parents gave 500 each — \$500,000. The next one is very close to 2 [million] because there’s a parking area for 100 cars and then there’s the field,

which has probably gone up in price... And then we have a Booster Club that gives—we have little golf carts out there that the trainers can use and the coaches can use and the AD [athletic director] uses just to ride out there to see what's going on. It is different.

In fact, administrators, teachers and students all spoke at great length about the second Astroturf field and how this generous donation to the school symbolized the strong commitment to public education in the Belvedere community. But perhaps more importantly, the enhanced athletic opportunities that flow from attending a school with two privately donated Astroturf fields can be translated into tangible academic opportunities – e.g. doors that are opened because a student is the captain of a lacrosse team that would not otherwise exist. As the insightful social worker at Belvedere noted, the second multi-million dollar field was being put in so that the school's lacrosse team did not need to share a field with the football team. He noted that therefore, because Belvedere has athletic fields more students are playing sports with better equipment and better coaches than those at other public schools. As a result, he noted, the Belvedere students are getting more athletic scholarships to colleges and universities which would not otherwise admit them:

You've got a student who's a B student but he's a star goalie on the lacrosse team. He's going to Rutgers, you know, or something like that, which is a school where his B wouldn't have done it, but his athletic pursuit will get him there, again because of the opportunity that this school may have afforded that student.

Another, critical role that this extra private funding plays in a place like Belvedere is to allow the educators to build a stronger esprit de corps among the students and educators as well as the broader community. This bond connects members of the Belvedere community in their shared sense of support for their schools – material support that only affluent communities can provide because of their affluence. Such support is then credited to the community members' superior values and beliefs about education and not their privilege in terms of resources. All of this extra funding translates into a school system that is a better place to work and go to school than other, less affluent communities – not just because of tangible factors, which are important, but also because of the values and beliefs ascribed to the community members. Indeed, the high school principal spoke at length about how well supported he feels at this school versus the prior school where he worked. He noted that having a lot of resources is “what makes working here incredible” and that his budget at this high school is the best one he has ever had in his many years as a principal working in other districts.

In addition to the public funding for schools in Belvedere, private donors give additional, discretionary money directly to the high school principal. When asked how much money he generally gets from these private donors per year, he noted that it was several thousand dollars from each person, so it adds up – some years to as much as \$20,000 or \$30,000, which is equivalent to about 10 percent of his annual budget from the district. And, he noted, he has much latitude in deciding how to spend it: “... they don't put any restrictions on the money. It's what you want to spend it on for the good of the cause. And believe me, the district office licks their chops over that money. They want access to it, and they're not allowed.”

The Belvedere High School principal emphasized several times how beneficial it is to have complete flexibility with these donated funds, which he mostly spends boosting the esprit de



corps of the staff and students – a process by which the local community becomes even more wedded to maintaining its small, inefficient and completely separate school district. For instance, he noted that he uses that money to make the school an easier, more comfortable place to work and thus, create a sense of commitment to the school. For instance, he bought coffee machines for the faculty room to allow the teachers to have free coffee day or night. He also purchased several water coolers, located all over the building, so that students and staff have access to good water. He bought more smart boards and sent his teachers to additional professional development conferences. to provide more decent food at faculty meetings and to treat the students to a special senior day by bringing a rented amusement park to campus. He said that if he did not have the private discretionary funds, it would be hard to justify this extravagant event. But because of the private funds, he can explain that “it didn’t cost the district a penny.”

The relationship between these private, discretionary funds and the Belvedere High School’s sense of community, commitment and convergence is best illustrated by the principal’s favorite purchases – those designed to boost school spirit. He explained that when he came to Belvedere, the high school had the worst pep rallies he had ever seen. Then, after the first Astroturf field was donated, they were able to hold their pep rallies outside, which, he said, greatly improved the experience and “the kids were just elated.”

The next step in pep rally improvement came when the principal spent \$900 on an air gun and 400 Belvedere High School t-shirts. He explained that the air gun, with its CO2 canister, can fire the t-shirts up to 500 feet in the air: “...I was shooting them [the t-shirts] out to the kids before Homecoming, and they all were going crazy.”

He added that even several months after the pep rally that he still walks around outside every so often and shoots the gun. “The kids love it. I shoot balls out of the thing -- anything that makes it [school] positive.”

And finally, his next pep rally expenditure from the private funds was a 13-foot blimp to hover 200 feet over the stadium: “You would have thought we put Disney World out there! And it was hysterical - it was hysterical. They were having a great time, and we kept it up for the Homecoming game. I mean, to me this is nothing for me. I’m having a blast. I’m shooting t-shirts. I mean what could be more fun?”

Blimps, air guns and amusement parks aside, there are also many ways in which the abundance of private resources in the community enhance the already exemplary academic program at Belvedere High School. In other words, there is a connection between the process of building the esprit de corps on the campus and furthering the reputation of the Belvedere Public Schools. For instance, in larger part because of parent donations and support, none of the teachers, across all of the departments at the schools, lacked needed technology or equipment. The chair of the school’s rapidly growing art department described all the extra programs, equipment, field trips and events that her department offers as being possible only because of the parental support in terms of donations in the form of money, supplies and connections. As the art department chair informed us, the school is awash with new technology – for her new and rapidly expanding media arts program and the revamped industrial arts program, which is now geared toward technology. As she explained it, “...It is a disservice to not offer all this technology to kids.”

Each spring this art department chair and her students in the fashion design class put on an elaborate fashion show that is only possible through generous private donations from the high

school's parent-led arts committee and booster club. In fact, funding for multiple bolts of fabric and the creation of a fashion design showroom – complete with mannequins -- all came from parents. Furthermore, Belvedere parents are connected to museums and fashion companies that support this unique fashion program via donations of time and access.

The art department chair explained how the parents in this affluent community sustain the arts because they see it as an important supplement to the rigorous, high-powered academic program at the school and a central component of a well-rounded education, which is important for getting into a top university. She explained that in this district “there’s a great focus on the academics. And getting into a lot of the big-name schools is very important to the students, their families, and the district understands that, and you know, it kind of goes along with their philosophy of providing the best education possible. And it’s certainly a community that encourages and supports the arts.”

#### *Supporting Good Schools by Supporting Good Students*

Taking this notion of private resources/support for students to another, closer-to-home level, we also learned through our interviews with educators and students in the Belvedere community the multiple and often subtle, or behind the scenes, ways private resources assure greater academic success for not just the school as a whole, but for individual students. While educational researchers have long documented the powerful relationship between parents’ socio-economic status and student outcomes, the insights from this highly privileged school demonstrates some of the more subtle and nuanced mechanisms of this home advantage (see Lareau, 2003) and how it creates a set of norms or expectations about what its parents provide for their children to help them in the competitive race toward a high-status college.

For instance, the social worker at Belvedere High School, who had only been at the school for about a year, had previously worked with students from a low-income community in New York City. In comparing these two experiences, he noted that the main difference is not the kinds of problems or challenges students face in affluent versus poor communities, but rather the types of support systems they have in place outside of school to help them through difficult times. As he explained it:

What I think is different... here, the families have the money to help them get through it... The issues are the same.... They’ve got the students who are socially awkward, they’ve got students who need special ed services, they’ve got parents who are divorcing... But here, if your parents are divorcing, you may have the financial means to go to a therapist outside of school, you know. If you’re autistic, your family has gone to the best specialists and they have you with the best medications, and you’re going to special camps over the summer to really develop your social skills, and I think that’s what separates the districts. It’s really the resources.

In describing similarities in the conditions and problems facing students across these different contexts – e.g. divorce and autism -- we do not wish to downplay the distinctions in terms of the privilege of Belvedere students and thus the many obstacles they do *not* face on a daily basis compared to their counterparts in poorer districts. As the assistant principal noted, “...we’re not diverse at all, so we don’t have—we have one student who’s learning English. I

believe she's a Russian student. Um...so everyone comes motivated, well fed, well dressed... So, much of our job is done for us, as opposed to other schools."

Still, the idea of similar, almost universal teen problems facing students across varied socio-economic contexts and school districts also has some validity. And it is within these similarities that we see different safety nets available to them depending on their family resources. This distinction emerged whenever Belvedere educators spoke of social challenges such as drug or alcohol abuse among their affluent students. As the assistant principal at the high school explained, "These parents are intelligent. They'll realize and they have the means, in many ways, to deal with these problems in ways that other parents just couldn't face... If there's a drug problem that seems serious, they will put them in some sort of rehab."

Not only do the rehab centers, which are often residential programs, cost a great deal of money that only parents who can afford to live in a community like Belvedere have, but they also serve a secondary purpose of keeping students' school records clean of deserved suspensions or expulsions. As the assistant principal of discipline at Belvedere High School noted, there had been no expulsions from the school in more than a year. She said that the only infraction that could have led to one never made it to the superintendent's hearing because the parents pulled the student out of school and put him in a rehab center – a residential, 18-month program. She noted that once a child in this school district has a problem – be it drugs or alcohol or something else -- the parents will act on it.

In this vein of "acting on" a problem – or a perceived problem – nearly everyone we interviewed in this district said the private tutoring industry was thriving in Belvedere despite the stellar academic reputation of the high school and the quality of the teachers employed there. The principal stated that some Belvedere families spend between \$10,000 and \$15,000 a year for tutors for just one child. According to the assistant principal, even students who do not really need tutoring get it. "I think parents feel now that they have so much, that they want to do as much as they can for their children."

Still the assistant principal and others we interviewed noted that while everyone knows that everyone else is being tutored, no one really knows just how much tutoring is going on. According to the assistant principal, "...we don't know specifically. We don't go public with that. We don't ask people are they being tutored, but we know. That's like giving your child tennis lessons."

According to the social worker, he knows of Belvedere students who have two or three private tutors a week, and students who have been taking private SAT prep classes since 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Meanwhile, he noted, "A family in [a poor community where he used to work] whose mom and dad are working minimum jobs, and they're just getting by, they can't say, 'Let's give \$150 to a tutor.' Or, even in that community, \$80 for a tutor, or \$50... I mean, \$50 is the difference between light and heat to them. I think that's the big difference."

#### *Buying the Best College Admissions Letters*

This willingness of affluent Belvedere parents to write checks to help their children get ahead in the increasingly competitive rat race of education does not end with rehab centers or tutors. According to the guidance counselors at the high school, these parents will also use their financial resources to buy their children a college admissions letter. They do this in two strategic ways:

First of all, an increasing number of Belvedere families are hiring private admissions counselors or relying on the well-funded public schools to provide that service via the counseling

office. As one of the Belvedere High School guidance counselors noted, she has seen a sudden rise in the number of families who want to farm out the work of actually applying to college to other people. She said she sees this trend, even among the large percentage of families with one stay-at-home parent – sometimes referred to in this context as a “stay-at-home millionaire” whose full-time job it is to support the highly paid spouse by planning dinner parties for his associates, etc. The counselor noted a shift, even among these more “able-bodied families, for lack of a better term, seemingly relinquishing some of that responsibility” of applying to college as they take on other responsibilities related to the spouse’s career and the establishment of social networks through country clubs and other exclusive institutions. She noted that these stay-at-home parents, usually mothers, are very busy, playing tennis, entertaining, etc. She also notes that the shift toward more on-line applications had created a possible technology barrier between the parents and the process. This barrier, however, seems less likely in a community with affluent and well-educated parents.

The trend toward less direct parental involvement in the college application process, which may or may not be unique to privileged contexts such as Belvedere, means not only a boon for the private college counselors, but also that the high school counselors have become more central to the students’ college application process than ever before. As this counselor noted, in recent years, she has often been the one sitting with the students at the computer when they submit the applications. With only 44 seniors assigned to each counselor at the high school, they can conceivably play that role in this affluent school district:

Now again, my colleagues at XYZ high school on Long Island, I don’t know if they’re doing that or not because their caseloads are probably larger than mine, but for me, having to do that, I wouldn’t say I did it with all forty-four, but I did it with well over eighty percent of my students. I actually went on and did the applications. I haven’t done that in the past. It’s been more—that part’s been a family aspect.

Even with their relatively low caseloads, the Belvedere counselors seem a bit overwhelmed by the parents’ withdraw from the college application process. They said they are grateful when the parents chose to hire a private college admissions counselor to play this role in the application process. According to one counselor, “I actually admire them more for paying someone as opposed to relying upon a school person to do it. It’s a public high school but not a private high school, so it’s not the only thing that I’m responsible for.”

In fact, some of the Belvedere educators suggested that families’ increasing reliance on private college admissions officers could also be related to affluent parents’ norms regarding hiring people to support many dimensions of their lives, be it housekeeping, gardening, child care, or transportation. Hiring someone to get their children into college may be just one more task that can be outsourced. According to a Belvedere High School counselor, “...This seems to be a theme — certainly parents want positive outcomes, but sort of taking a more hands-off role... I’m attributing some of that to technology. But I don’t know if that’s what it is.”

The second expensive strategy employed by Belvedere parents trying to get their children into college is the “early decision” or “early action” application option for first-choice schools. According to the guidance counselors at Belvedere High School, applying early decision boosts students’ chances of getting into the most competitive colleges, but it is also a strategic option

that is limited to students from affluent families because it means they typically forego the ability to request or negotiate financial aid. One of the counselors at the high school noted that she sees many upper-middle-class or more affluent white kids from Belvedere who are borderline in terms of getting into the most competitive colleges get “bumped over” into the accepted category by the early decision option, which shows the colleges how committed the students are to their university and signals that this applicant comes from a family that can pay full tuition. Thus, she spends a lot of her time as a counselor advising students and their parents about the benefits of early admissions if they can afford to forego the financial aid, which most of them can. In contrast, she said, her friends who work in less affluent school districts are having very different conversations with the families they serve:

I have friends that work [in poorer districts] as guidance counselors that don’t even get into that dialogue with their families because from a financial perspective, what the families forego typically is the ability to negotiate financial aid. So I’ve been able to advise that to my population because they could financially support that... I could tell you that of our class right now... I would say well over seventy-five percent of... my 44 [seniors]... are utilizing early programs

And finally, if these two affluent-parent strategies – private college admissions counselors and early decision admissions processes -- are not enough to assure that most, if not all, Belvedere students get into top colleges and universities, there is another critical way in which the school itself – as a beneficiary of the local community’s high status – uses its clout with college admissions officers to give its students a leg up in the application process. According to the Belvedere guidance counselors, while other high schools try to get their students to attend crowded college fairs where they can talk to dozens of admissions officers at once, here, in one of the most affluent school districts within one of the most affluent counties in the New York metro area, the college admissions officers come to them – one at a time and often for one-on-one meetings with students.

In describing the benefits of this approach for the Belvedere students, one of the high school’s admissions counselors noted:

...we have a huge number of college admissions officers who are actually the people who make the decisions [about admissions] that come literally to our school... and I’ve been a college admission officer, and I know what some of the other schools will do is do sort of a mini fair. They’ll stand outside the cafeteria, hand out brochures, and so forth and so on. We don’t do it that way...

She said that when these admissions officers come to Belvedere, they will spend a full period meeting with a small group of students, facilitating a discussion and getting to know the students on a personal level. “It’s very time-consuming. But it’s beneficial -- so I’m shaking hands with the woman who is going to review my student who’s applying to [a competitive private university], who’s really an under-achiever, and I say, ‘Can I talk with you about [so and so],’ and I’m being afforded that opportunity.”

This counselor also talked about the “guy” – meaning the admissions officer – from a nearby competitive college, noting that she has a “very personal relationship” with him. They e-mail each other back and forth about his materials or her students. This counselor explained that

despite the fact that she works in Belvedere where so many of the children are high achieving and the families care about education, the high school had a lot of students who are borderline academically when it comes to getting into some of the top colleges and universities. For these students in particular, she commented, private meetings with admissions officers to facilitate personal relationship building and allow questions to be asked are critical.

In reflecting on her critical role in this affluent school and community, she repeatedly returned to the importance of her relationships with college admissions officers, and how they differentiate her job from that of other counselors in less affluent districts:

... this is not to discredit my colleagues in other places, who probably—and I don't mean this with any disrespect—have a better relationship with maybe the social services person. I don't need to maintain that relationship very much. Certainly \_\_\_\_ there's child abuse here, but it's so rare that I don't have that number on speed-dial. What I have is the admissions officer from Georgetown, Bucknell, University of Chicago, and many others on my school e-mail account that I can find at any time. And this is not me tooting my horn, it's just the nature of sort of what our function is. And sort of developing a relationship because there still is an old boys network to college [admissions]... particularly for private institutions...

Even at age 17 or 18, the Belvedere students understand what their counselor is talking about. They note with great pride that many college admissions officers come to them; they do not need to seek them out. They seem to understand and accept the importance of relationship building and networking as a part of the competitive process they must navigate. As one senior explained, having the admissions officers visit the school and hold one-on-one or small group meetings with students is invaluable because of the personal connection and the impression it creates: "Mostly, probably if you're interested in the school it shows incentive. They'll have your name down, and they'll have your information and they'll know that you inquired about their school."

As the U.S. Supreme Court noted in their landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, it is not just the "tangible" factors such as resources and facilities that matter in public education – although they clearly do matter. But these intangible factors – e.g. personal relationships, networks, status, reputation, etc. -- are critical as well.

### **The Tale of Concentrated Poverty:**

#### **Districts with Fewer Public and/or Private Resources Serve Families with the Least**

Our detailed description above of the privilege and affluence of the Belvedere community provides the necessary backdrop for our discussion of the poorer districts and what they lack compared to Belvedere in terms both tangible and intangible resources. We should preface this by noting that while none of the districts we studied were insolvent, it is clear that the public resources are less ample in some contexts than others on Long Island. But because this is New York and not California or Mississippi, the level of basic funding is far more generous than in other states. Still, for districts in close proximity to places like Belvedere, there is a sharp contrast between those with more resources than they can spend, and districts such as Grantsville that could certainly benefit from additional resources to serve their mostly poor students. When we

factor in the social and emotional needs of the students served in districts such as Lakewood and Grantsville in particular, the resource gap seems even wider. As Belvedere's social worker pointed out, it is not always that the problems facing students across these contexts are so disparate, but rather the parents' ability to help "solve" any such problems/issues by purchasing solutions or assistance with their private resources. It is this type of private, augmented support for students that is lacking in these other school districts, where the need for support is even greater in many respects.

For instance, educators and students in the other districts in our study – even those with higher per-pupil expenditures than Belvedere's – talked about unmet needs in their schools due to a lack of funding. In particular the lack of technology and support staff such as counselors or social workers as well as the need for better and/or bigger facilities came up frequently, especially in Grantsville, the district serving some of the poorest students on Long Island. We learned through our district- and school-level interviews in Grantsville, for instance, that the school board had been ordered by the state to close two schools due to their state of disrepair – e.g. asbestos, falling ceilings, etc. These school closures created a domino effect of overcrowded schools and classrooms, which in turn has led to a greater reliance on portable classrooms. According to one report, there were 70 portable classrooms in use in the district and some of them were 20 years old. According to this district official, "In our district, space is an issue."

The lack of facilities in places like Grantsville too often means that classes or programs that would greatly benefit the students are not offered or do not serve students very well. As one educator in that district noted, the pre-school center is housed on the third floor of a building with no elevator: "So therefore if you can imagine these little four-year-olds going up to the top level every day. So we're really concerned and I know that they do have a task team looking for another location. Yeah, they need another site."

This interviewee also noted several other projects that are supposedly in the works at the district office, but with no resolution in site. In terms of the pre-school facility, she said there is a district-level committee working on it, and they are hoping to float a bond issue to raise money for it, but that there are conflicting needs and demands on their time, energy and resources. For instance, she noted that the middle school in the district is overcrowded and that there is talk of building a separate 6<sup>th</sup> grade center. So, she said, "we have to look at which is a priority."

Setting priorities while trying to meet the needs of students in this mostly poor and all black and Latino district is certainly a challenge. This effort has become more and not less challenging according to many of the Grantsville educators as their district has become the destination of a large influx of immigrant families, mostly from Central America. These educators describe many of these immigrant families as "transient," and note that between mid-July and mid-September each year, they have hundreds of new families lined up outside the central district office trying to enroll their children. Most of these families, one official noted, do not stay more than a year or two. He said, "I mean, the enrollment issues are of serious concern because they come and go so much."

Despite this influx of Latino students, the bilingual education program in the district is lacking. In the elementary school we studied, for instance, there were no bilingual classes for the 5<sup>th</sup> grade because there was no room for it. "I think it's a space issue," the assistant principal said, noting that the staff supports the "best practice" for teaching English Language Learners, but they do not have the resources to make it happen.

At the district level, this assistant principal explained, the Grantsville central office is in the process of updating the ELL curriculum because the last curriculum was written many years ago. But, as we know from our district level interviews in Grantsville, there are many vacancies in the district's central office and a great deal of staff turnover there. Meanwhile, according to one official we interviewed, Grantsville is receiving not only an influx of Spanish-speaking Latino students but also French-speaking students from Haiti, and the district "really need(s) services to address other languages other than just Spanish..."

In addition to a lack of bilingual education classes and programs, the Grantsville elementary school we studied has no gifted education program because the only elementary-level gifted program is housed at another school. Students must be tested to gain access to this program, which consists of one class each for all the "gifted" 4th and 5<sup>th</sup> grade students in that district. The assistant principal noted that some of the children who qualify for the gifted class opt instead to remain in their home schools because the district does not transport them from their neighborhood to the school housing the gifted program, which means a parent would have to transport the child every day.

In this same elementary school, the assistant principal explained they have only one part-time social worker and a part-time psychologist because they have to share them with other schools in the district even though all the schools need so much more.

The lack of resources and support in Grantsville is also evident in smaller matters, e.g. basic school supplies. According to one of the administrators at the elementary school we studied, "we have to prioritize as to what we need most because we never have enough resources to order everything." She noted, for instance, that sometimes the teachers do not let the students write in the workbooks so that they can be used again by the next class. She said this happens a great deal in the upper grades, where students are asked to write their answers to workbook questions on other paper. She noted that it is much more difficult for the younger students to do this because they lose track of what they are doing: the "little guys, they need to write in the book."

To make the lack of public resources worse, the families served by the Grantsville district lack the private resources that the Belvedere families have to supplement their public school education. As one of the school administrators we interviewed noted, the children served in this district lack basic supplies from home: "They'll come without a book, without a notebook, without paper, without pencils... our children are coming with less and less."

Another educator at the elementary school we studied in Grantsville explained, by the early 2000s, the number of Latino students – most of whom are recent immigrants from Central America -- had surpassed the number of black students at the school. This trend, which is not unique to Grantsville but is seen in many less affluent districts on Long Island, was on-going when we visited in the fall of 2008, as more Latino students were pouring into the district and the number of African American students continued to decline. Furthermore, given the recent immigrant status of these many of these students, the educators noted that they were even more disadvantaged than the black students they were replacing in the school. As one school administrator noted:

Okay, and many of the students come lacking skills. Some are new to the country, without having had any school experience. There are others who may have had school experience but are limited in their



understanding of English. We have a situation where many of the Hispanic students, their attendance fluctuates because they're going back and forth to their home countries. And that definitely interferes with the educational process.

The district and school officials in Grantsville describe many of these families as "transient," and note that between mid-July and mid-September each year, they have hundreds of families that are new to the district lined up outside the central office to enroll their children. Most of these families, one official noted, do not stay more than a year or two. He noted, "I mean, the enrollment issues are of serious concern because they come and go so much."

The lack of "home advantage" that the Grantsville students bring with them to school each day is shocking in comparison to students with far more advantages in other school districts. The key point that educators here keep honing in on are the little things that can have a big impact on students' school success. According to one administrator: "And when your parents have not spoken to you because they're working two jobs, when you have not had somebody read a book to you, learn the alphabet, you know, they're coming to first grade and some of our children, who are bilingual particularly, still need to learn the alphabet."

In the more working-class district of Lakewood, which, as we noted, encompasses several immigrant enclaves, a school board member commented on the many challenges recent immigrant families face and how their circumstances prevent the parents from being involved in their children's public schools. She noted:

...folks who are new immigrants oftentimes are usually at a point where they're getting themselves settled and having to become acclimated to the new society and so they're often working and burdened with other kinds of things that are priorities... They're also coming from situations where you just picked your child up and you sent them to school and the school did what it had to do...

Still, this is not to say that districts like Grantsville and Lakeview are completely lacking in private resources. The problem is that the private resources that are available have far less flexibility and are far less comprehensive than those in the supporting the Belvedere students. Still, in Grantsville, in particular, the district has somewhat compensated for the families' lack of resources by garnering partnerships with local businesses and non-profit organizations. These partnership programs bring additional, private resources and opportunities to the district but they are piecemeal in terms of their ability to address the needs of the Grantsville students and therefore they do not make up for the lack of public funding. Furthermore, unlike the extra private resources that affluent Belvedere parents provide for their schools, the private partnership funds that Grantsville receives often come with strings attached, requiring a great deal of work on the part of the staff to maintain, and are often as much about meeting the needs of the partnering organization as they are about helping the students.

For instance, one such partnership in the Grantsville elementary school we studied is with a local bank. The program is a social-studies based curriculum called Junior Achievement in which a bank employee comes to the school for an hour and a half a week for 10 weeks to teach social studies. According to the school principal, as part of their participation in this program, the 1<sup>st</sup> graders were coloring in a book titled Our Community Partners featuring the local bank while the 5<sup>th</sup> graders were learning about marketing and finance. While the educators said such programs

are somewhat helpful, the partnerships do not really evolve around the needs of the students as much as they focus on the particular skills and knowledge of the partnering organization.

There are other programs with local non-profits and universities that seemed a bit broader than this one with the bank, but the benefits from such programs were still piecemeal and sometimes completely due to luck. For instance, one of the local university's teacher education program has a fast track master's degree in which the graduate students take their teaching methods course at this elementary school and then work in the classrooms, side by side with their supervising teacher. Out of that program, the principal noted, you never know what will happen. "Last year, one of the [university] students was very entrenched in her classroom. Her father owns a big plumbing company so they adopted our school, and they gave for Christmas a laptop computer, a childlike laptop, to every child in the school."

While such donations are greatly appreciated, they are completely serendipitous and cannot be counted on as the Belvedere high school principal's discretionary fund from which he can purchase air guns and blimps because his school already has ample resources and technology.

Other private resources for Grantsville come from the educators themselves. In fact, he learned of several examples of a staff member of the elementary school we studied taking money out of his or her own pocket to spend on the students. For instance, there is the school nurse who, according to her principal, buys nice clothes – pants, shirts, shoes, dresses and jackets – for the students to wear when they are going to be in any kind of school performance. "They need to feel good, and she'll dress them, she'll outfit them," the principal said.

And then there is one of the teachers at this school who will pay nearly \$2,000 out of her own pocket for her students to spend the night at the Museum of Natural History in New York City. Such generous donations on the part of the school staff are meaningful and important for the children in this high poverty school. They cannot, however, make up for what these Grantsville students are *not* getting from their district, school, parents and/or local community.

### **Public Funds but for Private Schools**

And then there is a third category of the relationship between educational opportunities and resources on Long Island. This third category applies to those districts where ample resources are generated through the local tax base and state funding formula, but a significant percentage of that funding does not get to the students in the public schools. Under New York State law, public school districts are obligated to pay for certain services/supplies for private school students who live within their boundaries. These services and supplies include transportation to private schools within 15 miles; textbooks; special education services; and other supplemental services provided in public schools by nurses, social workers, and school psychologists. In two of the five school districts we are studying, the private school enrollment rates are quite high, and the provision of these services places a serious financial burden on the public school district. This amounts to another form of public-private resource co-mingling, as more and more public funds are being used to support private schools, often at the expense of the public school students, the majority of whom are more socio-economically disadvantaged than their private school counterparts.

The district from our study that is most profoundly affected by these provisions is the Leesburg Union School District, which, as we noted, has the highest per pupil public funding -- \$25,000 -- of the five school districts. In fact, this funding level is one of the highest on Long

Island. Yet, as we also noted, because of the political and social situation in Leesburg, with a school board consisting mostly of members whose children attend private schools, much of this public funding is spent on private school students – a different form of co-mingling public and private resources. Because of the demographics of Leesburg, with a much higher percentage of poor students and students of color in the public schools and mostly white, affluent students in the private schools, this diversion of public funds toward private school students is even more troubling. This is especially problematic when it means the public schools lack critical resources and support for students, as we have heard from students, educators and parents is the case in Leesburg.

According to data from the 2000 Census, 36 percent of households with children in Leesburg are enrolling at least one of their children in a private school. Based on our 2008 interviews there, we expect that the 2010 Census will show an even higher percentage of children in private schools. Meanwhile, the Leesburg school board is paying for private school students' transportation to more than 100 private schools, at a cost of almost \$10 million a year. In addition to the transportation expense, the district pays for the private school students' textbooks and other services, especially special education, for a total estimated cost of about \$20 million a year. This private school budget has grown over the years, becoming a larger part of the total Leesburg district budget, which is about \$85 million a year. In fact, the superintendent noted that when you look at the relatively high (even by Long Island standard) per-pupil expenditure for the district, it stands out, even in comparison with other more affluent Long Island districts. Yet he said that number is calculated strictly by dividing the entire budget by the public school enrollment, with "no accounting for the fact that about fifteen to twenty million... [goes to] services for non-public school kids."

This means that when recalculated, the per pupil expenditure for students enrolled in the public schools, based on the total school district budget of \$85 million minus the \$20 million spent on private school students, comes to about \$19,000, which is lower than most Long Island K-12 districts. At the same time, the Leesburg public school population has become predominantly non-white – a mix of mostly black and Latino with some Asian -- and increasingly poor, even though the district residential population remains predominantly white and affluent. Thus, most of the public funding for private school students is going to support the education of more affluent white students and their families. This is yet another example of people with more resources – those who can afford private schools to begin with – getting more, while the mostly low-income students of color in the public schools students left behind have less.

The resources and support services that the people working in and attending the Leesburg public schools miss the most include computers and other forms of technology, department chairs and sufficient guidance counselors, more course offerings and smaller classes, transportation for after-school programs and activities, and general facility upkeep. As one of the teachers at the high school explained, the school board cut the budget for department chairs, which she saw as detrimental to the functioning of the high school. She explained that the school board would not allocate the necessary resources – about \$400,000 – for the department chairs: "I mean, yes, it was a lot of money, but that was a lot of money well spent."

Students and educators also complain about the lack of guidance counselors and how difficult it is to reach and work with the counselors who are there. According to one student, the counselors at the school are inexperienced and never there when the students need them:

“They’re lacking, slack, slack, slacking... They don’t do nothing. Then every time you wanna go to them and tell them something, they ain’t here.”

The assistant principal of the high school and other administrators noted that as the total student population declined in Leesburg, programs needed to be cut and while teachers had not yet been laid off, when they have retired or left the district, they were not replaced. The result is fewer course offerings and larger class sizes. Thus, this high school, which was once seen as one of the premier schools in the area and a gateway to the top colleges and universities in the country, has had its curriculum scaled back. According to the assistant principal, “We’re offering as many AP courses as possible, but each year, the threat of not having money for the next year... I worry, especially for next year, what’s coming down the pike.”

In terms of the facilities, we heard many complaints from students and faculty at Leesburg High School about the need for capital improvements and general upgrade of the buildings. The state of disrepair in the Leesburg schools sent a message to the students about how much they are valued. As one African American student noted, the high school is located near a swamp and there is no air conditioning in the school, except in the computer labs and the special education department. This student noted that when it is hot outside, the swamp stinks. “[Y]ou just notice like ceiling tiles are missing, there’s like sometimes like floods from when it rains a lot, and then there’s just missing ceiling tile, like water will drip from there... I want to see like more computers, more like options for courses to take.”

This student, and others we interviewed, understood about the politics of the Leesburg school district and how the school board is dominated by people whose own children do not attend the public schools. As the student above noted:

...their kids don’t go to school here. They are in private school. They run the Board to make the tax cheaper for them because they’re like, Why am I paying so much taxes? My children don’t even go to school here... that affects the school a lot because there’s a lot of things that are being cut like every year, there’s so many things being cut, and when you ask why, the first thing is budget, budget.

In contrast to Belvedere High School’s two AstroTurf fields, Leesburg High School is still waiting for one turf field, which was reportedly promised to them by the school board years ago. According to a teacher at the high school who follows the politics of the school board:

...it would have actually been very nice if they put in the turf football field that has been promised. Now would it be a good thing to spend money on other things and different things than a turf football field? Maybe yes, maybe no. But they said they were putting in the field, the money was allotted. Where’d it go? We don’t have tennis courts... I believe we are getting a—we’re finally going to get a new ceiling for the auditorium. You know, there’s all sorts of infrastructure stuff in this building that have been neglected forever...

In fact, the politics of the school budget in Leesburg is intense, with accusations of fiscal malfeasance – or, at the very least, malicious intent -- on the part of the Board. The common perception is that the publicly elected school board does not have the public schools’ best interest at heart. As the assistant principal of Leesburg High School noted, “on the surface, it looks like the school board is just motivated to trim the budget as much as possible without really considering

how it's going to affect the kids -- and really how it's going to affect their community long-term. It's definitely going to change the face of their community."

In the school board's defense, board members cite the district's new technology as evidence that they invest in the public schools. According to one board member, he brought in close to \$1 million in state grants and another \$200,000 or \$300,000 in county grants for technology. With that funding, he said the district bought 60 Smart Boards and planned to install wireless internet access into all the schools. He said he was looking into another grant to give all the high school students laptop computers without raising taxes.

Despite this argument put forth by the board member, the Leesburg High School teachers complain about the lack of new and reliable technology at the school. One teacher noted that, yes, the district bought smart boards, but they were cheaply made and falling apart even when they were new. According to a science teacher, "I just think in general, the technology's terrible. Like we have a beautiful computer lab upstairs with Mac computers for computer graphics. But you go to the other computer labs, they're constantly breaking, they're antiquated."

This teacher noted that within the last year new computers were put in every classroom but prior to that, the teachers' computers were from the early 1990s. This science teacher also noted that the science equipment is also antiquated: "I mean, my classroom is not even really set up like a science room."

Ticking off a list of all the things he thinks the Leesburg High School needs, the principal cited more technology, capital improvements, and enhanced transportation services. In fact, one of the greatest ironies about the use of public funds for private schools in this district is the issue of transportation. Because of budget cutbacks, the public schools are not able to run any late buses for students who stay after school for a sport or other activity. As the principal laments, if students want to do something after school, "either somebody's going to pick you up or you're going to walk home."

Yet at the same time that the district has cut back on transportation services for their public school students, the school board is footing the nearly \$10 million bill to transport private school students to more than 100 private schools, many of which are located outside the district. These decisions made by the Leesburg Board of Education are, as far as we can tell, legal, given New York State's law on public funds for private schools. And the board members themselves justify their choices and note that their goal is to close the black-white and Latino-white achievement gaps in the district in part by not letting the white public school parents have their say all the time.

In fact, the several board members we interviewed accuse the white public school parents and the Leesburg teachers' union of not having the best interest of the black and Latino students in mind. There is probably some truth to that, given how the political dynamics of racially diverse school often play out around issues of tracking and access to the most challenging classes, best teachers etc., with white student generally getting more (see Wells and Serna, 1996).

Still, as fewer and fewer of those white parents remain in the public system the question becomes who will stand up to the board and question some of the decisions they make in terms of allocating funds to the private schools. In the past, it has been the almost all-white PTA that has fought back against some of the board's decisions about the budgets. More often than not, the PTA loses and the Board wins, but the parents have had some victories, and they have managed to remain a thorn in the side of an elected body that some say only represents a portion of its

constituency. Many people we interviewed who are familiar with the politics of the district noted that the black and Latino parents tend to be far less involved and more politically disenfranchised within the Leesburg public schools, particularly when it comes to fighting for their children's access to high quality education and greater resources.

Educators at the high school see this relationship between the demographics of the public schools and the shifting role of parents in the system. As one of the high school guidance counselors noted, there are many parents in the district who just don't know what questions to ask -- whether it's about course scheduling or college:

So if a student, for example, is recommended to be in an Honors level class, but that student really should be in an AP level class, you know, there's some parents that don't know that they can call and fight for that because they don't know what that lingo means, they don't know the details, they don't know that it can change. Whereas other parents, where a child doesn't deserve to be there, and the parent will fight, fight, fight, and they're too vocal.

Parents who are, on the other hand, new to the country, have multiple jobs, and speak very little English will not be the ones demanding that the high school keep all of its AP courses, this counselor notes. Nor will they necessarily be the parents in the community to mobilize an opposition to the school board's decisions about using public funds for private schools. As one PTA member noted when talking about school board elections and the dynamic that allows the private school parents to get elected and dominate the board, "So you're dealing with a [Hispanic] population that's unable to vote, or doesn't understand to vote, or is afraid to vote, and we don't have the numbers, we don't have the power, and we can't generate the excitement and interest either."

A graduate from Leesburg High School in the 1970s who has been a teacher there since the late 1980s talked about the demographic changes in the district over the years and impact they have had on the public schools -- politically and educationally. He said quite succinctly:

...a lot of kids--so their families are--come from other countries, they're not voting, you know, so they're here. So you're not getting that same voice again. You're not having the same groups voting. So you're having outside sources in the private schools voting for what's happening to our public schools. So it's a scary thing [laughs].

Thus, it is clear that the co-mingling of public and private resources and interests is a central theme that plays out in different and often highly complicated ways across contexts. And this subtheme of the use of public funds for private -- and privately managed -- schools is also salient in Grantsville, the district serving the poorest students, as we discussed above. Here, the board of education is also paying to transport large numbers of students to private schools, even as the district has had to dramatically cut back on transportation funds for the public school students. According the Grantsville district's director of transportation, while the school district can no longer afford to transport public school students to school, it is required by law to transport between 1,100 and 900 private school students each day. And while the Grantsville Public Schools are less than 1 percent white, at least 25 percent of the students this district transports to private schools are white, and most of them are more affluent than their public school peers.

Furthermore, according to the district official who is in charge of purchasing supplies and services for private school students, even though many public school students have to make do with outdated and antiquated textbooks – or no new workbooks as we discussed above -- the district is obligated under state law to order new books for the private school students. “We pay for the books because they are [district name], they are a [district] resident, so the [district] is obligated to pay for their books and their transportation...You know, whatever they decide to use, we’re paying for it.”

This same district official has a 3<sup>rd</sup> grader in a Grantsville public school, and she said that he brought home a math book that was “totally, totally raggedy.” She noted that the book was so old and in such bad shape that it disgusted her. She said she was going to a school board meeting to demand that the board buy the teacher “some books and some decent material to teach my kids.” Meanwhile, the private school students are getting new books each year.

The other threats to Grantsville’s public school resources are the pending proposals for several new charter schools in the district. If these proposals are approved there is a concern among the public school educators in the district that these new privately managed schools will be yet another drain on resources for the public schools. Yet, given what we write below about issues of accountability in the Grantsville school district central office, this diversion of public funds to privately managed schools may not be all bad. On the other hand, to the extent that this means even fewer resources, supplies and programs getting to the schools and classrooms, this is problematic. In this way, the public-private funding nexus tends to pull poor and struggling schools down further in a vicious cycle of school failure and student and resource loss that is hard to escape.

### **Conclusion to Finding #1**

The central point of this first theme to emerge from our data was to illustrate the multiple ways in which information on public school expenditures and finances are complicated and commingled with the broader context of the public schools. In some instances the private resources are in place to supplement and even supplant the public funds to help students succeed academically. In other situations, those resources are not there and students suffer not just from a lack of adequate public funds, but also a missing safety net to catch them and sustain them when they fall. And still, in other contexts, there are ample public funds generated to support public schools, but those with greater political power use much of this funding to support their private interests. Perhaps the worse case scenario is when public funds in districts that do not have ample or adequate support are siphoned off to support private interests.

The boundary lines that define these separate and unequal school districts do not just circumscribe the poverty and wealth of schools in terms of public revenue generation, they also divide people according to private resources that supplement and sustain student learning. A closer examination of the relationship between these public and private resources helps us understand the harms of racial and socio-economic segregation not only in terms of the negative effects of concentrated poverty and disadvantage for students of color, but also in terms of the impact of concentrated privilege on students in affluent and predominantly white school districts – and, perhaps most importantly, the distinction between the two.

All of these forces push back against efforts to shift the terrain, to move the school district boundary lines that contain the privilege or lack thereof, or to allow individuals to more easily

cross those lines. The sometimes subtle and insidious ways in which private resources supplement and even supplant the public funds that are more clearly documented in the quantitative data help bolster resistance to changing school district boundaries in fragmented contexts such as Long Island because they inadvertently define who is “good” and who is not, who people of privilege want to associate with and who deserves access to resources – both public and private.

### Finding #2: The Educational Impact of Separate and Unequal Public and Private Resources

If the story of public and private resource inequalities across school district boundaries – and the ways in which the two are intertwined -- ended with blimps and t-shirt-firing air guns, it might not matter so much, but we have powerful evidence that these differences strongly affect students’ access to high-quality curriculum and educational opportunities. *Not only do they affect these tangible curricular factors, but they also profoundly influence how students make sense of who they are and what their academic identity and potential are and will be in the future.*

In this section of the report we describe the tightly intertwined and iterative relationship between the different levels of curriculum offered across district boundaries and varied academic identities of the students who encounter these unequal academic experiences on a daily basis. This relationship speaks to the influence of both public and private resources – tangible and intangible -- in these different contexts and how they are translated into differentiated curriculum across district boundary lines. We argue that these educational distinctions are significant at any moment in time. However, if we consider their cumulative impact across students’ K-12 education – the educational debt that is accrued over time (Ladson-Billings, 2006) – these distinctions are frightening.

#### **Differentiated Curricula and Academic Identities Across District Lines**

The popular term “differentiated curriculum” in the field of education is generally used to describe a process whereby teachers try to meet the individual needs, skill levels, and learning styles of different students within their classrooms. We are using the term here in a pejorative way to illustrate a serious consequence of the structural inequality we discussed above. What we learned in these school districts and talking to educators and students is that despite the New York state standards, state exams and state-wide definition of “proficiency” under the federal No Child Left Behind law, there is very little consistency across these five districts in the quality of education students are receiving. *The discrepancies have less to do with state mandates, however, than they have to do with local inequalities and the way they are reflected in the educational support systems available to students, educators’ expectations of the students, students’ sense of their academic identity, and the communities’ understanding of their educational rights. Each of these is, in turn, related to the affluence, or lack thereof, of the constituents across these contexts.*

For instance, we learned that in the affluent district of Belvedere, students are challenged and pushed by their parents and peers in particular to achieve to extremely high levels – well above the state standards, which are more of an aside than a set of benchmarks. In contrast, in the poorer districts of Lakewood and Grantsville, this intense academic press is lacking to say the least and the state mandates are the ceiling and not the floor. Meanwhile, the story of curriculum differentiation in Leesburg and Clearview is more complicated, with the upper track classes of these two racially and socio-economically diverse school districts looking more like Belvedere’s



classes and the lower-track looking more like classes in Lakewood and Grantsville. This phenomenon relates to the race/ethnicity and socio-economic status of the students within the districts and tracks and the ways in which the adults in their lives come to define them.

### *State Mandates as the Maximum in Less Privileged Contexts*

In the two school districts in our study serving the poorest students – Lakewood and Grantsville – educators talk about curriculum and instruction as driven by the state mandates, which for many students are the hurdle they strive to clear. From the perspective of educators, absent the kind of parental pressure that is central to the experience of educators working in more affluent districts such as Belvedere and in the midst of serving students who have been mostly disadvantaged in terms of their familial wealth and privilege, meeting the state standards is the goal; exceeding the standards to the extent that they can simply be ignored, as Belvedere educators do every day, is difficult to fathom in these contexts.

The best example of this contrast comes from Lakewood, the diverse but increasingly non-white school district with a large percentage of immigrant students. In this district, which is a K-6, elementary school district, the curriculum appears to be very much dictated by the state standards and mandates.

For instance, the principal of the Lakewood elementary school we studied talked about the themes that he asks the teachers to cover on a monthly basis to stay on schedule for the state benchmarks and tests. His goal is to get the teachers to cover certain skills at certain points in the year. This means that the stories that students read and the skills that must be covered in the process of reading those stories are dictated by the state and the district. Within that, the principal noted, teachers are “free to teach it how you need to teach it.” The principal pointed to the outline of the curriculum punctuated by the state’s benchmarks and assessments: “These are the assessments and the different benchmarks, you can see how it flows... It gives you everything that you need, overview—this is math—and then you make it work as the classroom teacher, you make it come alive.”

Lakewood students take practice exams for the state tests and then the teachers sit down with the principal to go over the scores on those tests and plan curriculum accordingly. Based on the practice tests, the educators conduct an “item skills analysis” by examining which topics the children may be struggling with, and, according to the principal, we zoom in on those topics to make sure that we’re focusing on it as a team.

The resource room in the school is then geared toward helping students develop specific skills that they are lacking according to the state tests. According to the educators in the school, they do a lot of “tiered assignments so that the children receive the proper amount of scaffolding for each topic that’s taught.”

But as the principal notes, doing the tiered assignments geared toward the needs of each student can be particularly challenging for more novice teachers, which are the only teachers Lakewood tends to attract. According to the principal: “It’s challenging because, especially we have a lot of new teachers, so it’s easy for me to say small groups, but when you’re working with a small group, what’s the rest of the class doing? As a new teacher, that’s a challenge.”

He also commented that the school is trying to move away from giving students too much test prep “busy work,” and meeting the students where they need to be met. For instance, when the educators at his school selected a reading series for their “community read” program in which

everyone in the school reads the same book, “it’s all based on violence prevention; all those stories are based on violence prevention. So we try to really deepen the curriculum for them, and we try to give them just different perspectives on life, and those are great books and the kids love it.”

This example of meeting the students where they need to be met in Lakewood is in stark contrast to what the educators in Belvedere see as appropriate for the needs of their students. There, the chair of the art department puts on a fashion show every year that allows students in her fashion design class to display their creations while drawing in students who have no interest in fashion to be models, set designers, etc. Each show has a theme – e.g. the Italian Renaissance or modern French designs – something that integrates and enhances the curriculum of the art department as well as many other departments in the school and provides students with a form of high-status cultural capital that is not represented on the state test. The state tests in the Belvedere district, by the way, are mere blips on the radar screen in the race for admissions to the best college and universities. There was virtually no discussion of them as salient to the work of educators in that district. They must, like every other district in the state, administer the mandated tests, but there is nothing high stakes about them. Designing fashion or scenery for a major fashion show instead of reading books on violence prevention helps Belvedere students move closer that ultimate goal.

#### *The Academic Identity of Lower-Income and Lower-Achieving Students of Color*

While this curriculum differentiation is pronounced across the district boundary lines of Lakewood and Belvedere, within the boundaries of more diverse school districts such as Clearview, similar differences exist across a single hallway as we discuss in more detail below. But what is most interesting to note here is that the lack of an academic press or high-status curriculum for lower-income students of color is often intertwined with students’ lack of confidence in their ability to tackle more challenging work.

While we do not have student interview data from the two elementary schools we studied in Lakewood and Grantsville, we do know from our interviews with middle school students of color in Clearview a bit of how they make sense of the fact that the curriculum is differentiated across classrooms that also divide students by race and social class.

For instance, we interviewed a low-track, African American middle school student in Clearview who opted not to move up to high level classes when she was given the opportunity to do so. She recalled: “my mother said she doesn’t think it’s right for me to go to Honors because she doesn’t want me to fail that. She said it was better for me to pass Regents instead of flunking out of school I guess.”

This student’s middle school principal is a white woman who is on a mission to break down the rigid barriers – physical, social and emotional – between the honors and regular tracks in her racially and ethnically diverse school (see discussion of this below in Finding #6). She noted that her greatest challenge is “helping our youngsters who have historically not been successful, but have the ability. There’s a discrepancy between their ability and their performance. Especially a lot of our students who are African American and Latino, I think helping them reach their potential is a big challenge.”

This principal spoke of her efforts to get more African American parents involved in the school, which has a white student population of about 65 percent and an almost all-white PTA.

She noted that black and Latino parents feel uncomfortable at the school, voicing their opinions and that they lack information about the long-term consequences of low- versus high-track classes in middle school. All of this, she noted, shapes students' sense of which classes they belong in and the kind of students they are.

### *The Academic Press of Affluent Parents, Schools and Classroom*

In sharp contrast to the Lakewood example, in Belvedere, the state assessments are almost superfluous. In this context of more concentrated privilege students, educators and parents talk about how hard the students there are pushed to succeed far beyond state mandates. In this way, the students, parents and educators tend to internalize and even embody the distinctions across the boundaries of Long Island school districts. Thus, the degree of privilege that students in the Belvedere district assume – and how it becomes their “common sense” -- is quite remarkable but not completely surprising.

Virtually everyone we interviewed in Belvedere, including the parents themselves, attribute much of the pressure the students feel to succeed in school to their parents' anxiety. In fact, the students and educators marvel at the degree to which the parents – advertently or inadvertently – influence their children's engagement in the educational process and their “academic identity.” They note that the parents play a central role in fostering a school environment described as an “academic pressure cooker.” As one of the seniors we interviewed at Belvedere High School explained it, “There's more to lose when you go to a prestigious school like Belvedere and like you have very successful parents and it's like you want to live up to expectations both from your parents and yourself...”

The Belvedere High School social worker said that for about 20 percent of the students, the anxiety of trying to live up to their parents' expectations is the main issue. But, he added, that most of the students are stressed because stress is bred in an environment of concentrated financial success. He explains it this way:

In this community where there's such a high-income lifestyle, the kids want that same lifestyle. The parents are like, ‘You need to get good grades, you need to do this.’ I mean, a lot of the parents come in in seventh grade and say, ‘Okay, when can my child start AP classes?’ Advanced placement in seventh grade! Or three years before you even get to high school, you know?

The social worker and many of the counselors and educators at Belvedere noted that it is not unusual for students to take four and five AP classes at one time or spend four, five and six hours a night on homework. It is not unusual, furthermore, for students to arrive in the morning drinking coffee and reporting that they were up until three a.m. doing homework. They hear of many students who drink the caffeinated soda, Red Bull, which is banned in the school, for breakfast. These students are reported “wired” through fourth period, but comatose by fifth period.

The social worker said that he has tried to organize a stress management support group for students, but that they do not attend because they are too busy doing homework, sports and clubs – e.g. things Belvedere students know they need on their resumes for their college applications. According to the social worker, who sees the fallout of much of this stress because of his role in the schools, “To me, it's way too much, it's just over the top. High school is supposed to

be fun, you know? Have fun, joke around, laugh, giggle... [it's] that home influence of academic pursuit—be a doctor, be a lawyer, be a CEO—[that] drives that, you know.”

The familial influence on students and their intense drive for academic success is echoed in the voices of the senior boys we interviewed at Belvedere High School. Looking back on their fast-paced, high-stress high school careers and reflecting on why they did what they did, these boys commented on their sense of academic identity within the context of a very successful community and how that has shaped their life goals. This sense of success and the subconscious appears to be particularly acute with the male students who talk about it in terms of their fathers and thus, their destiny as the future family bread winners. The prevalence of stay-at-home mothers in this community fuels students’ more gendered way of thinking about their futures. As another, particularly high-achieving male student noted, when your father is very rich, “you think, oh I’m going to be just like my dad. I’m going to do the things my father did and try to be just as great and successful as my father.”

All totaled, the pressure Belvedere parents place on their children leads to an understanding of high school as a “means to an end” on the part of many students. As one senior explained his decision to take the hardest classes in high school:

...if it was up to me, I’d be in all regular classes and do as little work as possible. But basically, like my parents force me into everything... basically just for college prep and stuff like that. I mean, I really don’t think in high school like I don’t really care what we’re learning here, but most of it’s just so I can get into a good college.

In response to both the pressure from the parents and the academic success of the students, Belvedere school officials have added more Advanced Placement courses in recent years. In fact, one of the assistant principals noted that in less than 10 years – from the early 1990s to the early 2000s – Belvedere High School doubled the number of A.P. courses offered to 27. Such responses to the pressures and demands of parents perpetuate the distinctions between Belvedere and the other districts we studied where the state mandates are more of the ceiling and not the floor.

While most, if not all, families in the Belvedere district push their children to achieve academically, many of the educators note the difference between the “old” Belvedere families – mostly “old money” or “blueblood” affluent Long Island families – and the so-called “nouveau riche” – families with parents who may well have grown up middle- or upper-middle-class but who are now extremely affluent because they were in the right place at the right time in the 1990s and 00s when the economy disproportionately rewarded those in the top 5 to 10 percent of the income distribution (Piketty and Saez, 2007).

Belvedere, in part because of its reputation for having excellent public schools, has been a magnet for families in the second category. An influx of such families has led to a sharp increase in student enrollment in the district, causing many changes in what was once a very intimate and tight-knit community. But the change that the educators note most clearly as a result of the growing number of “new rich” is the increase in the academic press and anxiety about school achievement and getting into the “right” (read highly competitive) college. Some argue that because the “new rich” parents had to work for their money – that they did not simply inherit wealth amassed over several generations – they feel their financial situations and thus their children’s inheritance is far more precarious. Thus, they push their children harder to succeed in

school and win the college application game, even if they were not highly successful students themselves.

For instance, according to the Belvedere High School principal, because these nouveau riche parents grew up mostly in middle-class families and then became very successful financially as adults, their financial footing is more precarious. As a result, they often have a greater “fear of falling” from their affluent perches and thus make more demands on the public schools to provide a challenging curriculum that gives their children a leg up when applying for college. Similarly, one of Belvedere High School’s assistant principals noted that even though some of these parents may not have been successful in school themselves, they expect their children to enroll and succeed in all of the most advanced classes. “And the expectations are that the children will succeed, and you will succeed if you go to the right college... And the colleges have become much more competitive than they were, and each year they get more competitive, so it’s hard.”

The push on the part of parents for their children to do well is not unique to the affluent parents of the Belvedere school district. In fact, in the two most racially/ethnically and socio-economically diverse school districts we studied – Leesburg and Clearview – the more affluent and well educated parents, who were mostly white, did the same thing. The difference is that in those contexts, such parents were distinct from other less involved, less vocal parents. In Leesburg, for instance, which we have already described as unstable and experiencing white flight from the public schools, the higher income white parents who still have children in public schools were said to be vocal and demanding – of their children and the school. As a Leesburg High School teacher explained, these parents expect their children to get 100 percent on every assignment. If the students receive a 99 percent, the parents want to know what they could have done to get a higher score. She said she hears this from the teachers of the high-track classes in the school all the time, whereas the parents of the lower-track students, who are mostly black and Latino and much less affluent, are excited if their children pass. “You have a whole different kind of thing.”

Meanwhile, in Clearview, which is also extremely diverse in terms of race/ethnicity and social class, the more affluent parents push to maintain a rigid tracking system in the middle school (see Finding #4 below) because they believe that their children must be taking more competitive classes beginning in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. These parents also dominate the PTA and have the political clout to strongly influence the school board elections. Thus, their demands too often dictate school district policies. Thus, while several of the educators at Clearview’s middle school, including the principal, want to dismantle some of the most rigid tracking practices, they recognize the challenges to such reform. According to one of the middle school educators: “convincing those parents that the best thing for their child is not to be trapped [in all honors classes] in sixth grade is really the most difficult part.”

It is clear, therefore, that Belvedere parents are not unique among affluent, white parents in terms of their expectations and the demands they place on their children and their educators. But what makes Belvedere unique among the districts that we studied is the concentration of such parents in one school district, creating a sort of pressure cooker environment – or academic identity -- for their children in which the academic “floor” for the high school is higher than the ceiling in most public high schools and the fear of falling through that floor is great.

#### *Academic Identity in the Pressure Cooker: Grade Grubbing and High Anxiety*

Many of the Belvedere educators, and even the students themselves, note that all of this parental pressure filters through the student body and creates a social milieu in which *not* being stressed out is weird. As one educator at the high school noted, even though the Belvedere students' academic outcomes are impressive, the price that is paid for them is quite high. "I think it affects them in a lot of ways. You know, in making friendships... in proper diet."

The Belvedere students also talk a great deal about their shared stress levels and how they get used to it and adapt to it as they progress through the school. As one senior explained, most Belvedere students feel intense pressure to succeed academically, and "it takes awhile to get used to it... once you get used to it, then, you know it's just a part of everyday life... "

Echoing this sentiment of getting "used to it" and developing an academic identity around the pressure, one of the Belvedere teachers described the students' view of their high-pressure lives as "this is my life, and this is what's expected, and this is what my parents expect and this is what all my friends do, and this is what I do."

As one of the students explained, "I feel like there's a lot of pressure, especially in our school district because we have a lot of strong kids so kind of the pressure feeds off other people. So, if everybody else is so driven you're kind of forced to be driven also. And if everyone else is doing well and you're not doing well then you have to pick it up, so that's why I feel our school district is pretty strong."

Thus, as the Belvedere students talk about taking so many AP classes and staying up all night to write papers and prepare for exams, they note that they were not the only ones who did this – that it is the norm there; part of their academic identity. They also add that it is not looked down upon in Belvedere to do well in school, as they believe it is in other schools. Thus, part of the students' academic identity is that they attend a school that is so much more difficult than other schools and that they deserve this advantage because they value it more – in part because their parents demand they value it more and in part because they are all good students. As one Belvedere student who commented on how hard the students in this district work noted, "even the regular classes here I bet are harder than regular classes in other schools in comparison."

For Belvedere students, part of this identity appears to be assuring that your grade point average remains high even if you don't do well on an assignment the first time. Many of the teachers note how the Belvedere students cannot accept a B or often even an A-minus on an assignment. In fact, often times if they receive less than an A they will beg to redo the assignment. This process of "grade grubbing" among Belvedere students was mentioned by most of the teachers we interviewed. One of the high school's English teachers gave an example of a student who started crying when she received an A-minus on an assignment.

But she wanted the A. And you know, not to put the child down, I mean she's thinking, you know, I'm competing, I want to go to an Ivy League school, and I need A's. I don't need B pluses, and that was an A minus, and she was distraught over an A minus. You'll see it with the parents, too, you know? And it's crazy to me when kids will be upset because they have a B or a B plus. It's like you should be praised and you should be proud of yourself, but not in Belvedere. Everybody wants A's. (laughs)

The teachers worry that this form of grade grubbing is emblematic of a situation in which both students and parents are far more concerned with grades than they are about the learning

process. This sentiment was echoed by one of the students at Belvedere who noted that a lot of the students think that high school is “all about going to college.” He said: “That’s what High School is, and a lot of people don’t actually study, they just study like—they memorize for one test and don’t actually learn...”

This idea of “going through the motions” to get into the right college does not only affect what classes students take or what grade they get. There is also a sense that much of their extra-curricular activities – sports and clubs, etc. – are also about resume building. This results in students who are not only extremely overbooked but also stressed about what “fun” activities they are participating in – wondering if they will look good on their resumes.

As one of the counselors in the school noted, Belvedere students know what a resume is by 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade, and they are already working to develop theirs by joining the right clubs and teams at the schools. She noted: “I’ve had kids come into the office and said, Mrs. \_\_\_\_, if I join this club, will it look good on my resume? I’m like, I didn’t even know what a resume was in seventh grade, you know... I mean, the question is, is it going to look good? And I’m like, Are you going to like it? I mean, will you enjoy that club, you know? So it’s interesting.”

The students will admit that much of their over-booked extra-curricular schedule is, like so much of their time in high school, about that “means to an end” with the end being the college acceptance letter. As one student explained, “Like, you see kids that are like into the clubs, but then you also see kids that you need it for college um, which is stupid. But you do, colleges look for that. Um, which I think is stupid because anyone can go to a club and sit there for whatever...”

Despite their stressed-out lifestyles, Belvedere students win accolades from their teachers for being well-behaved and “good” kids. Thus, despite the Red Bull consumption and grade grubbing, another dimension of the Belvedere students’ academic identity is that, according to their educators, they are seen as model citizens who behave like most parents would want their children to behave. In an odd twist, this concentration of exemplary students with high college acceptance rates somehow helps to legitimize their stressed out academic identity – it’s part of what they have to do to remain “good.”

## **Conclusion to Finding #2**

*This relationship between students’ academic identities and the curriculum offered them in their schools (or their tracks/classes within schools), as well as the social milieu in which they grow up – e.g. the high pressure atmosphere of Belvedere or the less-involved communities of color in a diverse district such as Clearview – all shape their sense of themselves as students and their possibilities for the future. They, in turn, are likely to internalize this sense of where they “fit in” in a manner that can profoundly shape their future decisions.*

What these data suggest is that the curricular and educational distinctions across separate educational spaces – whether it is across school district boundaries or corridors within a single school – shape not only what the students experience but also what they come to understand they should experience.

## **Finding #3: Perceptions of “Good” Schools and Their Tangible and Intangible Consequences**

Related to the finding above about the dramatically different educational opportunities available to students across these separate school districts, this section of the report examines the

ways in which those who live and work in these distinct spaces understand the reputations of their school districts on Long Island. *Documenting how people articulate their school districts' reputations may not seem empirically or scientifically important – nothing more than people's perceptions, which may or may not be “valid” in some more concrete sense. But we argue that “intangible” factors such as districts' or schools reputations – e.g. the way in which people make sense of particular public schools versus others, whether they know much about them or not – matter a great deal in terms of people's willingness to move into or out of a particular school district as well as their resistance to changing existing boundaries. In some ways, therefore, perceptions are more powerful than “reality.”*

Furthermore, we know that a school system's reputation is not unrelated to tangible factors such as the quality of teachers (see section below on teacher recruitment), the condition of facilities, the quantity of supplies and support services, and the achievement outcomes of students. But a district's reputation is also shaped by the status of the families affiliated with the schools and their economic and political clout (or lack thereof) within the larger society. Furthermore, in a somewhat vicious cycle, the status of the population served also affects the degree of tangible resources, especially public funding, that a district or community can garner. The most visible impact of the reputation of a public school district on a local community would be the relationship between the schools and the local property values. High property values in those school districts with strong reputations serve not only to support the schools through the local tax revenues but also the residents when it is time to sell their homes.

The central point of this section, therefore, is to demonstrate the tightly intertwined relationship between many of the tangible and intangible factors that make a district or school “good” and to consider why we should not think about them separately and why each becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy for the other. Whether they articulate it fully or simply know it more intuitively, many educators on Long Island appear to be aware of this tangible-intangible connection and very sensitive to what they perceive to be their districts' and schools' reputations. They also, within each given context, have formed some degree of consensus as to what those reputations are. Meanwhile, they all seem to recognize the obvious: that these reputations are strongly correlated with the race and social class of their constituents – and the concentration of either poor people of color or wealthy people who are white or Asian – within separate and unequal spaces.

### **The Reputations of Different School Districts Across Long Island are Related to the Race of the Students Within Them**

As in the larger body of research on race and education, we found in our study of Long Island that the reputations of schools and school districts are highly correlated with the status of the students who attend them and thus the families associated with them. It is the case that these reputations are also correlated with some objective measures of “school quality” as measured in terms of mostly tangible factors, as mostly poor, black and Latino schools continually lack resources, well-prepared teachers, high-status curriculum, etc. But such bad reputations are, we suggest, more strongly correlated with the race/ethnicity and poverty rates of the students served than with an objective measures of school or district quality per se. In this way, school and district reputations can become self-fulfilling prophecies – with poorer districts unable to attract more affluent residents or more prepared educators. As a result, these ways of “knowing” school



districts, through their reputations helps to legitimize the separation and inequality across district that so many people on Long Island say is morally wrong. It is in fact a vicious cycle of bad reputations begetting bad schools and visa versa. One thing that these data on public school districts' reputations clearly underscores is the harms of racial/ethnic segregation across the disparate villages and hamlets of Long Island.

For instance, we heard from many Belvedere students, parents and educators make sense of who they are vis a vis other school districts in the area that suggest that school district reputations and their relationship to material resources and privilege help to develop the academic identities that we discussed in the prior finding. Indeed, the Belvedere students we interviewed were not shy about what they see as their district's superior reputation or in discussing the relationship between that reputation and the affluence of the community in which they are growing up. As one of the high school seniors we interviewed noted, "Yeah, like we have a reputation of having smart kids."

In rapid response to this point about the smart kids, another senior participating in this group interview noted: "Yeah that [smart kids] and money like the fact that we're going to pay a lot in college. We have a reputation of money also, so..."

Basically Belvedere is known for this combination of smart and straight-laced students and rich parents who can pay their way through college without burdening the universities of their choice with requests for financial aid. All this adds up to a school district reputation that helps pave the way for a high school-to-college transition that is as smooth and successful as possible. The students seem well aware of the value of this reputation, of its fragility, and even of the need to protect it. As one of the senior's noted when talking about some Belvedere students smoking cigarettes in public and how it was "shocking" to him because it jeopardized the high school's stellar reputation. He said, "Once you lose your reputation you're never going to get it back. And I don't think the kids here or the school here wants to lose that Belvedere reputation."

Within their understanding of the "Belvedere reputation" is nested a sense of how their privilege is perceived by others less fortunate than they. In fact, according to several people we interviewed, Belvedere students are often taunted by students from other schools for being rich, spoiled and snobby. One student recalled participating in a tennis meet at another school when the students there made fun of the Belvedere students, asking them why they didn't make their mothers buy them a Mercedes:

We were just getting jeered at and made fun of. I think like reputation-wise, we're like the rich white kids that get whatever they want from their mom, everything they want from their dad. And reality is that we do work hard. We work hard in our classes and I don't think we deserve to be called like rich, snobby kids when they don't really know us. So, that's the reputation I think on the Island.

Hard work to get good grades aside, when pressed, the Belvedere students admit that there is some truth to their reputation as rich and spoiled – at least for a critical mass of students in this affluent enclave where "a lot of parents have a lot of money." As one of the women students we interviewed noted, she does not really mind the stereotype of Belvedere students as really rich and snobby. "It's this bubble. And I don't—I take a lot of offense to that because I know that there are a ton of really rich kids in this school but the majority of the kids here aren't big

snobs. And there are average people here... [but] it's definitely a bubble. I don't think there's anyway around that."

The adults in the Belvedere district – both the educators who work for the public schools and their constituents – spoke more candidly about the connection between the district's reputation and local property values when asked about how their schools are perceived by others. As one of the district administrators noted, he immediately directed us to ask the realtors about the schools' reputation, noting that the reason why there are virtually no houses under \$1 million dollars in Belvedere has to do with the perceived quality of the schools. The real issue, he noted, is not whether families want to live there, but rather if they can afford to buy a house there.

Another district official explained that the district's reputation is excellent – that he has only worked there for two years, but has always known about Belvedere just from its reputation. "And a lot of it has to do with the wealth of the community and again the resources that are here so we can provide a great educational program."

Yet living amid such a concentration of privilege does skew the Belvedere students' perspectives, according to some of their educators who worry they are too sheltered and too fearful of going to other schools and communities, even to play sports. The underlying fear and lack of familiarity on the part of the Belvedere community when it comes to schools, districts and communities of color are illustrated in the following quote from a Belvedere basketball coach who describes taking her team of mostly white students to play a game in a poor and mostly black and Latino school district. She said she felt obligated to tell her student athletes, whenever they go into a black community, not to "stare at them like you never saw a black person in your life." But, she said that is what white kids – particularly from very isolated communities do. "Like they act like they never saw a black person before, you know... They're not inner city. They're in Long Island, you know. And their kids are great kids. They put their pants on one leg at a time, just like us, you know. We may drive a BMW, and they may drive a Ford, and it doesn't make a lick of difference."

Clearly, the Belvedere students have a different understanding of the other district's reputation and what that separate and unequal place stands for in relation to their privileged enclave. In fact, it appears that school district and school reputations are highly sensitive to these issues of safety and security that are both related to the race and sex of the students within them and changes in the larger district context. For instance, Clearview, the racially and socio-economically diverse and fairly stable district we studied, has seen its reputation change over the years – from the 1950s when it was seen as a very viable place to live and send children to the public schools, to the 1970s when its reputation took a nose dive, to more recently when it began enjoying rising popularity again. Despite the stability of its student population in terms of demographics, the downturn in the district's reputation in the 1970s, according to long-time residents we interviewed, was due to the influx of deinstitutionalized mental health patients who moved into the community at that time. Meanwhile, the recent upswing in reputation is at least partly attributable to the sharp rise in housing values there in the last decade.

But as in all these settings, housing values are often tightly connected to perceptions of the quality of the public schools, so the two generally rise together. Thus, this district, the same one that is tackling tracking and racial segregation issues within its schools, is simultaneously riding a tide of popularity while also trying to provide a better educational experience for all of its students. Outcome data on this district suggest that several of its schools are "beating the odds"

when it comes to student achievement, particularly for more disadvantaged students. In this way, this diverse and up-and-coming district is a beacon of hope, a possibility of what other district on Long Island could do and become if they had the political will. According to the assistant superintendent of curriculum at this district, “We really want to be viewed as offering a world-class education to our students – to all our students.”

Nowhere do we see the powerful relationship between race and school district reputation more clearly, however, than in the Leesburg district, which is going through rapid demographic changes as white enrollment continues to drop dramatically. Many of the Leesburg educators, particularly those who have been there a long time, all talk about how this used to be one of the top-ranked districts on Long Island. Yet as one teacher in Leesburg explained, the high school now has a bit of a “bipolar reputation” because it maintains a shrinking group of high-achieving and more affluent white students who are, for the most part, high achieving and who do well in the Intel science competition each year. But the district and high school also have a rising percentage of lower-income black and Latino students who are too often low achieving:

[It’s] very, very confused because *The New York Times* still thinks we’re one of the best schools in the United States because of Intel, and the local people around here thinks we’re a terrible school because of some of our test scores, et cetera. Because if you look at our Regents test scores without scaling them for socioeconomics, et cetera, et cetera, oh, we’re not a very good school. But if you look at Intel and you look at some—like if you look at our accomplishments, we’re still first-rate. If you look at some of our test scores, not so great.

In fact, in Leesburg, as fewer white students enroll in the public schools and more resources are siphoned off to the private and religious schools, the district’s tarnished reputation slowly becomes the cause, rationale and consequence of these on-going shifts, even though the reputation of the district shifted initially in response to the impact of the religious community moving in and not putting their children in public schools and not because of an initial change in course offering or curriculum. The current Leesburg student population is extremely diverse and socio-economically bifurcated – with some affluent white and Asians still there, but a growing poorer black and Latino population. According the principal of Leesburg High School, “We have every kind of kid here. We have every ethnic group. We have every religion. We have every socioeconomic. I have kids who have three and a half acres, horses, and tennis courts, and I have kids without electricity.”

This principal is also quick to talk about how district and school reputations change as the racial/ethnic and socio-economic demographics of the students have shifted. He said that the white population of public school students will continue to shrink in Leesburg, according to projections, and that the changing reputation will lag a bit behind those shifts, but will catch up eventually. He pondered:

You know, it takes a long time for school reputations to change, positive or negative. Just about a generation. There are a lot of schools that people think are wonderful because they were. There are a lot of schools that people think they’re struggling because they did, not because they are, you know... The reputation... of the school

and of the district, I would say, is people either know us for what we were a long time ago or know us for the change in school demographic. Very few people know the reality of the school.

The greatest problem a district like Leesburg faces is that once people perceive it to be a “bad” school district, it has a difficult time changing that external image, which will over time affect its ability to attract families and teachers and political support for the public schools. As one of the Leesburg High School teachers explained, because her school used to have higher test scores and outcome data, that people assume that the reputation of the school is now terrible. She said that she has friends who live in the districts who have children approaching school age. They ask her what they should do, and “I’m like, send them to school;” she tells them it is not a problem.

But even this teacher, who is relatively new to the Leesburg district and has not lived there through much of the change is aware of how dramatic the shift has been and how it has created a downward spiral and a self-fulfilling prophecy of a poor school district serving mostly poor children of color:

As less children come to the school, you have like really no middle-class here. So what happens is the upper-class parents that do send their kids to public schools start to get nervous, and then they pull their kids and send them to private school. So it’s like a trickle-down effect, so parents that normally wouldn’t have sent their kids to private school, I think they hear rumors, they get nervous. They wind up pulling their kids out, so you wind up with like the lower socioeconomic students in the building. It’s been like that since I’ve been here, so I don’t see a change. But I know teachers that have been here for a while see a *huge* change.

Still, what is interesting about the teachers who have been teaching in Leesburg for a while is that many of them think that the declining reputation of the schools, particularly the high school, is greatly exaggerated. Many of these teachers at Leesburg High School complain about the school board and the shrinking public school budget, but they also do not think that the school deserves the reputation it has garnered in recent years and that the students – as diverse as they are – all get along really well. As one Leesburg High School teacher explained, too many of the parents have bought into the negative hype about the school: “I’ve had parents this year say, ‘Oh my older son went here and I didn’t want to send my younger son here. But now that I’m here, it’s been a wonderful experience.’ So they just look at it from the outside. They don’t take a chance to get to know everybody and see what we’re doing, unfortunately.”

In addition, the Leesburg High School students note that the school’s increasingly negative and violent reputation is nowhere near the reality. As one African-American student noted: “Everyone thinks that we’re like a school that’s like all like ghetto and like racist and we always get into fights and stuff like that. But it’s really not like that.”

Still, to the extent that this declining reputation leads to a withdraw (or lack of enrollment to begin with) of the most affluent families in a community, and given the findings discussed above about the interplay of private and public resources and wealth, it is clear that a school district’s reputation can indeed over time become the reality, even when it is not the reality at the point in time when critical enrollment decisions are made. Nowhere is this fall from grace

and the resulting self-fulfilling prophecy more clearly illustrated than in the Grantsville School District, which, according to interviews with long-time residents, was once seen as one of the top school districts on Long Island. In fact, according to one Grantsville district administrator, this now mostly poor and increasingly Latino school district used to be the “number one district in the state” and now it is seen as one of the worst on Long Island. When asked why the reputation shifted, he said much of it had to do with the changes in the population. He added that once school test scores are reported in the paper, people think twice before buying property in that district. He also said that although the district needs more resources, the local property tax rate is very high, and he sees this relationship between the reputation of the schools and the housing market at a tight one. He said that the “price of housing goes down when people see the rating of the school district... And the taxes are high, so who’s going to buy in?”

Yet, like the educators in Leesburg, several Grantsville educators argue that the district’s bad reputation is undeserved or at least greatly exaggerated and is too tightly correlated with the race and social class of the students alone. For instance, the principal of the elementary school we studied in Grantsville noted that the perception of her school inside versus outside the district is very different, simply because every school within the impoverished Grantsville is seen as “bad” by those in more affluent contexts. She noted, for instance, that her school is “perceived well, really well” within Grantsville because people know us. She added that nobody outside the community knows anything about the school except that it’s in Grantsville. “I can go and someone will say, ‘Well, where do you teach?’ And I’ll say Grantsville. And they’ll say, ‘Oh my goodness, what’s it like there?’ Immediately it’s a negative.”

Part of the problem with the negative perceptions of districts and schools such as those in places like Grantsville is that they too often, over time, weigh heavily on those who work there, and these bad reputations combined with the unequal tangible resources available as property values and thus tax revenues decline too often become the self-fulfilling prophecy of “bad” public schools. In other words, multiple forces push these schools toward becoming more and more similar to what their bad reputations say they are, even if they never completely get there and the reputations remain exaggerated. The most insightful analysis of this process came from a school district administrator in the Grantsville district who had seen the spiraling down of that district – in terms of its reputation but also in terms of the education offered and the expectations that educators hold for students – as the population served changed from mostly white and middle-class to mostly black and Latino and poor. In his analysis of this process, he talked about a graduate class he once took in which the effects of racial segregation on public schools were discussed. He noted, “It’s been proven, it’s been said that segregation, the segregated school districts are unequal, okay? You could spend all the money you want, but you have a certain mentality here... I’m sure somebody will be willing to take issue at me for saying it, but I do think there are a lot of so-called professional people that have very low expectations for these children.”

This administrator talked repeatedly about the low expectations and the watered-down curriculum in Grantsville High School, in particular. His assessment is that the negative perception of the Grantsville students vis-à-vis their more affluent counterparts in other Long Island districts has affected Grantsville educators over time, leading them to internalize some of these ways of thinking about the children they serve or to see their challenges as insurmountable. He explained: “So I’m saying is, what happens, what I think is happening here now, because of all the negativity

that's been said, this that and the other, you have people in the classroom already decided they won, the kids can't learn."

To the extent that a school district's "reputation" – perhaps the most important "intangible" characteristic of educational institutions – is tightly tied to the color and income of the people who live within its boundaries and the degree of distinction/segregation across these boundary lines, the prospect of ever reaching parity in terms of the tangible factors seems quite slim. In fact, we see in our data that the boundary lines that separate students by districts, schools and classrooms are more than physical barriers, they also shape how the students within them are defined and thus what is appropriate for them.

Exploring this iterative relationship between the tangible and intangible factors in public education through an investigation of how people make sense of their school districts' reputation and how that sense making relates to the population served and the resources available to serve it, is an important step toward illustrating the challenges facing those who hope to change or circumvent the boundaries that divide schools and districts on Long Island. Knowing these relationships between public school reputations and student populations – even at an intuitive level – leads those in the more affluent districts to resist any alteration of the borders that divide them from those perceived to be less smart, less rich and less well-behaved, despite the fact that these perceptions do not always match reality. It does not matter. Furthermore, there is some evidence that as time goes on, the separation itself feeds the inequality in ways that make the perceptions closer to the reality than it initially was. This self-fulfilling prophecy and the power of perception over how people come to see themselves and their possibilities has been greatly underestimated by those who tout the full implementation of "separate but equal" educational policies such as NCLB.

### **The Different Reputations of the School Districts Strongly Affects Their Ability to Hire and Retain High-Quality Teachers**

Perhaps the worst and most obvious dimension of the self-fulfilling prophecy of negative public school reputations and how they relate to the tangible factors that affect educational opportunities is the way in which the distribution of "good" teachers are distributed across district boundary lines. What we see on Long Island is that the districts and schools that serve poorest, most educationally disadvantaged students often lack the reputations needed to attract the highest-quality teachers or those prepared to teach the highest-level classes. This means that the students who rely most heavily on public schools to provide them the education and support they need – those who lack the private resources, support systems and safety nets that Belvedere parents provide for their children – have access to the least prepared or expert teachers. Furthermore, the lack of teachers who can teach the highest-level courses mean that the chances that any student in these districts will have access to classes such as calculus or physics will be slimmer still than even a low-track student in a school where such courses are offered.

In other words, while boundaries that divide the haves from the have nots at all levels of the educational system – district, school and classroom – are problematic in terms of access to opportunities for poor students of color, district boundaries are most problematic, especially when it comes to these issues of teacher quality. Teachers, after all, are employees of districts and thus are attracted to working in one versus another. Once they are hired in a district, they can more easily move from one school or classroom to another than they can move from one district

to the next due to their benefits, pension plans, etc. In small suburban districts, which oftentimes have only one high school and one or two middle schools, students who reside within common district boundaries are more likely to have more equal access to the same quality teachers than those who live on opposite sides of such boundaries. While we know that there are tremendous inequalities within districts and schools, the point here is about which boundaries matter most in terms of moving toward a more equal and fair system.

What we have heard quite clearly from district and school-level officials is just how easy it is for affluent districts to hire good teachers, and how challenging it is for poorer districts with many students of color to even get a highly qualified teacher to apply for job openings. The end result is a complicated and never-ending cycle of students with the greatest educational need having access to some of the least qualified teachers because their districts and schools lack the reputation to attract the more qualified teacher candidates.

While these disparities are no doubt partially related to differences in teacher salaries across districts (see below), we argue that such distinctions alone cannot explain the ease of teacher recruitment that a district like Belvedere experiences or the difficulty that districts such as Grantsville or Lakewood – or more recently Leesburg – experience when trying to hire teachers. In fact, the list of average and median teachers' salaries below – organized roughly in order of the district's ease in hiring teachers, from reportedly most desirable to the least desirable districts to work in, according to district administrators' reports about their ability to attract prospective teachers. For instance, Belvedere has the highest average salary by far at \$97,674, but not the largest median salary, which is greater in both Clearview and Leesburg.

Belvedere Public Schools: Average Teacher's Salary: \$97,674; Median: \$91,419

Clearview School District: Average Teacher's Salary: \$89,672; Median: \$93,264

Leesburg Union School District: Average Teacher's Salary: \$89,732; Median: \$94,331

Lakewood School District: Average Teacher's Salary: \$78,450; Median: \$77,179

Grantsville School District: Average Teacher's Salary: \$82,377; Median: \$84,220

(New York State Department of Education, 2009)

Furthermore, Lakewood, which has by far the lowest average and median salaries – in part because it is only an elementary school district – appears to have an easier time recruiting teachers than does Grantsville, where the student population has been poorer and less white for many years. Lakewood, on the other hand, is a district in transition, where the reputation is changing, but not as quickly as the district. Also, because it attracts recent immigrants from several countries – some of which are working- or middle-class – Lakewood appears to be developing a more scrappy reputation – as a hard-working district of constituents who are trying to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. Whether this evolving reputation matches the reality or truly distinguishes Lakewood from Grantsville, which has attracted more of the extremely poor immigrants, is less clear, but it does seem to somewhat ease the tension that Lakewood faces in teacher recruitment and retention process, despite its relatively low salaries compared to Grantsville and the other three districts we studied.

But by far the district that best illustrates the powerful connection between reputation, resources and teacher recruitment is Belvedere, where district and school administrators all noted how easy it is to hire top-notch and highly competitive teacher applicants because of their district's "excellent reputation." According to these educators, whenever Belvedere has an opening, they get hundreds of applicants simply through word of mouth and as many as a

thousand through the formal channels of listed ads, etc. As one administrator noted in talking about how the district recruits high quality teachers, “Mainly, people come to us.”

In fact, according to one department chair at Belvedere High School, not only are they able to attract “high-quality” teachers but also enthusiastic, highly qualified teachers. As this educator in a district that already has highly motivated and high-achieving students, noted, such additional qualifications are important to students’ classroom experiences: “I believe that the teacher you have in the classroom makes or breaks your program, and the hiring of the (pause) enthusiastic, you know, highly-qualified teachers, but teachers who really are enthusiastic and believe wholeheartedly in what they’re teaching. That excitement spills over to the kids.”

Clearly, as we note above, this ease of recruitment in Belvedere is partly related to funding and salary schedules. For instance, the assistant principal at the high school explained, when talking about teacher recruitment, hiring and retention, “You have to be pretty good to make it here. We can afford to be particular.”

In our interview with Belvedere’s assistant superintendent of finance, he gave a more in-depth explanation of how this well-respected school district uses its wealth to attract and hire the best teachers:

We can take a teacher with 25 years of experience and bring them into Belvedere and pay them what they were getting in their last school district. We can give them 25 years of steps. Most districts can’t do that; it’s too costly. But we’ll do that. We can get a great math teacher, a great physics teacher and it’s going to cost us \$100,000, and we’ll do it. Where other districts will say, we can’t hire experienced teachers, it’s too costly, let’s hire somebody who just graduated from college and we only have to pay 50,000...

Furthermore, this district official talked about the clear connection between the ability of his district to attract and pay the best teachers in this way and the strong reputation of the district – they feed off each other to assure that Belvedere is in a position to attract such teachers and in a position to pay them what they require to move from one district to another once they have experience and seniority. He noted that the connection between the resources and the reputation of the district is very strong, especially when it comes to hiring teachers.

Meanwhile, in Leesburg, with its declining reputation, internal political struggles and instability, recruitment and retention of good teachers is becoming more and more difficult. As one teacher noted, a lot of teachers are choosing not to come to Leesburg anymore because they’re concerned about whether this district will have another teachers’ contract and whether there will be money in the system to pay the teachers. For instance, the assistant principal at Leesburg High School, who had come to work in this district in the last few years, noted that when he was looking for a new job and interviewing for a position, he heard a lot of negative things about Leesburg – that “it was just headed downhill fast... That’s the word on the street... they’re not passing budgets, they’re going downhill. “

Yet this educator, who grew up on Long Island, noted that he has always associated Leesburg with being one of the more prestigious districts on Long Island based on its history. So, he said, he overlooked the negative talk and “saw it as an opportunity to come to a place where excellence and high standards have been the tradition and the expectation... and when I was



interviewed, that was the sense I got, that the people interviewing me still took pride in their school and still had high expectations for their students. So that was why I took the job.”

Still, not only does Leesburg have a hard time recruiting good teachers, but the district also, according to the educators we interviewed, has a hard time maintaining those they get because, according to one teacher, “people are afraid that they might not have a job ten years down the road. They’re afraid about the future, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.”

As part of what we see as the self-fulfilling prophecy of the changing reputations of school districts due to the sort of demographic changes taking place in districts like Leesburg, the difficulty these districts face in hiring the best teachers often means they come to live up (or down, as the case may be) to these reputations over time.

### **Conclusion to Finding #3**

The main point of this finding is that the tangible – especially resources – and intangible – especially reputations – factors are not separate and distinct from each other. Quite the contrary is true. One begets the other in a rather vicious cycle of the rich getting richer – or at least, the rich being educated by superior teachers – and the poor suffering from the fallout of both a lack of funds and a lack of good p.r. to help bring the housing values and thus tax revenue up to provide the kinds of resources that would help recruit the stellar teachers that would in turn boost their reputations.

When all of the above is closely tied to issues of race/ethnicity and social-class so that districts that are skewed completely in one direction or another – either virtually all white and Asian and affluent or virtually all black and Latino and poor – provide dramatically different educational opportunities it is even more tragic. Added to this layer of inequality is a political dimension to school district politics that feeds the unequal reputations across district boundary lines.

### Finding #4: The Political Fallout of Separate and Unequal School Districts:

Another critical facet of public school inequality is the relationship between the highly unequal social contexts of school districts across Long Island and the ways in which these districts and their constituents are defined and either constrain or support democratic processes in public education systems. What we see here is that the local constituents in the poorer communities often lack the political power and the information needed to hold school officials and educators accountable for the quality of education they provide the students. Such lack of political clout – directly related to the concentration of families with limited economic and social capital across separate and unequal school districts – stunts the development of vibrant democratic institutions.

While such lack of accountability and voice is problematic in the context of a racially and ethnically diverse school district such as Clearview, at least the Clearview parents and students have greater access (in theory) to a more challenging curriculum and higher quality teachers within the boundaries of their district and schools. The fact that their children are not always able to partake of these resources due to several social, political and academic barriers, is highly problematic, but is a more easily solved problem than segregation across district lines. But when the racial/ethnic and social class segregation transcends school district boundary lines, black, Latino and low-income families are more systematically removed from both tangible and

intangible opportunities that they rarely have the political clout to demand or develop within the context of separate and unequal school systems.

### **School Districts with Poor and Disenfranchised Constituents Lack Political Accountability**

Our conclusion after studying these five school districts is that in the context of communities characterized by high levels of poverty and large numbers of disempowered and recent immigrant families, public school systems too often serve a purpose other than educating the children. In the poorest district we are studying, Grantsville, allegedly the public funding generated by the district is used to support school board members – allowing them to hand out jobs and contracts to people who need income and who are too often willing to pay kickbacks to the board members. In this local context, where there are few viable, working- or middle class jobs to be had, inside whistle-blowers complain that the school district and its funds too often support the most well-connected community members. Sometimes, some of these observers fear, such support comes at the expense of the Grantsville schools and students.

According to U.S. Census data on the residential population within the Grantsville school district, the parents and constituents in this district are for the most part, poorly educated and low-income and recent immigrants. And, according to several officials in the Grantsville district, this leads to a situation in which many of these constituents lack the efficacy or legitimacy in the political system to hold the school board accountable. In fact, one Grantsville school board member who ran on an anti-corruption platform so many of the parents in this district are busy surviving on low wages and long work hours, and they often come from a context and culture in which parents are not supposed to question educators or officials. Meanwhile, the more efficacious and affluent residents of this district put their children in private schools.

This school board member noted that part of the problem of the corruption and lack of accountability in Grantsville is the lack of involvement and political push back from the community:

In this community, either they don't have children in school or they're not involved or concerned. They have their children in private school; therefore they're not involved or concerned because they're not thinking about the fact that their property values are going down because you have a poor system of education in your community. So that hasn't hit them yet. [Then] you have parents who are just simply not involved in the school system. You would never see them unless there's a particular problem involving their child. They don't participate in any matter.

The result of this lack of political vigilance within Grantsville, a political context of much poverty and scarce resources, is that corruption and malfeasance is not unusual. As one of the whistle blower school board members noted, those who care about such corruption and try to stem it do not even know the full story of just how pervasive it is. She noted that there are rampant rumors in the community about various deals with contractors and vendors that have led to kickbacks and “the whole nine yards.” She noted that while she has not been able to verify all the various corruption schemes, there is an on-going and extensive investigation into all of this, but no verification as yet. Still, this board member and others we interviewed know of people who have personally benefited from the corruption and kickbacks – of board members using their

district-issues credit cards for personal expenses, including their magazine subscriptions, groceries and non-district related cell phone charges, or friends of friends who got jobs they may or may not have been qualified to take.

Related to these issues of corruption and malfeasance and the subsequent whistle blowing that results, there is a great deal of turnover in the central administration of the Grantsville school district. In fact, at the time we were trying to conduct district level interviews, several positions remained vacant. The cost of this turnover and vacant positions are large in a district trying to move forward amid rapid demographic change from serving predominantly black and low-income families to serving predominantly Latino, recent immigrant (or migrant) and poor families. As one of the few long-time administrators in the Grantsville district noted:

I think if they could just get some permanent administration in here, you know, the district may be able to move. But when you get administration in here for six months, and you have this administration here for a year, you know, they come in and they wanna fix this. But [they] weren't here those prior years, so [they] don't know what happened prior... You can try, but it's been broken for so long. So someone walking in here—and then half of them don't stay. We get a lot of interims... it's like the last thing you need. You've already got problems and now you need stability to move forward.

What became increasingly clear to us in doing our data collection is that the type of corruption and malfeasance that is seemingly rampant in Grantsville would be unlikely to occur in a place like the Belvedere school district. It would be hard to imagine kickbacks for jobs that pay less than some of the nannies make in such an affluent community. In fact, according to the Belvedere superintendent, the school board in this wealthy enclave is a group of highly educated adults who have a lot of information on what students need in an educational system to go on to high-status colleges and well-paying careers. They are also, as a political body, very responsive to the needs and demands of their constituents because there would be large political consequences if they weren't:

I cannot tell you the level to which the Board members are actively involved in the education of the community... They sit on committees... we have Board members that go to the parent meetings so they know what's on the minds of the residents. They're very responsive to the residents. This is really just not, you know, a kind of a rubber stamp board or a board that is very removed from what's going on in the community. These people are on top of everything... there's a lot of communication. It's not unusual for Board members to—you know, they'll be going to a school for something regarding their own child, but you know, end up in the principal's office for half an hour, and you know, there's just a lot of communication between teachers and Board members and administrators, which can be challenging (laughs).

Thus, when asked why more affluent districts in the area generally have far fewer corruption problems than Grantsville, the whistle-blower Grantsville school board member said

such problems would not arise in more affluent contexts because you tend to have much more community involvement in these spaces. “Parental involvement, community involvement is the difference.”

She said that communities with more such involvement would not “tolerate the fact that your buildings are in disrepair, that they’re dirty, that your children don’t have the proper learning environment. That your children are overcrowded and sitting in cardboard boxes by the roadside. I don’t see any other community tolerating this.”

Meanwhile, as we noted above, in Leesburg, the diverse school district experiencing a great deal of white flight in the last 10 years, there also appears to be a breakdown of the democratic process as well because certain segments of that community may be too disenfranchised to fight what is happening there in terms of the massive public funding for private schools. Meanwhile, the more affluent and white parents who still have children in the public schools are accused of only looking out for the needs of their own children. At the same time, the faction of whites that now dominates the school board is more supportive of families with children in private schools, hence the push to spend more on supplemental services for these students. As a result of all this animosity, disconnection and inequality, the democratic institution that is our public educational system does not function very well in the Leesburg district either. Allegedly, people get bought off, and the minority parents are rarely involved or fighting for their children’s rights.

According to one Leesburg school board member, the black and Latino parents do not make themselves known or fight for their rights.

We don’t hear the minority parents stand up and say, ‘Why aren’t my kids not doing well?’... They think... everything’s wonderful... it’s one of the most frustrating things in the world.... [meanwhile the] PTA presidents’ kids, all get favors. One of our PTA presidents, her daughter was in a regular Regents class and got Honors credit. So the parents that get involved are just as bad as most of the Board members that get involved. They get bought off. Now I’m sure this happens in the Congress, it happens everywhere, but it’s so hard to get real change... who gets involved?

The lack of involvement and voice among the politically disenfranchised constituents of public education is not unique to Grantsville, Leesburg or Long Island. It appears to be a more universal phenomenon amid low-income contexts where there are high concentrations of students of color and/or recent immigrant families. This is particularly a problem in Lakewood, where a large percentage of the population is recent immigrants who are not citizens, cannot vote, and may or may not speak English. According to one Lakewood school board member, the larger segment of the Lakewood population that is comprised of recent immigrants pretty much stays out of the political process in the district. in Lakewood. “They’re not involved actively in the decision-making, even at the level of voting, in terms of attending meetings, at school board meetings.”

This board member noted that these immigrants are often coming from countries or communities and settings where their vote was not important. “I mean, they don’t feel that they have to be involved in that process. They’re also coming from situations where you just picked your child up and you sent them to school and the school did what it had to do.”

While problems of corruption and malfeasance have not been as much of a problem in Lakewood as in Grantsville – in part because Lakewood is less poor district, with 27 percent of its students qualifying for free lunch, compared with 65 percent of Grantsville’s students – these two “poorest” and most immigrant-populated districts in our study point to the dangers of inequality and segregation to democratic institutions such as public schools. If the democratic process relies on some degree of efficacy, empowerment, and engagement on the part of its constituents, then the process of concentrating large percentages of people who lack these three characteristics at any given point in time within distinct boundary lines seems highly detrimental to the creation of an effective public education system. Below we see another effect of this political imbalance across district boundary lines.

### **The Affluence/Poverty of a School District Affects the Teacher-Community and Teacher-School Board Relationships in Interesting Ways**

While Long Island school districts with more tangible resources and strong reputations are in a better position to recruit the “best” teachers, it is less clear that the teachers who are hired in those contexts are always well served relative to the privilege of the local constituents. What happens in situations such as the Belvedere school district, where the socio-economic divide between the teachers and the parents is huge, is that the parents and constituents of the district often cannot relate to the needs and demands of middle-class people such as public school educators and other employees. While such a gap in Belvedere has not jeopardized teachers’ salaries there vis a vis other districts (see data above), it has led to some conflicts related to contracts and negotiations – and created a bit of bad blood between the teachers and the district administration and the parents and board members who supported them.

In fact, from fall 2006 to 2008, the Belvedere teachers worked without a contract, as the school board and the union were at an impasse about the benefits for retired teachers. According to the president of the teachers’ association, the affluent parents in this district, including the school board members, do not understand what it is like for someone to try to live within community distance to a place like Belvedere on a teachers’ salary:

Now I don’t live in [this district], and I never will... That’s not in my cards. But for me, I think it’s reasonable for me to own a house. I think it’s reasonable for me to be able to afford to send my children to college... A district like [this], and some of the other high socioeconomic districts, the teachers don’t live in those districts... That’s where the difference, that’s where the philosophical difference comes in... If I stop working, my family doesn’t get fed... These people, though it’s a hard economic time right now for them, they’re not going to go hungry, you know? They might have to think about selling a piece of property or something like that, and I feel bad for them... but we’re not talking about feeding a family. And that’s, to me that’s a big difference.

According to the principal of the high school in this district, teachers are considered “hired help” and only part of the entire process of preparing students for their positions of power – there are also trips to Europe and private tutoring and all the other aspects of their privileged and “rewarding” lives. Taking this hired help metaphor even further, there were several references in

our interviews in Belvedere to the “good gene pool” in the district, implying that the success of the students is almost completely related to their parents’ genetic make up and less to what the teachers are doing in the classrooms. One of the science teachers at the Belvedere High School explained the gene pool argument this way, noting that some of the Belvedere school board members have said at public meetings that they and their children, “have good genes —and they’ve used that word even.” He continued by explaining the way in which the Belvedere parents make sense of their own privilege and children and how that affects their relationship with the teachers:

They’re just great kids. You could bring in any teachers and it would be the same, and they basically said that to [to the teachers]—you’re dispensable. You’re lucky to work here. You’re lucky to work with our good kids. And it’s like, in a sense they’re right because obviously they are good, but it isn’t just them. It is really a culture that was established that was a dual way that worked both ways that made it such a positive, positive place. And I don’t think they really, really realize that.

According to the Belvedere High School principal, when you work as an educator in a very affluent community, you need to reconsider the teacher-community relationship. He referred to the teachers as “hired help” analogous to affluent families’ gardeners, cleaning people, etc. He noted that with a recent contract negotiation, when the parents did not support the teachers in their demands that the teachers were surprised, but he was not. He said, “I think the teachers viewed themselves on a much more even relationship with the community. No, not when [the parents] have maids and servants, and... can drive four foreign cars. You may think because you’re meeting with them on Back to School Day or you see them out on the ball fields, but it’s a whole different experience.”

According to the principal, the teachers’ miscalculation of the parents’ support was based on their ill-informed view that they are more central to the success of the Belvedere children than the parents think that they are. Meanwhile, the parents are paying \$150-200 per hour for private tutors to cover what they think their children are not getting in school. Why then would they support huge salary increases for the teachers. If the teachers are just another category of “hired help” as he claims, then why would the parents want to have the paid significantly more than these other categories of people who work for them.

In emphasizing this social-class tension in the district, the principal noted that he had to discipline several teachers during the long, hard negotiation process because they were speaking inappropriately to kids about the contract agreement. According to the principal, some teachers were saying things like: “Your parents can afford it, you know, don’t put another pool in this year and you can afford the contract. You know, that kind of thing. It was very much a class war. It was a class war straight up and down. I felt like I was reading Marx again. I really did.”

Meanwhile, in Grantsville, the poor district we are studying, the teachers union, like other organized, connected and mobilized groups and individuals in this context, is often able to work the system to get what they need with no pushback from a disempowered community. Indeed, it appears that the power, influence and wealth of the community, school board members and constituents vis a vis other actors in the district, especially the teachers organization, may not play an important role in terms of deciding whose interests are served in the schools each day.

#### **Conclusion to Finding #4**

While it is common in the field of education to relate the wealth and affluence of a particular community to the types of tangible resources available within the public schools, this and other sections of this report are intended to emphasize the relationship between public school context and various intangible factors – all of which ultimately influence the tangible resources and educational opportunities available to students. This section, in particular, highlights the political dimensions of inequality across school district contexts and the implications of that inequality for the functioning and success of democratic institutions such as public schools. Unless we explore all these many dimensions of inequality and their consequences for schools and students, we will not fully appreciate the effects of separateness and inequality in public education – or the consequences of it for a democratic and increasingly diverse society.

#### **Finding #5: Powerful Political, Economic and Social Forces Push Back Against Efforts to Break or Transcend School District Boundaries on Long Island**

As we noted above, the survey findings presented in the *Long Island Index 2009* report suggest that the majority of Long Islanders, including those who are white, non-Hispanic, are in favor of policy changes that could begin to break down the boundaries between separate and unequal public school districts. Furthermore, there is some evidence in our interview data, even some from Belvedere, that this highly segregated system of public education is not the best for preparing students for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. For instance, as several Belvedere High School seniors noted, there are disadvantages to attending such a racially/ethnically and socio-economically homogeneous school district. As one student explained:

That's my one complaint with Belvedere High School is the lack of diversity. I mean, I can't wait—I'm really looking forward to graduating and going to the next step of my education experience, career... I really want to meet different ethnicities—different kids of different ethnicities. Like, I think everyone's so homogenous in this community. Everyone's white and affluent and most are Christian or most are...you know everyone fits the profile and I think we are missing that.

Beyond the social and social justice arguments for breaking down the barriers between fragmented school districts on Long Island, there are several real financial reasons for change. Basically, what we have learned through our interviews and read in news accounts is that the current system of funding public schools in New York State and especially places like Long Island cannot hold – it will be crushed by its own weight as local communities can no longer sustain the immense tax burden.

As a Leesburg board of education member explained, there has been a lot of talk about school district consolidation on Long Island lately, but, he said, “they’re not talking about it because of education, which they should be talking about. They’re talking about it because of money.”

This board member, like many other officials on Long Island, was quick to point out the inefficiency of the current system with one superintendent and two or three assistant

superintendents, plus central office staff, for each district, even if these districts have fewer than a few thousand students in them. The economies of scale are problematic anyway they look at it, and especially when they consider the burden these costs are placing on the local tax payers. As a Grantsville principal noted, the current funding system puts a great deal of pressure on local property owners, particularly in less affluent districts where each tax increase generates smaller increases in revenue. She said, “And the reality is that taxpayers don’t want to pay anymore.”

Similarly, in Lakewood, the elementary school district with the lowest per-pupil expenditure of the five we studied, a board of education member noted that even though the tax rate is very high per assessed dollar of property value, the district does not generate as much as it needs because the values of the houses are relatively low. Thus, one of the biggest challenges for school board members is trying to keep costs down. Still, with 89 percent of the district’s budget allocated for salaries as negotiated under contract, there is little room for cutting costs. According to this Board member:

That’s what we have the least amount of control over because it’s based on contractual agreements with unions, it’s based on stepped stages that they have with the teachers and all kinds of things, and it’s also associated with insurance coverage... it’s the part that we have the least amount of control over.

Elderly, retired residents even in the more affluent school districts also have a hard time paying their property taxes, as their incomes remained fixed while the value of their property – and thus their tax bills – have increased. Clearview officials note that more poor families are moving out of that district as property values have skyrocket, and many long-term, fixed-income residents are struggling to pay the taxes for their homes. One Clearview board of education member who has been particularly vocal on this issue of school finance reform in New York State, argued that a system so dependent on property taxes has its limits. He gives the example of a retired couple who bought their house 40 years ago for \$10,000 and now have a house worth \$500,000 and are living on fixed incomes. “How am I paying my taxes?... So to me, you’ve got to find a way of doing it on what monies there really are, whether it’s income tax—I don’t know. “

Beyond lip service to these urgent fiscal issues, however, there is very little evidence that the political powers that be will allow the kind of structural change that would provide some relief for over-burdened taxpayers while also breaking down the political boundaries dividing students by race/ethnicity and social class. First of all, we see little political support for change among those with the greatest vested interest in the status quo and the most control over it. Secondly, we learned how existing structures and organizations not only facilitate the on-going separation across school district boundaries, but have legitimized an existence that requires that separation. According to one Long Island superintendent we interviewed, many of the little school districts should have been merged together a long time ago. Furthermore, he noted that New York State Assembly has the right to consolidate school districts. The main problem with such a political decision on the part of the state legislature is that those who voted for such consolidation would then be out of a job because the people who voted for them are going to be incensed. “Everybody wants their little base of power. This local control is an obsession, but you pay a price for that local control.”

### **Little Political Support for Change Among those with Interests in the Status Quo**



In Belvedere, the district in our study most likely to support the status quo, community members and school district officials tend to see school district boundaries as sacrosanct. Resistance to altering these boundaries is often couched in terms of the “ideal size” of a school district, a concept that seems to vary somewhat across boundaries on LI, and can be used to justify quite a range of district sizes. Indeed, the Belvedere superintendent noted that she did not see any school district consolidation happening on Long Island any time soon, and that, quite frankly, she did not think it would be a good idea to merge the small districts into something bigger. She said that her affluent district with only a little more than 2,000 students was just the right size: “We’re small enough so that there is really a culture of caring and connection for each child, and yet you know, at some point, if you’re too small, you lose your ability to offer programs and to meet diverse needs. So I think we’re just right.”

She added that while some people argue that district consolidation would save some money, make the system more efficient, etc. she thought that it would create a “huge bureaucracy” and that nothing would get done. Interestingly enough, this same superintendent, in talking about the school district in which she lives and her own children went to school, which is much larger and less affluent than Belvedere, noted that it is a “really very good functioning and very successful school district.” She also noted that efforts to merge a small, poor, and all-black and Latino school district with failing test scores with her residential district several years ago went nowhere, even though, she said, it would have been extremely beneficial to the poor district. According to this Belvedere administrator and others we interviewed across district boundaries, the pushback against district consolidation comes from not only affluent districts such as Belvedere, but also from poorer districts that provide jobs for people in the local communities. Basically, across the separate and unequal school districts on Long Island, educators and constituents are loath to give up the resources, jobs and control that the fragmented system provides.

Indeed, even in Lakewood, with its relatively low per-pupil expenditure and lack of extra resources, the educators tout the small size of the district – even though it has twice the students Belvedere has -- as one of the advantages of working there. For instance, the principal of the elementary school we studied there used to work in the New York City Public Schools, and he is quick to contrast working for the City system and working in Lakewood in terms of making decisions and communicating with district official, etc. He noted that in Lakewood, when he needs something – input or resources – from the central district office, which is right down the block from his school, the superintendent is “just a phone call away.” In the City system, in contrast, it would take much more time to expedite requests or feedback. Here, in Lakewood, he said, he just calls the superintendent, and he is “here in two minutes if you need something.” According to this principal, “that is the biggest difference for me in a good way... This is a lot more hands-on, which is the way it should be... It benefits the children immensely that way... I know in the back of my mind, if I have an issue here, I just pick up the telephone.”

Thus, despite widespread acknowledgement across these districts that the current school funding system is broken and needs fixing, that it is highly inefficient and wasteful, the thought of solving the problem by changing or traversing school district boundaries appears to be equally distasteful. Based on our interviews, most district officials are opposed to even inter-district transfers and magnets schools – let alone wholesale consolidation -- because it would mean they would lose funding to the receiving school districts.

For instance, in the Leesburg School District, which, as we noted, is in a mostly affluent community but is drawing a smaller and smaller percentage of those affluent (and mostly white) students to its public schools, the large percentage of private school students and school board members without children in the public schools has put more pressure on district officials to cut public school costs. Critics of the school board claim they are doing this in order to siphon off more money for private schools; the board members themselves say that they are just trying to keep the district's costs under control. In places like these, albeit perhaps for the wrong reasons, there may be more openness to the idea of consolidation as a money-saving device. According to one of the Leesburg school board members, the current system is highly inefficient:

Do you really need one superintendent for—we now have [fewer than 3,500] kids in our system? And he's probably costing... a quarter million dollars a year... you mean, he couldn't handle... six thousand children? Come on... we have an assistant superintendent for curriculum and an assistant superintendent for business, so with their packages, you're probably at two hundred thousand dollars each. You're telling me... you can't handle double? Of course you can. It's silliness.

Interestingly enough, despite all this talk about “ideal size,” which appears to be a slippery term, and money and control, the issues of race and class are often lurk just below the surface of these conversations. Indeed, the one exception to the no-consolidation rule appears to be when those with economic and political power want to change district boundaries to maintain their distance from poorer students of color. For example, in the Leesburg district, parents in a white and affluent section of the school district that has experienced a great deal of white flight from the public schools in recent years, are lobbying the New York State Commissioner to let them secede from Leesburg and become part of another, neighboring school district that is racially and ethnically diverse, but more stable and more white. While the future of this effort is uncertain, the affluent community has hired lawyers and formed a committee to press this issue at the state level. This nascent movement is one of the only signs of possible near-term consolidation on Long Island, and it is motivated by white parents who are trying to flee an increasingly black and Latino district. The only hopeful aspect of this effort is that the district these families would be reassigned to is one of the more racially/ethnically diverse school districts on Long Island.

Conversely, in the case of one of the poor, mostly black and Latino school districts on Long Island, efforts to dissolve this district when it became fiscally insolvent and send its students to several neighboring school districts were stalled and ultimately blocked by leaders of those nearby districts. These district officials joined with representatives of the Nassau County Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) to lobby state policymakers to assure the poor district remained in tact. Instead of lobbying for the consolidation of this district and its students into bordering school districts, these local official asked that the poor district remain in tact and instead, that it become more solidified as a separate entity by receiving extra state resources to build new buildings. The strategy worked, and this mostly black and Latino school district remained separated from its nearby, white and middle-class counterparts.

While school district consolidation proposals seem nearly impossible, given the political resistance to them, we would think that there would be an openness and acceptance of the idea of inter-district transfers of students across these boundaries. But we have also learned that there

is little support for such a transfer program. An assistant superintendent of the affluent Belvedere school system voiced strong opposition to the student transfer idea, noting that he was not the only administrator on Long Island who feels this way. At the crux of the issue he said is the degree of control that districts can have over who they do and do not accept in an inter-district transfer program. Thus, he noted that although legally, Belvedere and other Long Island districts have the authority to accept out-of-district students, the reason why his district will not do it is because they could end up accepting a student with special needs costs Belvedere far more than the per-pupil allotment they will receive from the state and sending district to accept the student:

[S]ay an out-of-district student hears that we have a good program, and the student has severe educational needs, it may cost us \$100,000 to educate that student and we couldn't say no to that student... we can't bill the sending school district or the sending parents for more than you would charge for a regular student. So, that's the kind of Catch-22 there. So many districts will say, look we're not going to accept any tuition students because if you do, someone could send a \$100,000 student where you can only collect \$15,000 in tuition, so you don't want to risk that... So, that's why we don't accept tuition students because we can't discriminate and we wouldn't.

In other districts on Long Island, where the student population is less consistently privileged and high-achieving, there is a bit more openness to the inter-district transfer idea on a limited basis, although there are no mechanisms – e.g. outreach to parents, a lottery system, transportation, etc. -- in place that facilitate it. Such support systems are critical, especially to assure that low-income students with less involved parents can participate. What few Long Islanders seem to realize is that there are several sites around the country where such inter-district transfers are common and have been for years. These programs begin to break down some of the barriers between school districts and assist people across district lines in thinking more regionally about solutions to problems such as a broken school funding system (see Wells, et. al., 2009).

### **The Role of Existing Structures and Institutions in Maintaining the Status Quo**

Not only are individuals, especially those with a vested interest in the status quo, resistant to altering school district boundary lines on Long Island, but these individuals are supported by powerful institutions in their quest to maintain small, inefficient school districts. In New York State, school districts are nested within regional educational institutions known as Boards of Cooperative Education Services, or BOCES. Primary, these BOCES, along with County Executive Offices and State-level purchasing consortia, support the current fragmented educational system by lessening the cost of running a small district through the coordination of a cross-district cooperative purchasing program. This means that small districts can remain small while still enjoying some of the economies-of-scale of larger districts, especially purchasing power and greater access to special services and curriculum they could not provide on their own. Furthermore, certain BOCES, especially the one in Nassau County, have taken on a greater role in the operations of school districts over time.

The first New York State BOCES were established in the late 1940s to provide expensive vocational and special educational services to students across districts, thereby lessening the cost of such services for each district. But BOSEC have evolved over time, with the decline of vocational education programs, to provide more business as opposed to educational services. While most BOCES still provide some educational services, their central role appears to have become helping small school districts offset the cost of fragmentation by creating and sustaining cross-district cooperation in terms of purchasing and business office functions. Student access to classes and curriculum across district boundaries is not a focal point, except when it comes to special education or the few remaining vocational education programs. Still, perhaps the infrastructure created by these institutions could become a basis for more student transfers across district boundaries.

According to one Belvedere school district official, who has worked in various Long Island districts for several decades, the role of the BOCES has changed/evolved over time since they were developed on Long Island in the 1960s, from mainly a provider of education services to a multi-faceted organization that now assists districts with everything that is larger than they can handle or afford – from much-needed special education programs to purchasing supplies and equipment. What’s more, the districts are reimbursed for part of what they spend through the BOCES, a percentage based on their property tax levy. These percentages range from 80 to 40 percent for the five districts we are studying, with Belvedere, the most affluent district in our sample, still getting a 40 percent reimbursement from the state for anything it purchases through one of the three Long Island BOCES. When asked if the BOCES mitigated the disadvantages of being a small school district, this official replied:

Yeah, that’s really the idea of it. I mean there’s certain things we can’t do as a small district... I mean we can get more technology for paying less because of the [BOCES] reimbursement. When we do our budget, we show that BOCES aid as revenue because it reduces our property tax levy... I think last year we bought 378 computers, and we did it all through BOCES. There’s no question in my mind that we would not have incurred that type of expense if we... didn’t get reimbursed. So what would normally be a major expenditure for a district, you can spread out the cost over five years. And we couldn’t necessarily do that as a school district, but BOCES can and then on top of that we get reimbursement. So what might have cost us a million dollars in one year’s budget, might only have cost us \$ 85 or \$90,000 because we’re paying it off over five years, and we’re getting back 40 percent.

The end result is that these “cooperative purchasing” options that the BOCES provide help small school districts stay small without incurring the cost of purchasing on their own. According to this Belvedere district official, his affluent district does cooperative purchasing for almost all of their supplies—paper and fuel oil, etc. He said that this allows him to bids for goods and services cooperatively with other districts. So, while his affluent school district may require 10,000 reams of paper a year, if all the school districts in the BOCES bid together, they might be buying as much as 1 million reams of paper, and, because of the volume, we get tremendously low prices.

He noted that Belvedere also purchases building supplies—e.g. maintenance supplies, electrical supplies, plumbing supplies— bid cooperatively through what’s called a cooperative purchasing program and that saves the district a lot of money. The BOCES acts as the districts’ administrator in these transactions -- BOCES staff members prepare the bid specks as an administrative service to the districts, which end up saving thousands of dollars every time they buy through the BOCES. In addition, BOCES provide instructional services and set up leasing plans for major technology.

When asked if the BOCES get better prices on the equipment and supplies, this and other school district officials say not really, but because the state of New York subsidizes the BOCES by reimbursing the districts for a larger percentage of what they purchase through their BOCES, the small and fragmented school districts receive additional state aid by buying through the BOCES – yet another form of “state aid” via BOCES purchases. According to the Belvedere official who has worked in many districts, that is what sustains the BOCES “because if we didn’t get the state aid we probably would never use them because they don’t necessarily get better prices... so if school districts didn’t get BOCES aid and the state didn’t have that arrangement, I don’t think BOCES would survive because we could probably do just as well on our own for certain types of services.”

#### *Unequal Access to BOCES Programs*

In addition to its role as a cooperative purchasing agent, the BOCES does still provide some important educational programs, including some vocational and special education programs that bring students together from different districts and technological services and training for teachers and students. In theory these programs, which bring students together with other students from other districts in the BOCES, help to lessen the significance of school district boundaries by providing students with cross-district opportunities. When we look more closely, however, we see that there are many factors related to these programs that work against broader student access. In fact, lower-achieving students and those from less affluent school districts have far less access to these BOCES educational programs. And, ironically, they tend to be the students who need them the most.

In this way, the existence of the BOCES lessens any demand for or movement toward school district consolidation by providing programs that smaller, more fragmented school districts cannot afford to provide. At the same time, because of the prerequisites and costs associated with these programs, the BOCES tend to perpetuate inequality by excluding some of the most needy students from these educational opportunities. Educators across the five districts we studied explained how this happens. According to a teacher from Leesburg High School, many of the BOCES programs require students to have completed a certain number of credits before enrolling. In other words, students would need to have all their coursework for earning a New York State Regents diploma up to date to participate in many of these half-day BOCES courses. According to this Leesburg teacher, who has tried to get many students who are struggling in the regular academic program into the more vocational classes offered through the BOCES:

... so a kid like in eleventh grade, if they have all their credits up to date, they can do a half a day here and a half a day at BOCES, and they can learn whatever trade they want, but they still have to have all their Regents credits up to date. So a lot of our special ed kids have problems with going to school, coming on time, and a lot of

times they're not... up to date in eleventh grade, so they don't get there.

This teacher noted that for her lower-achieving students, the BOCES program is considered "a little bit higher level" than many of the regular high school classes, and students need to be able to work fairly independently to succeed in them. In this way, BOCES programs that may best serve students who are not planning to go on to college right after high school, are in some instances excluding these very students due to their prerequisites.

Another access issue related to the BOCES program is the cost to the sending school district for each student who enrolls. According to a Grantsville district administrator, some of the BOCES vocational and trade oriented classes, such as auto mechanics, could be very beneficial to Grantsville students, but they are expensive, and students' home school districts must cover the costs of the courses and the transportation. The Leesburg high school principal, who said that many of the BOCES programs are quite good, also noted their high cost – about \$25,000 per pupil for a part-time program, which is more than most district's total per-pupil expenditure -- and the burden they place on school districts to send their students to them. He also reflected on the central paradox of these costly programs: "the districts that can afford to send their students to those programs don't have those students who need them. And the districts that have funding limitations, those are the districts that have the kids."

Yet perhaps the most disturbing way in which a Long Island BOCES acted to help maintain separate and unequal school districts was in the case of the poor, all-black and Latino district we discussed above. As we noted, when this failing district with one of the highest concentrations of poor students of any district on Long Island, became insolvent, one option was to simply dissolve it and let the students who live in that district attend neighboring, more affluent districts. In part due to strong opposition to such a plan on the part of the neighboring predominantly white school districts, the leadership of the BOCES assisted these other districts in lobbying Albany policymakers to pass state legislation that would keep the separate and unequal school district in tact, but would provide temporary state fiscal relief, most of which went toward the construction of new buildings. According to an administrator from the Clearview district who has worked in this other impoverished district, "It is a travesty that a school district with so much poverty... could be allowed to continue in such a wealthy county."

#### **Conclusion to Finding #5:**

In theory, an institution such as a BOCES, which was established to promote cross-district cooperation, could facilitate many progressive programs, including inter-district student transfers, to help ameliorate the racial/ethnic and social-class segregation that exists across district boundaries. But the current emphasis of the three Long Island BOCES appears to be headed in a very different direction. In fact, it appears as though these institutions economically buttress political and social rationales for maintaining the boundary lines between separate and unequal Long Island school districts – districts that are otherwise economically highly inefficient and perhaps, in the long run, unsustainable. What's more, the ways in which these BOCES have constructed some of their programs and policies actually exclude the students who should, theoretically benefit the most from them. It is unfortunate that public institutions that have the potential to help alleviate some of the rampant inequality across the separate school districts of

Long Island, instead often help reinforce the degree of separateness and inequality across the boundaries that shape the educational opportunities of children.

Finding #6: Racial/Ethnic Diversity at the District  
and School Level has its Challenges and Rewards

As we noted above in our discussion of how we sampled these districts and the descriptions of each, only one of the five districts in this study, Clearview, is racially diverse and stable. In fact, the racial/ethnic make up of the Clearview district – about 64 percent white, 12 percent Black, and 20 percent Latino -- mirrors that the Long Island County in which it is located. It is in many ways a microcosm of the diversity of suburban New York. And perhaps what is most amazing about Clearview is its relative stability over time. This racial/ethnic breakdown Despite the rise in housing prices there in the mid 2000s and the resulting slight decrease in poor students, particularly Latinos, it remains an extremely unique in terms of its diversity and stability.

In this way, Clearview provides a vision of what Long Island public schools could look like if fewer district boundaries existed and more students crossed the lines of segregation and inequality. What we see in Clearview, however, are two somewhat contradictory findings:

1. The middle and high school in this racially diverse district are symbolic of an age-old lesson from the history of school desegregation policy in the U.S. – namely, once between-school or between-district racial segregation has been alleviated, new racial boundaries are often created within racially diverse schools between classrooms and thus curricular opportunities. The resegregation of otherwise diverse public schools across classrooms via “tracking” or “ability grouping” has been, unfortunately, more the norm than the exception (Oakes, 1985).

2. These issue of racially divided, separate and unequal classrooms in Clearview Middle School and the effort on the part of some educators to do away with some of the rigid tracking and grouping practices there provides an opportunity -- a site of struggle -- in which a diverse community like Clearview grapples with broader issues of race and education. Such struggles and conversations do not occur in Belvedere or in Grantsville, because these sites of homogeneity when it comes to racial and socio-economic status are not places where people can see racial differences in terms of student achievement or access to high-status curriculum on a daily basis.

In this way, the story of Clearview is both dispiriting and hopeful, full of challenges and promise – all at the same time. But one thing that is crystal clear from our research on Clearview is that the boundaries that have been created between classrooms in the middle and high schools in this district are not, for several reasons, as problematic as the district boundaries that exist between Belvedere and Grantsville. As disturbing as the within-school segregation is in Clearview – the middle school principal equates it to apartheid – it is more malleable and less consequential than the separate universes of Belvedere and Grantsville.

*The story of these five schools districts illustrates that the boundaries that clearly matter most in the field of public education – a still highly decentralized system in which much power, funding and control remains vested at the district level – are district boundaries. They are most insurmountable, especially after a 1974 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that further legitimized them and made it more difficult for students to cross them as a remedy for racial inequality. The racial/ethnic and social-class boundary lines formed within districts – either between schools or classrooms – are no doubt problematic and disconcerting, but less rigid and more susceptible to a dialogue and debate about their validity. After all, students who reside within the same school*

*district boundaries, in theory, have access to similar funding streams and many of the public or private resources that support schools and communities. And, in schools such as the Clearview middle school, students across high and low tracked classrooms have access to the same teachers because of the manner in which students are assigned to mixed-track teams and teachers are assigned to classes within those teams.*

We are not, for one minute, suggesting that the rigid tracking situation in Clearview is ok or that it does not perpetuate racial/ethnic inequality, as virtually all of the white students end up in the high-track classes and virtually all of the students of color end up in the low-track classes. But, we are saying there is far more hope for the future of a racially and ethnically diverse society in Clearview than in Grantsville or Belvedere. This hope is born not only of the more permeable boundaries that exist within diverse schools, but it is also born of the struggle that ensues in schools such as these, as even a small number of educators, parents and students try to make a change because of what they can see with their own eyes and feel in their hearts as they walk down but one hallway in one school. They can see – side by side – the image of separate and unequal education – a view that students in more racially isolated districts cannot see and generally do not think about because they are ensconced in their own distinct and physically removed school districts.

We argue, based on the story of Clearview that racially and ethnically diverse schools, which we know are the exception and not the rule in places such as Long Island, stand out because they are sites of struggle, places where people grapple with these broader, societal inequalities within a smaller context. While the same racial/ethnic and socio-economic hierarchies and beliefs exist, they are played out in closer proximity to people who are different and thus, they are more easily contested. These sites provide our best hope for a brighter future.

### **Tracking in Racially Diverse Schools: Another Form of Separate and Unequal**

In Clearview, students attend racially/ethnically diverse elementary schools with enrollments that have been balanced via a controlled choice kindergarten assignment policy. With the exception of a one-day-a-week pull-out gifted education program that enrolls a disproportionate number of white students, the elementary students in Clearview are in racially diverse schools and classrooms. Although there is some ability grouping, especially differentiated reading groups, within those elementary school classrooms, there is no rigid separation of students across classrooms until they reach middle school in 6<sup>th</sup> grade.

Clearview Middle School is another story altogether. There, students are tracked into two levels – honors and regular -- and not allowed to take classes outside their tracks. For the most part, the high tracks and upper level classes are almost exclusively white, while the lower track and less-challenging or non-gifted classes are disproportionately students of color. According to the assistant superintendent of curriculum in this district, “you’d walk into a class, you looked at the students, you knew exactly what kind of class it was” based on the race of the students in each.”

Similarly, the principal of the middle school noted, “if you... walked around the school and looked in the door of classes, you can tell what is an honors class... Because it’s very disturbing. I find it disturbing.”

The high school has instituted a new self-selection process by which students who have been tracked throughout middle school can theoretically elect to take more challenging courses,



although, given the middle school tracking practices, those who were in the “regular” track will lack the prerequisites needed to take higher-level classes in high school. Thus, the high school, although less rigid and systematic in its tracking practices, remains highly segregated within as well, perpetuated as it is by the more entrenched tracking system in the middle school.

The middle school practice of placing students in “honors” versus “Regents” classes for the entire school day in most cases begins with the 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher’s recommendation based, theoretically, on the student’s test scores and grades during that last year of elementary school. Despite this seemingly meritocratic system of assigning students to high and low tracks for 6<sup>th</sup> grade, there is a great deal of evidence that it is not so fair or so scientific. Furthermore, it is clear that students whose parents are more efficacious and who carry more political weight in the district – generally white and more affluent parents – have more influence over the process than do parents with less voice in the Clearview district. These would be the working class and poor parents who are more likely to be the parents of color.

As one of the Clearview Middle School teachers explained in talking about the placement process for getting students into the honors versus Regents track in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, “It’s the involved parents who are going to push their kids ahead, whether or not they belong in a top class.”

This teacher argued that these students with involved parents who push to get their children into the higher level classes, might be better off in the lower track, but that does not seem to factor into the parents’ decisions to push for a higher placement. What does seem to motivate the parents in such situations is the symbolic meaning of the different level classes, as reflected in the differentiated enrollment of students. “We still have some parents that feel their kids should only be with certain types of kids, and that’s a reality of the situation in Clearview. So as a result, we have much smaller Regents classes as opposed to the honors classes...”

The meaning of the different tracks in Clearview Middle School, for the students and their parents, is debated within the school community. But it does appear that the actual content of the courses and the pedagogy across the tracks is less stark than the different titles and status-levels of the tracks suggest. First of all, because the middle school is organized into teams, and each team has both honors and Regents track classes within it, students across tracks and within the same team have access to the same teachers. Furthermore, based on our interviews with several Clearview teachers across disciplines and teams, they vary in terms how distinct the content and pace the separate honors and Regents classes are at any given moment.

According to one of the English teachers, differences between her Regents and honors classes in terms of curriculum are not that great. Still, she noted that the level of discussions held and her expectations for the writing assignments are dissimilar across tracks. Other teachers described greater differences between honor and Regents classes. Still what remains consistent is the potential impact of these high- versus low-track classes in shaping students’ future options in high school. And there is also the ways in which the parents and students make sense of what it means to be an “honors” versus a “Regent” student, and how that relates to this issues of academic identity that we discussed above. According to the Clearview principal, who wants to do away with the rigid tracking system in the school. She noted: “Because we call a track ‘honors,’ and I think that sends a loud and clear message to an adolescent that you’re dishonorable if you’re not in honors, and that there are lower expectations. Whether this is really true... And in some cases, I do think that they are.”

Similarly, one of the Clearview Middle School social studies teachers who has, along with the principal and a small cadre of teachers, been trying to move the school away from the inflexible tracking structure, noted that her recommendation has been to create more flexible groupings for the 6<sup>th</sup> graders – that they are too young to be boxed in to a “low” or “high” track and trajectory because “kids then internalize this and they live it. I find the mind is very powerful, it’s a self fulfilling prophecy.”

This teacher argues that to even provide one more year of schooling before locking students into a track placement would give them more time to consider the consequences of what course they take in middle school. She said that, ideally she would rather that all three grades of middle school be “heterogeneous” or detracked – “that everyone was pushed, and that everyone would receive the extra help when they needed it, but I don’t think Clearview is ready for that.”

When asked why she thought Clearview was not yet ready to go further than 6<sup>th</sup> grade with its detracking reform, she cited the stability of the town, the fact that many parents and

teachers in the district grew up there themselves, and that this is the way it has always been done. “People are so used to this, they’re very comfortable with it, they understand it, and I think there’s resistance to change.”

In particular, this teacher and many others we interviewed in Clearview noted that there are some parents in this diverse school district who push their children very hard – much like the Belvedere parents discussed above. At the same time, there are parents more like those in Grantsville who are overwhelmed with the daily demands of being poor, recent immigrants, and people of color. The “fear,” on the part of more high-status and stressed out parents is that if too many students with uninvolved parents are in classes with their children, “either curriculum won’t be pushed as much as it had been, possibly discipline might become an issue.”

Indeed, the Clearview principal recognizes that her efforts to “detrack” will not be welcomed by the most affluent white parents who live on one end of the district. She noted that getting such parents, who are highly influential in local school board elections and on the middle school PTA, on board with this reform will be the most difficult part of what lies ahead. She said that generally, the parents of the highest-achieving students are the parents who wield the most power in the district, who do participate in their children’s school, and are far more vocal. Meanwhile, the parents of the other, lower-achieving students do not have a voice here. “So that’s our challenge because those [affluent and involved parents] are the parents who will go the Board meetings, take the microphone and say, ‘My child will not be successful without this Honors track’.”

In fact, several people we interviewed suggested that the Clearview School Board has not yet moved forward with a recommendation from a committee it appointed to partially detrack the middle school because a few of the board members were up for re-election and these powerful parents were adamantly opposed to the changes. As the principal notes, “I think we have those outspoken people who have the money, you know, and who want to do what they want to do. Their kids are privileged and they don’t want their kids mixing with them.”

When asked if she was talking more about issues of race or issues of poverty and social class in terms of the affluent parents talking about “them,” she said “I think more race, but both. Yeah, both.”

Still, there is some evidence that this political stalemate regarding the issue of tracking in Clearview is slowly beginning to change. In fact, one of the most interesting developments in this district in recent years is that several members of the top district administration and the principals of the middle and high schools are all working on developing less rigid and more equitable ways to organize students in these two schools. They all are basically trying to “detrack” the secondary schools. And while they are up against stiff opposition from the powers that be in this school district, the fact that they are there, supporting the educators, students and parents who agree with them, and the fact that the racial/ethnic and socio-economic diversity of the school districts helps to make its internal discrepancies even more stark, are two hopeful signs. This also means that Clearview has become a “site of struggle” over issues of diversity and school success and achievement.

### **Hopeful Moments in a Less Hopeful Context: Sites of Struggle For Diversity and Success**

This last theme under Finding #6 is nascent but critical to a more hopeful view of what can develop in the diverse but divided suburban counties that constitute Long Island. In this final

section of the report we highlight once again what is happening in the Clearview school district – one of only 12 stable *and* racially diverse school districts on Long Island. Given what we have discussed thus far in this report, it is clear that as far as boundaries between educational opportunities are concerned, district boundaries appear to be the most consequential. As we noted above, the within district and school boundaries that are created and generally used to separate students by race/ethnicity and class, are also problematic, but seemingly, based on this research, more permeable. Moreover, as we noted above, within these racially diverse districts, the close proximity of separate and unequal educational spaces – in the case of Clearview, just across corridors -- helps to highlight the injustice of segregation within the field of education. Furthermore, the existence of these relatively stable but diverse schools where students can remain separated by boundaries but physically in similar spaces, means that our larger democracy maintains critical sites of struggle over which issues of diversity and equality can be debated. Absent such sites of struggle, as we call them, there are few places in our diverse but divided society in which such conversations or debates can occur.

Perhaps the most hopeful aspect of the struggle over tracking and within-school segregation that Clearview Middle School has begun is the support for such a movement by key educators within the district who are trying to provide an alternative vision of the way things could be. For instance, the middle school principal, whom we quoted above, has a strong vision of why her school needs to “detrack,” even if she lacked, at the time we visited, the political tools or strategy for getting there. In our many interviews with this school leader, she talked at length about how the current system has not helped students who have high ability but have historically not been successful in school. For such students, she noted, “There’s a discrepancy between their ability and their performance. Especially a lot of our students who are African American and Latino, I think helping them reach their potential is a big challenge.”

In particular, the principal wants to see more of the low-income parents of color who are currently disenfranchised from the district and schools more involved. She said that too often public schools were seen as unwelcoming when these parents were students, and they still see the “schools” as racist institutions where they’re not welcome. “They’re very disenfranchised from feeling like they have a voice in the school. So I think that’s a challenge, you know, changing that perception and making parents feel welcome. Also it’s a challenge with some families that their immigration status is questionable or they don’t have the documentation that they should have, and I think that makes them very reluctant to come to school.”

This principal’s vision of a more equal school is felt and appreciated by her students, particularly African American students who have felt somewhat marginalized in the middle school prior to the new principal’s arrival. As one African American student we interviewed noted, the new principal has brought “a lot of positive attitude” to the school. When asked what she meant by that, this student talked about the principal’s sense of caring toward the students and the segregated black community in which this student lives. She talked about this principal, a white woman, coming to her neighborhood and talking with parents there to try to get them to the school and to be part of the decision-making process.

The African-American student, for instance, recalled her mother standing on the porch of their house when the white principal came down their street:

... and my mother was like, who is that? And I was like, that’s the principal. And then that’s when she told my mother that she

wants me to be in Honors. And my mother was like, well, you have a lot of guts to walk around a town with your students. And she was like, yeah I do because I want to know what they're about and how they're living and stuff.

Despite the principal's sincere effort to connect with the parents of the lower-achieving students, the road from the highly tracked middle school to a more equitable distribution of students and educational opportunities is long. Interestingly enough, this relatively new principal and even her predecessor have put into place several key elements in the middle school that will help smooth the path for a more dramatic tracking change. For example, as we noted above, students in the middle school is organized into teams that share the same six common teachers across classrooms. Not only do these teams help build smaller learning communities, but they are also a foundation for greater equity because they assure more equal access to precious resources – including teachers – across tracks within each team. In other words, all the students on a given team have access to the same teachers across subjects. Each team then, consists of two or three honors classes and two Regents classes. Also, because the electives offered in the middle school are not tracked into honors and Regents, it means that students from different tracks within the same team are often together in the same class for non-core subjects. Meanwhile, the teachers on a team can use their common planning time to discuss specific students on the team – making the chance of moving from one track to another less problematic.

This process of team teaching and sharing teachers across tracks is somewhat unusual and hopeful – because it means teachers are not “tracked” along with the students. It also means the process of changing the system should be, in theory, anyway easier because teachers have not developed a sense of ownership about one track level or another. This is a sharp contrast to many schools with hierarchical or tracked ability grouping practices. For instance, in the Leesburg school district, which is also very diverse but unstable, and also highly tracked, the teachers talk about working within their assigned tracks and not knowing students with different placements at all. As one special education teacher in Leesburg High School explained, “I mean, there’s literally a side of the school that I don’t know. And my friends that teach AP calculus and AP statistics have never met any of my students, and I have never met any of theirs. So there is a divide...”

One of the other hopeful signs within the Clearview district, or more specifically, the middle school is the relatively new policy of “self selection” into honors classes for students. This process is designed to help chip away at the rigidity of the tracking system by allowing students and parents to veto the 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers’ recommendations for track placements of students. Under this system, a parent who wants his or her child in an honors class to ask to have him or her moved. Generally, such self-selection requests are granted, although students progress in their high-track classes are often monitored by the teachers throughout the year. In fact, according to some critics of this on-going monitoring process, there is too much pressure placed on the self-selected students to do extremely well in the honors classes in order to keep their seat in those higher tracks. Such monitoring does not occur for the students who were recommended for honors by their 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers. Also, it appears as first blush that many of the students taking advantage of the self-selection process in the early stages are white students with anxious parents.

But this is where the educators come in, including the middle school principal who is actively working with students and parents from the low track to get them more involved in the

school – to have more voice there – and thus to support needed change in the schools and the choice of higher-level classes. Yet because of the issues related to academic identity discussed above, too many of the students who have been in low-track classes for too long, do not want to move up. As we noted, these students are worried about their GPAs decreasing if they move to the higher level classes. They also feel a greater sense of identity and connection and/or comfort with the lower track classes, where many of their friends are still enrolled. Furthermore, there are plenty of Clearview teachers, particularly those who have been there a long time, who argue that the self-selection process forces them to water down their curriculum and lower their standards in the honors classes. Some of these teachers, especially those who live in the community and are tied to the powerful parents who resist detracking, may be resisting the reform for political reasons. Still, these and other teachers with fewer political ties, could have benefited from more staff development on how to draw on the strengths of all students within detracked classrooms. Other helpful support systems, some of which are now being implemented in Clearview Middle School, include back-up (or double dose) classes for students who need extra support outside of the honors classroom.

Despite the above-mentioned obstacles the students of color face in moving themselves from Regents to honors, the principal and other educators at the school report that the self-selection process has blurred the racial lines within the school somewhat, although not yet enough. Still, the principal, who had to be an optimist to take this job, noted with quite a high degree of optimism, “I think we have an opportunity to really make changes, you know, in the status quo, make changes for children...”

And finally, one more factor that will work in the Clearview district’s favor in its attempt to tear down the boundaries between tracks and thus classrooms and students is its proximity to and affiliation with a neighboring school district that has successfully detracked its schools years ago. This nearby district, while less racially/ethnically diverse and more white than Clearview, has been through this process and maintains several critical and potentially helpful ties to key educators in the Clearview system. For instance, one of the top administrators in the Clearview district as well as one of the lead teachers in the middle school have had children enrolled in or graduated from this nearby district. One of these educators has two children in the detracking schools – one, a son, who is high achieving and would have been in high-tracked classes had they existed. This teacher’s second child, her daughter, struggles more in school and would most likely have been in a low-track class. What’s interesting is the way in which both students have benefited from the detracked environment of the neighboring Long Island district’s schools:

My daughter is bright, but doesn’t catch everything right away. So she would have classically been one of those Regent’s students here [in Clearview], that would never have made it into honors but would have benefited from being pushed... And I moved to [the neighboring, detracking district]... She’s had a few bumps on the road, as I expected, but overall really doing well. And I think, performing better than if she had not had those high expectations. My son did well, but then he would have anywhere... And I’ve asked him what he felt about, cause he’s one of the brighter ones, right, things come easily, how did he feel having kids who struggle more working together? And he said, ‘it

doesn't bother me.' He says that he liked [the detracked classrooms], that he felt they added to conversations in the classroom... He never felt it slowed him down.

Meanwhile, this neighboring school district provides a sophisticated system of back up or support classes for students who need extra help to perform well in the higher level classes. According to the teacher quoted above, the students there do not consider it a bad thing to be in the extra help classes. She noted, "The kids don't see it as bad, cause so many do. It's just seen as, if you need glasses you wear glasses, if you cut your knee you need a band-aid. It's not seen as anything negative."

These two Clearview educators who have children of their own who have attended detracked schools as well as other colleagues who know the success story of this neighboring district, are supportive of efforts to break up the rigid track system in Clearview. Furthermore, according to many of the Clearview educators we interviewed, it is the younger teachers in Clearview who are more enthusiastic about doing away with the rigid tracking system and the older teachers who are more set in their ways.

Among the younger and more pro-reform educators, many see this other, neighboring district as a beacon of hope – a symbol that this can be done successfully on Long Island. Still, despite this model, Clearview will face its own unique challenges. For one, as we noted, it is more racially/ ethnically and socio-economically diverse than the neighboring school district.

Perhaps the Clearview Middle School teacher with two children of her own – one super high achieving and one who is not – in detracked public schools summed up the reasons why Clearview should continue to struggle to dismantle its separate and unequal tracking structure: "... in such a diverse community as Clearview, I felt that, first and foremost, we're creating citizens. And I felt that was our most important goal... And [detracking] works. You balance the personalities, you balance genders, and they help each other. Not in a way where you slow down. In a way where I think things speed up."

### **Conclusion to Finding #6:**

The one racially/ethnically and socio-economically diverse and stable school district in our study is both a microcosm of the challenges that such district face and the promise of a diverse and vibrant democracy that they hold. These "sites of struggle" within public schools embody both the hopes and fears of a society faltering at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, not yet poised to capture the full potential of its increasingly global population – a society that gives much lip service to the idea of equal educational opportunity, but too rigidly divides students based on phenotype and privilege, only to doom those with darker skin and less affluence to dead-end programs and classes.

Clearview is far from figuring out how to serve all of its diverse students well. It is subject to many of the same political pressures as the educators in Belvedere. But in the case of Clearview, these pressures only apply to some of the students. Meanwhile, the educators in this district face fierce opposition from the powers that be in that context to extending such opportunities and expectation to less advantaged children. In this way, the story of how and why boundaries matter plays out within the walls of single schools and not across school district lines. This proximity is important though, especially in the ways in which people within Clearview see

the boundaries. For some, this proximity makes them more anxious about maintaining the boundaries; for others, it is a sign of their fragility.

### **Conclusions and Policy Recommendations**

The point of collecting qualitative data for this larger examination of school districts on Long Island was to better understand the ways in which the people who live within this separate and unequal public educational system make sense of it, how they help perpetuate it, and their both their perceptions and their actions legitimize and reinforce it. The findings discussed in this report speak to these understandings and their relationship to the structural inequalities illustrated in the quantitative data.

Throughout the various sections of this report we have documented the many facets and layers of inequality within the educational system and the central role that boundaries play in maintaining those inequalities. We have seen first-hand and up close the age-old story of school desegregation in the U.S., namely, that once one racial/ethnic boundary is crossed, new more micro-level boundaries and barriers are erected to maintain distance and distinctions across racial ethnic groups, with white affluent students consistently on the more privileged side of the divide. We have known this story of recreated and reinforced boundary lines from other research on desegregation and resegregation. What we have not really understood is how this process is understood and legitimized by those working and interacting with the educational institutions in which it is embedded. This report helps us to see this process and its relationship to both tangible and intangible resources.

For instance, the first finding presented above demonstrates the many ways in which private funds and resources, for instance, both enhance and complicate the quantitative funding data drawn from the public revenues helps us understand both the greater importance of school district boundaries and the multiple, contextual ways in which they interact with several intangible factors in the field of education. Beginning with this discussion of the iterative nature of public and private resources led us to another set of insights about the multiple ways in which both tangible and intangible resources shape the educational opportunities of students within schools – through the academic press and identity of schools and students as well as the reputation of districts and schools and the political strength of the constituents.

Given all these nuances and layers of inequality, and given the final sections of the report, which show how difficult it is to make racially diverse schools work and how strong the resistance is toward efforts to dismantle the current structures that keep schools and students separate and unequal, we make the following policy recommendations:

1. **Cross-District Cooperation/Collaboration (via BOCES) for Education** – Building on the effective role that BOCES now play in the purchasing of toilet paper, we can envision BOCES playing a more educative role in helping students cross school district boundaries and thereby gain exposure to a more diverse mix of students. And, in the case of the poorest students, they would also gain access to higher status institutions and curriculum. One way to do this is to expand upon the current BOCES special education or vocational education programs and to lessen the costs of such programs for students in poor districts. Meaningful magnet-like programs could be developed to attract students with shared interests from across district boundaries. Much like the



regional magnet schools currently operating in New Jersey through county departments of education, New York State could provide incentives for BOCES to develop and sustain such programs, particularly in places like Nassau and Suffolk counties, which are so fragmented into geographically and demographically tiny school districts.

2. **Inter-district Transfers of Students** – Using the eight inter-district school desegregation programs across the country as a model (see Wells, et. al., 2009), we would like to see Long Island school districts develop a program that allows students to cross district boundaries to go to school. In these national models, mostly lower-incomes students of color transfer into more affluent and whiter districts, although in a few of these programs, white students have been drawn to urban magnet schools as well. In this way, such inter-district choice plans would compliment efforts by BOCES to develop regional magnet schools. It is possible that the BOCES would also provide the infrastructure for these choice-oriented programs, including outreach and recruitment, an application process and free transportation across district lines. In an era when school choice policy is supposed to solve all the problems of public education and when NCLB requires districts to give more schools choices to students currently enrolled in failing schools, it seems that developing inter-district choice policies to facilitate the transfer of students from failing to non-failing, from disadvantages to privileged schools and districts would garner bi-partisan support on Long Island.
3. **Blurring District Boundaries** – If full-blown consolidation of many small, expensive and highly fragmented school districts on Long Island is not a political option at this time, we need to consider when and how it might make sense for the boundaries between some groups of districts to become more porous, allowing the flow of students and teachers across them – if not for whole school days, then for special events, classes and programs. This relates to the inter-district choice policies discussed above, but it might also include more pooling of resources for certain specialized and expensive educational programs. If two school districts, for instance, pooled their resources to operate a joint fashion design program such as the one in Belvedere, it would reduce the cost per pupil of operating such a program while brining students with like interests together across district lines. Through the use of transportation and technology, teachers could collaborate across district boundaries to provide world-class programs that are particularly geared to the New York metro economy. They could partner with global corporations and non-profit institutions in New York City to help their students create valuable professional networks, etc.
4. **Support Diverse Districts** – The New York State legislature should take a hard look at the demographic future of this country, state and the suburban communities most members of that body represent. Through such research, state assembly and senate members would see the value of supporting racially and ethnically diverse schools districts. Furthermore, as more of these districts are created via the migration of more blacks, Latinos and Asians into the suburbs, state policymakers should see the wisdom

in maintaining stability in diverse school districts, to keep them from becoming the self-fulfilling prophecy of poor districts serving many students of color with a low-level curriculum, a low expectations and few tangible or intangible resources. If these state leaders fully appreciated the repeated failures of separate and unequal education in the U.S., they might think of policies and programs that could help support and sustain them. Resources for faculty recruitment and development would be one important area of support. Others would include staff develop to help educators address issues of tracking and resegregation within racially and ethnically diverse schools. Funding to support programs geared toward getting more poor and minority parents more involved in the schools and district governance structure would be good as well.

5. **Amend New York State Laws to Provide Fewer Public Funds to Private Schools** – In our research in Leesburg, we learned that the New York laws regulating the use of public money in private schools are entirely too liberal and work against the fundamental First Amendment principle of the separation of church and state, but they also, in the case of Leesburg, especially, lead to a siphoning of funding from the have nots to the haves. It has also in this particular context created a system in which those making the decisions about public schools are not constituents of those schools. The race and social-class privilege of those not using the public schools, but using the public resources to off-set some of the cost of their private and religious education creates yet another form of serious inequality that needs to be addressed by a higher level of government.

Clearly, a great deal of work remains to be done in fragmented and segregated spaces such as Long Island, New York. The system of public education, laid down within this context and a central component of maintaining it, provides both the possibility for a solution to inequality as well as powerful excuse for doing nothing. Let's hope that Long Islanders heed the call of both the *Long Island Index Report 2009* and this more qualitative analysis of inequality and choose to take action to make their suburban setting a model for the future of a diverse society and not a throw back to a past of white flight, inequality and hyper segregation created and reinforced during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

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