

"Where there is no vision,
the people perish."

OPINION

Learning about our schools

■ The Long Island Index sheds light on inefficiencies and disparities in our districts. We need to fix inequalities for all public school students

Love is blind, they say, and that seems to be true of our love affair with Long Island schools. We seem to accept blithely the common view that our schools are great, but we don't look closely enough at critical data on costs and performance.

Now along comes the Long Island Index to help us see our schools more realistically. Among the many jarring numbers in its 2009 report, these two stand out starkly: 27 and 72.

From 1998 to 2006, the Consumer Price Index went up 27 percent, and the real property tax levy for schools went up 72 percent. But those numbers don't come completely out of the blue. A 2006 Index study found that property taxes here are 2.5 times the national average. Schools are the major reason.

The new 2009 Index study offers some data to explain those costs:

Nassau has 56 school districts and Suffolk 68, and that makes them seventh and fourth out of 3,000-plus counties in the country. With that many districts, it's not surprising that the size of many is too small to be cost-efficient. Three out of four districts have fewer than 5,500 students, and 83 percent cover fewer than 15 square miles.

That proliferation of districts costs money and adds to property taxes. Each district has its own administrative staff, and most spend more on purchasing than they would if they worked more



SOURCE: LONG ISLAND INDEX; PHOTOS.COM PHOTO

closely in concert with other districts.

In contrast, the Index says, Virginia's Fairfax County has only one school district — and 60 percent lower property taxes per capita. But that comparison doesn't help the debate. Unfortunately, given Long Island's political realities, notably the fierce devotion to local control of the schools, there is zero chance that

we'll ever have a single countywide school district here. In fact, even the merger of two districts is a heavy lift.

So we're stuck with too many small, inefficient districts — and with a system that delivers less than its reputation suggests. Conventional wisdom says that excellent education draws people here. "But while some of our schools are the

best in the country," the Index report says, "many are not doing well at all."

One example: Only 40 percent of students in high-poverty schools met the eighth-grade math standards compared to 80 percent in low- and medium-poverty schools. The schools that need the most don't always get the funds, but schools with more to spend don't always achieve better results.

But the report is not all gloom. It offers real ideas for change.

Perhaps the most significant would be a pooling of revenues from commercial property taxes. Right now, all the revenue from a large shopping mall goes to the district where it sits, but the neighboring districts get none of it. Pooling is already in effect in Minneapolis-St. Paul, and the Index's poll shows that 73 percent of us are ready to try it here on the Island.

The poll also shows support for creating magnet schools of excellence (66 percent), consolidating school districts (64 percent), and letting kids from underperforming districts attend nearby districts (64 percent).

Sadly, though, the report shows that only 26 percent of us know about the stark differences in spending from one district to another. That's a phenomenon that should concern every Long Islander, in every kind of school district.

This report arrives at a moment when all of us are feeling the economic pinch, a moment when all of us may be more open than usual to entertaining changes in our schools that will bring down their costs and level up their excellence. If its data and its suggestions ignite a serious conversation about those changes, the Long Island Index will have done us all a real service. 