

### What Every Long Islander Should Know About Tackling Taxes

By: Nancy Rauch Douzinas

It is said that most fights in a family are about money.

Long Island has long needed not a fight but a serious discussion about money. Its time may have finally arrived.

On September 19 the Long Island Index released a poll of public attitudes toward taxes and ways of cutting them. Since then, discussion of the issue has raged, in print, on blogs, and around office water coolers.

The poll revealed a disconnect between what Long Islanders think they should pay in taxes and what expenses they are willing to cut.

For ninety percent of us, to make taxes “reasonable” would take an average \$3,000 cut. However, where the biggest costs are—in the schools—is exactly where we are least willing to reduce spending.

Fully 65% oppose reducing current teacher salaries—the largest single school expense. Almost as many oppose cuts for new teachers. Consolidating school districts, another measure with potential for big savings, also meets resistance, with 46% opposed and 44% in favor.

There is greater support—63%—for consolidating schools’ back-office functions, such as purchasing, payroll, and insurance. Consolidating non-emergency services, such as water, garbage collection, and libraries, garnered 65% support. But these and other “acceptable” cuts would not lower taxes anything like \$3,000.

These findings sparked widespread commentary, from both pundits and ordinary citizens. Some faulted Long Islanders for wanting to have it both ways.

I see their point, and yet the public response is understandable. They are right that taxes are too high: so high that they are driving people away from the region in alarming numbers. At the same time, our schools are a regional mainstay, one of the things that keeps attracting newcomers. So, people’s resistance to school cuts also makes sense.

Interesting, too, is the response we got when we asked who should be responsible for cutting local taxes. Although schools account for 65% of the tax bill, only 7% thought school boards should be responsible. Seventy-eight placed responsibility either on the state (27%), the counties (36%), or the towns (15%).

Does this suggest a widespread belief that money for schools is well-spent, but money to larger government entities is being wasted? As long as people believe that, they will continue to resist major changes to the schools.

Where does all this leave us? Will we go on nibbling at cost-cutting, while continuing to chafe at high taxes? For how long?

Or, will push finally come to shove? And if it does, will we bite the bullet on some kind of systemic change in our schools? Or decide that we would rather live with high taxes?

Polls are not designed to resolve such issues, but rather to bring them into focus. A discussion—earnest and far-reaching—is now an urgent need. It’s a discussion all Long Islanders should join: among their neighbors, in the media, and on the web.

Together, let’s tackle this problem. We know taxes are too high. What are we *really* going to do about it?

*Nancy Rauch Douzinas is president of the Rauch Foundation, and convener of the Long Island Index.. The Index provides data about the Long Island region, in order to promote informed public debate and sound policy making. For more information visit [www.longislandindex.org](http://www.longislandindex.org).*