

## What Every Long Islander Should Know About School Costs

By: Nancy Rauch Douzinas

Everybody wants good schools. Nobody wants high taxes.

That, in brief, is the dilemma Long Island is facing. Good schools are one of the Island's top attractions—and essential for building the kind of workforce a region needs to prosper.

On the other hand, high taxes are helping to drive talented young people away.

What to do?

To help sort out the issues, the Long Island Index undertook a study comparing Long Island schools—and costs—with those of Fairfax and Loudoun Counties, prosperous suburbs in Northern Virginia. The findings may startle you a bit. Ultimately, I think they are encouraging.

To begin with, education on Long Island is much more expensive than in Northern Virginia. We spend \$17,392 per pupil—\$5,369 (45%) more than NVA. That translates into a tax bill \$834 higher for every man, woman, and child on Long Island.

Our first question might be, *Yes, but are their schools as good as ours?*

It appears that they are. In fact, NVA residents are actually more satisfied with their schools. Seventy-four percent of them rate the quality of education as “Good” or “Excellent”—compared with only 65% of Long Islanders.

We also compared student-teacher ratios, a common indicator of quality. NVA's average is 13:4, barely more than Long Island's 13:2. Both are lower than the national average of 16:1.

If the schools are comparable, why the difference in cost?

The most conspicuous difference between the regions is the number and size of school districts. Long Island has 127 districts,

averaging 3,735 students each; NVA has 3, averaging 68,953 students.

Analysis shows that district size impacts costs. We divided Long Island's school districts into quartiles, according to size. The largest districts (averaging 7,802 students) had costs of \$16,793 per student. That number climbed to \$21,183, 26% higher, for the smallest districts. In Northern Virginia, too, the largest of the three districts had the lowest costs, while the smallest district had the highest.

Many Long Islanders believe it's time to find ways to lower school costs. Ideas range from cooperative purchasing arrangements to consolidating school districts. But some people fear that quality would suffer and that larger districts would be less responsive to local concerns.

The Index's survey does not bear out those concerns. Northern Virginians are just as satisfied as Long Islanders with their access to officials, with 49% of both groups saying that it would be somewhat or very easy to make their school board aware of a specific problem. And overall, Northern Virginians are more satisfied with their school boards, with 52% believing that members can be trusted to do what is right all or most of the time, compared to 43% of Long Islanders.

All in all, Long Islanders should be pleased by the news from Virginia.

It tells us that lower costs—and lower taxes—are possible without sacrificing quality. As Long Island explores changes for our region's future, the findings may help relieve our fears, and encourage us to be bold.

*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) click on to special analysis.*