



## **What Every Long Islander Should Know About Our Schools**

By: Nancy Rauch Douzinas

May arrives on Long Island. It's the season for Moms . . . azaleas . . . and school budget votes.

Last year, as you probably know, Long Islanders voted down more than one-third of first-round budgets. That was a rate three times higher than the state average.

What's that about?

Some say it's the result of changing demographics, an aging population with no children in the schools. A recent Long Island Index poll confirmed that voters aged 65 and older are more likely to vote against their school budget.

Others argue that the defeated budgets were less a matter of long term changes than specific local grievances. Our poll found evidence for that view, as well.

Our poll also found that people living in high-needs school districts (districts with a large number of disadvantaged children) were more likely to oppose their budgets. Their dissatisfaction is not surprising when you consider the achievement gap between high-needs districts and the rest of the Island: 15 percentage points lower on the fourth grade reading test and 31 points lower on the eighth grade math test.

Probably the most popular explanation for the budget defeats is that voters are fed up with their tax bills.

School costs are indeed high. Average school property taxes on Long Island for 2004-2005 were just over \$5,000, more than two-thirds the total property tax bill. And school expenditures have been rising—26% from 1998 to 2003.

These costs pose a serious, high-stakes dilemma. On the one hand, good schools are central to our region's success. They are among the main factors that attract people to Long Island. Plus, they produce an educated, professional workforce that is vital to maintaining a competitive economy.

At the same time school costs help fuel an affordability crisis that is driving people away and threatening our region's viability.

So where does that leave us? It seems like we're doomed if we do and doomed if we don't.

The answer lies in thinking outside the ballot box. As voters, we're presented only a Yes or No choice on our own local budgets. We need to consider broader options.

What might a regional solution look like?

Schools could be financed differently. In some places, commercial property taxes are pooled and distributed evenly among school districts. This not only improves equity and outcomes for poorer districts. It also helps normalize land use, which has long been skewed as local governments all try to



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maximize revenue-enhancing commercial property and discourage needed housing.

Other approaches include replacing part of our property taxes with an income tax, shifting revenues from wealthy districts to poorer ones and consolidating school districts.

These ideas are complex, requiring careful consideration. They also require cooperation. Different government entities will have to work together.

That's difficult, but not impossible. The public is supportive; polls show they are ready for a new approach. We need leaders who can join together and work together, regionwide. Other regions are doing it. Long Island can do it too.

*This is one in a series of articles examining aspects of life on Long Island, presented by the Long Island Index. The Index provides data about the Long Island region, in order to promote informed public debate and sound policymaking. For more information visit [www.longislandindex.org](http://www.longislandindex.org).*

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