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Separate, unequal

Long Island's persistently segregated school districts cheat our black and Latino students out of quality education

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Gross: LI schools are separate and unequal

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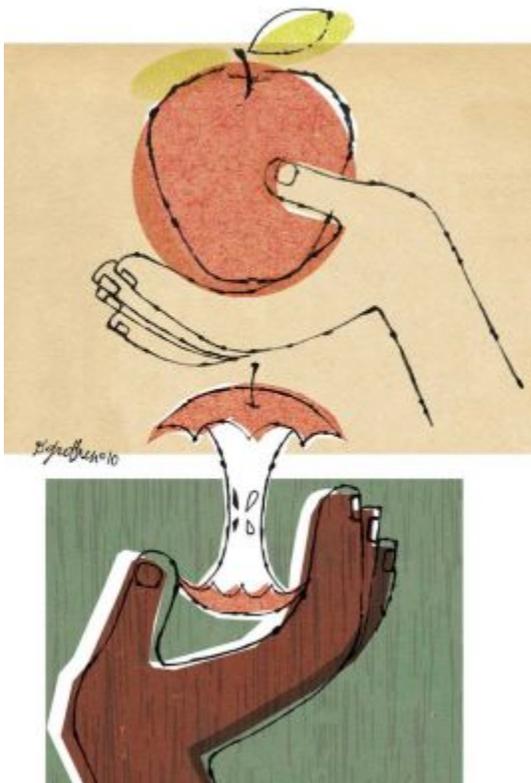


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As school graduations draw near, funding cuts and property tax caps capture the headlines. Nowhere can you find any mention of this fact: Americans with inferior and incomplete educations are more likely to be unemployed, unhealthy and incarcerated.

Because I'm African-American, I risk being accused of "playing the race card" when I ask [Long Islanders](#) to consider that continuing to support 124 racially segregated Long Island school districts is not giving all our students a fair shake. I'll take that risk: We can't overcome existing disparities and improve educational and social outcomes for all our students if we don't face the problem squarely.

Virtually all of us agree that the health of American democracy and the economy requires an increasingly well-educated population in this rapidly changing, knowledge-based world. Yet Long Island continues to confront new barriers and maintain old ones that ensure many students won't be educated enough to become productive workers or engaged citizens. This failure will cost not only the students and their families, but also the region and country.

As president of Erase Racism, I've worked with a committed corps of staff and volunteers to eliminate barriers to racial equity on Long Island. One of our accomplishments is the creation of a safe environment for talking about how institutional and public policies can limit opportunity for blacks and Latinos. We've begun a dialogue that rises above the buffoonish antics of some of our public figures -- and brings light, not heat, to the raging debates about race and racism.

For all the hard-won progress, however, much remains unrealized. Despite the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision barring racially segregated schools, Long Island's public schools are still overwhelmingly segregated, mirroring our extreme residential segregation.

Well-documented housing discrimination continues to be the root cause of Long Island's infamous -- and unfortunate -- position as one of the most racially segregated regions in the country, a distinction confirmed by [2010 Census](#) data. The 8 percent decrease in Long Island's non-Hispanic white population in the past decade reflects greater overall diversity, but the region isn't really less segregated.

There are no laws on Long Island mandating segregated and unequal schools, of course. But nonetheless, the structure of our public education system produces exactly that: poor educational outcomes for far too many black and Latino students, who are denied access to the schools deemed high-achieving.

Consider that only 9 percent of the Island's black students, and 14 percent of its Hispanic students, were enrolled in the top 25 percent of Long Island's best schools in 2008-09, according to the [U.S. Department of Education](#).

That means that the vast majority of black and Latino students are in lesser-performing schools. Most of these students are trapped in racially isolated residential districts where school district lines mirror that segregation. Families can't send their children to another district. Such structural racism can't go unchallenged.

How can it be acceptable that in 2009, [Hempstead](#) had a four-year graduation rate of 50 percent and just down the street, [Garden City](#)'s rate was 96 percent? Or that in [Suffolk](#), [Central Islip](#)'s rate was 52 percent, while its neighbor, [West Islip](#), had a 95 percent rate? Hempstead and Central Islip have majorities of black and Hispanic students, while the other districts have white majorities.

Take a look at the Long Island school districts in which 90 percent or more of the students are black or Hispanic. On average, only 2 percent of their students score at the highest level on the state's eighth-grade English language arts examination and 8 percent on the mathematics examination. By contrast, on average, 17 percent of the students in districts that are 90 percent or more white or Asian score at the highest level on the eighth-grade English language arts examination and 36 percent on the math exam. As there are virtually no black or Latino students in these school districts, the opportunity for them to learn in these high-performing environments is nonexistent.

We don't need bigots to ensure unequal education. We only need a lot of people -- even people of goodwill -- who allow the status quo to continue, regardless of the consequences. And the consequences go beyond the tragedy of unfulfilled dreams. They go to the heart of our ability to produce a workforce to keep the economy percolating for people of all races and income levels.

Now is the time for serious dialogue about restructuring schools to achieve educational excellence and racial integration, while realistically and fairly funding them. Everything needs to be on the table for discussion, including district boundaries.

Erase Racism analyzed what the demographic composition of Long Island school districts would be if they mirrored town and city boundaries. This would produce a total of 15 districts, which would be far less segregated by race and income -- a configuration that offers a path to integration by disbanding the separate and unequal school system that exists today.

Racially integrated schools are the best way to ensure more equal access to high-quality education. A good example is [Rockville Centre](#), where about 20 percent of the students in the high school and middle school are black or Latino. In the 1990s, administrators in that district were troubled by the persistent achievement gap between, on the one hand, blacks and Latinos, and on the other, whites and Asian-Americans. So instead of isolating all "gifted" students in one class and the "slow learners"

in another, they mixed the classes by ability and race, and taught a new, more rigorous curriculum to all.

After these heterogeneously grouped classes were introduced, the standardized test scores for black and Latino students rose to dramatically close the achievement gap. And the test scores for whites increased as well. Racial diversity is sometimes seen as a problem to be avoided at any cost, but in Rockville Centre, integrating at the classroom level proved to be beneficial to all the students.

Inaction to correct racial inequities results in discrimination. Civil rights laws must be enforced, and discriminatory policies must end. Especially in these times of lower budgets, when funding for all public education is at risk, we must transform the broken and cruel system that has shortchanged Long Island's students of color for years. Every year we do nothing is another year lost in the lives of our children. Every 13 years, we lose another generation. The children and our community can't afford to wait any longer for change.