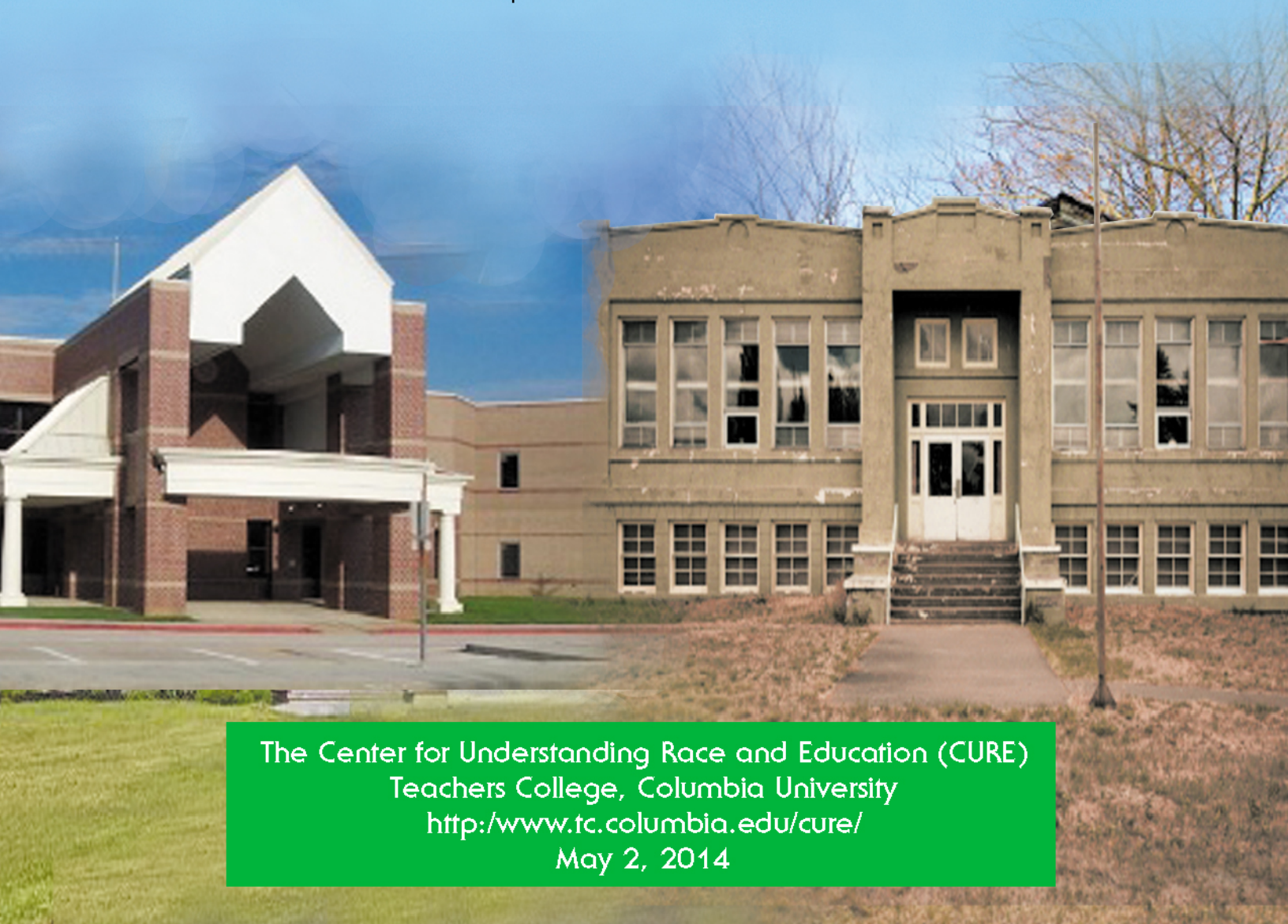


# **DIVIDED WE FALL:** The Story of Separate and Unequal Suburban Schools 60 Years after Brown v. Board of Education

Amy Stuart Wells, Douglas Ready, Lauren Fox, Miya Warner,  
Allison Roda, Tameka Spence, Elizabeth Williams and Allen Wright

Views expressed are those of the authors



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May 2, 2014

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... Originally [early 1950s] we looked for houses in Brooklyn, and I said one day this is really not what I want. I wanted *suburbia* and that's when we started looking out on the Island. Then we found this community... The school was close by. It was also probably 99% Jewish... Yeah we moved from one ghetto to another ghetto.... we moved because I wanted *suburbia*.

- a white woman who moved from Brooklyn to a Long Island suburb in 1956

[This school district] was my final choice because it's diverse. There're many different cultures there, and the school system is actually very good. I knew I couldn't afford to send her to private school so in looking for a house I needed a good school district, and [this one] kind of won in two ways... it was a good school system and then it was a diverse school system.

- a black woman who moved from Queens to the same suburb 50 years later

This report is a clarion call for those paying attention to the changing racial and ethnic demographics of this country and its suburbs in particular. It is the in-depth story of one suburban county and its public schools as the demographics of who lives in the suburbs versus the cities in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is shifting quickly, as the affluent and the poor, the black and the white are trading places across urban-suburban boundary lines. The same story could be told about hundreds of suburban counties across the country that are facing similar pressures and approaching similar breaking points.

In the statistical data we analyzed and in the voices of the 800 people we interviewed and surveyed in Nassau County, Long Island – the home of Levittown, the first post-WWII archetypal suburb -- there is mounting anxiety about the future of American suburbs and their public schools. We found much frustration about how the economy, housing market, lack of infrastructure and public policies negatively affect these communities. In this report, we convert this angst into a reality check for anyone who may think that racially and ethnically diverse suburbs are easily accomplished or that they do not face serious obstacles.

These obstacles include racially and ethnically segregated housing patterns amid fragmented and divided municipalities and school districts and the “brain drain” of more affluent and educated residents who grew up in the suburbs but now prefer city life. Meanwhile, these suburbs are “tubs on their own bottoms,” heavily reliant on “local” sources of funding, namely property taxes, to pay for public schools and municipal services. This means that public school resources *and* reputations are spread unevenly across separate and unequal suburban districts.

Precisely because so many suburbs are small and autonomous, they and their public schools face mounting pressures to sustain themselves economically. Without “good” public schools that attract homebuyers and stabilize communities, things start to fall apart. People with the income to pay higher property taxes and with the education levels to demand more of public schools leave in search of schools and communities that are viewed as being “higher quality.” Communities and public schools then become overwhelmed by the needs of less advantaged students amid shrinking tax revenues and declining resources.

In the new suburban reality, “good” public schools are becoming more diverse in terms of the races, ethnicities, income levels, countries of origin and religions of the students they now serve. American suburbs, therefore, provide the best setting for addressing how to make diverse public schools work for all students.

This report tells two intertwined stories about suburban public education:

1. The economic, political and social pressures suburban public school districts face today, which we refer to as **“the perfect storm”** of factors, from tax caps and budget cuts to the burdensome accountability system and the anti-public school politics.
2. The process by which creating separate and unequal schools and communities tends to repeat itself again and again.

This report also offers some insight into how we could reverse this trend in a country that is changing rapidly in terms of our demographics, our public, and our sense of who we are.

### **Section One:**

#### **Suburban-City Migration Patterns – Race and Trading Places:**

##### **The Demographic Sea Change of a Nation and its Suburbs**

Much attention has been paid to the fact that the U.S. population overall is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. The media have pointed out repeatedly that by the middle of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, this country’s population overall will no longer be majority white, non-Hispanic. Even more notably, this transition is happening much more quickly amid our younger



population. Come September 2014, for the first time in our nation's history, white students will no longer constitute a majority of the country's public school enrollment, according to the U.S. Department of Education. Rapid growth in the Hispanic and Asian populations coupled with a black population that has remained constant and a decline in the percentage of whites has led to a total kindergarten-12<sup>th</sup> grade enrollment that will be 49 percent white, 26 percent Hispanic, 15 percent black; and 5 percent Asian in the 2014-15 school year.

Coinciding with this changing racial makeup of our country and our public schools is a profound shift in *who* lives *where*. In many ways, our post WWII paradigm of "chocolate cities and vanilla suburbs" has been turned on its head. For the last 25 years in particular, the first and second ring suburbs of major cities have been at the forefront of the reversal of "white flight" from cities to suburbs after WWII. Indeed, by 1980, many cities had become predominantly black and/or Latino, housing 67 percent of blacks and 50 percent of Latinos, but only 24 percent of whites lived in these city centers (U.S. Census, 1993). At that time, only 23 percent of blacks lived in the suburbs. Furthermore, black suburbanization rates were even lower – about 12-15 percent -- in the Northeast (Harrigan, 1993).<sup>1</sup>

A subsequent phase of metropolitan change, beginning slowly in the 1980s, entailed increasing minority suburbanization. During this time, growing numbers of middle-class black, Latino and Asian families left urban communities for the suburbs, seeking the lifestyle advantages whites had sought decades earlier—larger homes with yards, lower crime rates, less noise and dirt, and, the perception of better public schools. By 2000, nearly 40 percent of blacks were living in the suburbs. Suburbanization has also increased among immigrant families – mostly Latino and Asian --and by 2000, 48 percent of immigrants were residing in suburban areas, as the housing bubble was inflating (Frey, 2001).

By the 1990s, journalists and researchers were increasingly reporting on the growing number of distressed suburbs that were coming to resemble poor inner-city communities. For instance, Lucy and Phillips (2003) note that from 1990 to 2000, while some newly developing suburbs experienced rapid growth in people and jobs, "many older suburbs experienced central-city-like challenges, including an aging infrastructure, inadequate housing stock, deteriorating schools and commercial corridors – and population decline" (p. 117).

A 2000 report on cities versus suburbs concluded that while suburbs were still more affluent than cities on average, certain cities were becoming less poor and their residents were more educated than their suburban counterparts (Mumford Center, 2000). By 2008, an *Atlantic Monthly* article highlighted the impact of the sub-prime mortgage crisis on suburban communities experiencing high rates of foreclosures. But the author was quick to note that declining suburban neighborhoods did not begin with the mortgage crisis and that they would not end with it as more people with high incomes move into the cities (Leinberger, 2008).

This leads to what we have conceptualized in the current, post-2000 era, as the still evolving period of metro migrations, which we refer to as the "trading places" phase (illustrated in Figure 1 below- see Frey, 2011). In this last decade, black and recent immigrant suburbanization has continued, but after a half-century of white flight to the suburbs, a growing number of upper-middle class and relatively more affluent whites are moving back into urban centers (Lees, Slayter, & Wyly, 2008). Lured by the convenience, excitement and culture of city

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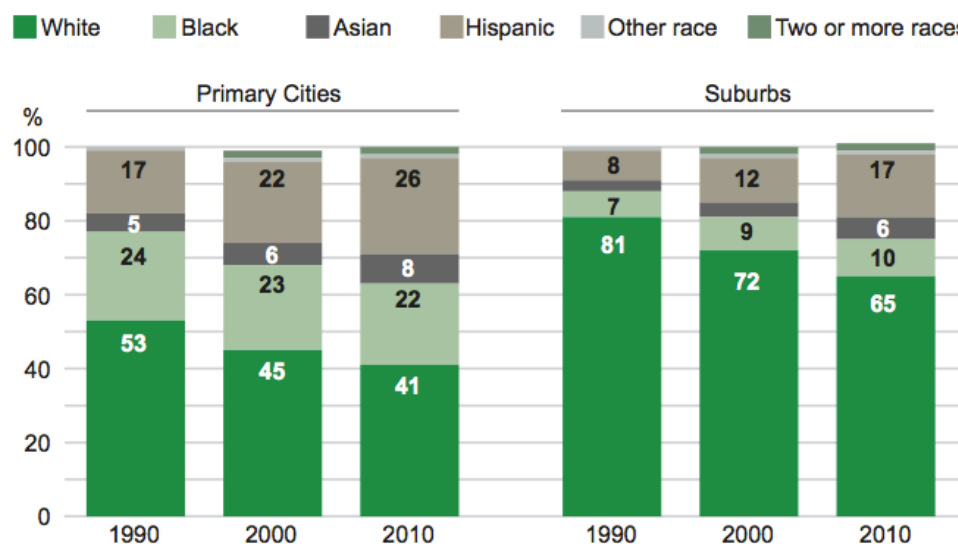
<sup>1</sup> It is important to bear in mind, however, that many "black suburbs" are simply smaller, high-poverty cities located near large cities (e.g., Camden, NJ and East St. Louis, IL; Massey & Denton, 1993). Areas that experienced substantial growth in black populations during this second phase of metropolitan change also tended to be older, "inner-ring" suburbs that were poor, experiencing social and economic decline, and rarely called to mind the "suburban ideal."

living, increasing numbers of highly skilled whites in so-called “global cities” such as New York and San Francisco have opted out of long daily commutes by living in nearby urban, and often gentrified, neighborhoods (Sassen, 2006). City life, once considered by many whites as dangerous, dirty and crowded, is now increasingly associated with excitement, fun and convenience (see Leinberger, 2008). As Ehrenhalt (2012) notes, cities and suburbs have experienced a “demographic inversion” as a result of their changing racial composition.

While a small trickle of whites began moving back into so-called gentrified areas of cities in the late 1970s, the pace of gentrification has accelerated much more rapidly in recent years (Lees, Slayter & Wyly, 2008). The New York City metropolitan area represents a prime example of the most recent trading spaces phenomenon. For instance, the percentage of whites in Manhattan increased 28 percent between 2000 and 2006, while it declined in nearby suburban Nassau County. During the same six-year period, the Hispanic population declined by 2 percent in Manhattan, but increased by 20 percent in Nassau. This 21<sup>st</sup> century urban aristocracy—or “gentry”—is driving up home prices in select city neighborhoods, sometimes pushing lower income residents—mostly black and Latino—into outlying urban and inner-ring suburban communities (Freeman, 2006).

As the cities become magnets for young white professionals, most of whom grew up in the suburbs, there is a growing concern about the “brain drain” from the suburbs (Berger, 2014; Downtown Alliance, 2012; Long Island Index, 2010) and what the future of the suburbs will be.

Figure 1: Share of Population by Race/Ethnicity, Primary Cities and Suburbs, 1990-2010



Source: Frey, 2011.

This current, “trading places” phase of metro migrations did not happen by accident. Just as federal policies after WWII enabled white families to flee the cities while keeping many people of color out of the suburbs, several more recent federal policies encouraged lower-income black and Latino families to buy houses in the suburbs in the last two decades (Jackson, 1985; Hayden, 2003; Lamb, 2005; Massey and Denton, 1993). Starting in the late 1980s, a set of federal policies simultaneously supported a new form of “urban renewal,” which pushed millions of poor families out of cities, and greater homeownership for those families who had not been able to afford a home. The Hope VI program in the 1990s replaced public housing projects with mixed-income housing and provided vouchers to displaced housing project

residents for them to find housing in the private market – often in inner ring suburbs. A total of about 80,000 units were destroyed, and only 19 percent of the residents of these urban public housing projects actually moved back to the same sites. Those who moved out of assisted housing were more likely to end up in less-poor (although still not affluent) communities. But at the same time, the black residents in particular, remained in racially segregated communities that were 90 percent or more black (Sharkey, 2013; Urban Institute, 2004).

Meanwhile, federal policies such as the Community Reinvestment Act of 1995 provided incentives for banks and saving institutions to loan money to low-income home buyers. While this federal law greatly contributed to predatory lending practices and the eventual mortgage lending crisis, it first encouraged many black and Latino families to leave their urban neighborhoods and move to aging suburbs where the cost of housing remained relatively low compared to more affluent suburbs and many areas of gentrifying cities. According to Engel and McCoy (2008), between 1994 and 2003, black homeownership rose 15 percent and Hispanic homeownership rose more than 13 percent. Together, black and Hispanic homeownership rates rose nearly twice as fast as the white homeownership rate during that decade. Thus, it is no surprise that by 2006, the number of people living below the federal poverty line was greater in the suburbs than the cities. In fact, according to a University of Minnesota report, by 2012, only 18 percent of the population in the 50 largest metro areas of the country still lives in predominantly white, non-Hispanic suburbs (Orfield and Luce, 2012).

Overall, these fluctuating metropolitan characteristics suggest that traditional paradigms of “cities” versus “suburbs” are rapidly evolving in ways that we cannot yet completely comprehend. The advent of the trading places phenomenon, in particular, complicates our 50-year-old notions of clearly delineated urban-suburban boundaries – in terms of demographics, but economic transformations as well. Thus, common categorizations of cities versus suburbs—one characterized by communities in need, with high-rise housing projects and concentrated poverty, and the other middle-class (or higher) with single-family homes and peaceful neighborhoods -- may have outlived its usefulness. Indeed, it is increasingly clear that contemporary urban and suburban communities *each* contain pockets of poverty and affluence, often functioning as racially and ethnically distinct spaces. In fact, by 2005, one million more poor people lived in suburban compared to urban areas (Berube & Kneebone, 2006).

### **The End of the Suburbs?**

American suburbs are in the midst of an identity crisis. No longer the guaranteed destination for wealthy homebuyers, the suburbs have been declared “dead” by those tracking the migration of empty-nest Baby Boomers and their Millennial offspring into hipper city dwellings. Solidified by the uncertainty surrounding home-buying in the wake of the housing crisis, 77% of Millennials expressed a preference for urban life (Ehrenhalt, 2012). In her recent book, *The End of the Suburbs*, Galliger (2013) notes that 2011 was the first year in decades that population growth in the cities outpaced that of the suburbs, and home builders now say their best markets are the urban, gentrifying neighborhoods.

In many ways, this exodus from the suburbs to the cities is more than a migration--it's a blatant rejection of the suburban lifestyle in favor of city living, including more walkable neighborhoods, better public transportation and night life, and low-maintenance apartments with no yards to mow or driveways to shovel. Meanwhile, many older suburbs are facing mounting challenges such as aging infrastructure, high property tax rates, shrinking tax bases, lack of social services and public school systems heavily dependent on local funding. At the same time, the mortgage lending crisis and recession hit many middle-class suburbs hard, leaving foreclosed and abandoned houses and a rising poverty tax rate in its wake.

But before the suburban epitaph is written, it is worth noting that more than half of the U.S. population – about 53 percent -- still lives in these supposedly dying suburbs. Furthermore, these suburban residents are increasingly diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, and culture, giving the suburbs a far more cosmopolitan feel than in the post-WWII era. In fact, today, in the 50 largest metropolitan areas, 44 percent of residents live in racially and ethnically diverse suburbs, defined as between 20 and 60 percent non-white (Orfield and Luce, 2012).

#### Suburbia at the Crossroads

Amid this sea change, a nascent suburban revitalization movement is taking hold. At the center of this growing effort to save the suburbs is an appreciation of small, diverse communities where people work together to solve local problems, cross cultural boundaries and gain mutual respect. This is a tall order for suburbs established in the era of “white flight” from the cities. But as the demographics of the country as a whole have changed – now only 63 percent white, non-Hispanic -- racial attitudes have changed as well, with more Americans than ever *saying* they are willing to live in racially diverse communities.

Sustaining racially diverse suburbs is easier said than done, however, as too many realtors and home buyers inadvertently perpetuate patterns of segregation coupled with differences in property values for the same houses across racially distinct communities.

In the following sections of this report, we illustrate many of the structural forces working against sustaining diverse and dynamic suburban communities. We also provide some hope that those who want to make it happen can succeed.

### **Section Two**

#### **Patterns of Suburban Segregation and the Value of Place:**

##### **Long Island as a Microcosm**

*Thus, while much has changed in both urban and suburban communities since World War II, much has also stayed the same. In fact, the most consistent finding to emerge from research across these three phases of metropolitan change is that segregation along racial/ethnic lines has remained fairly constant in both urban and suburban contexts.* These patterns of segregation are experienced even more consistently by African Americans than by members of other racial groups. Numerous authors have noted that black suburbanization is rarely accompanied by racial integration, and that even middle-class African Americans remain highly segregated (Adelman, 2005).

It is true that in the midst of migrations within local sites, segregation usually lessens to some degree when blacks or Latinos first move into predominantly white suburbs or when whites begin to inhabit mostly black or Latino gentrifying urban neighborhoods. But over time, these neighborhoods, more often than not, become resegregated as whites depart economically declining suburbs and minorities become priced out of gentrified urban spaces (Farley & Squires, 2005; Freeman, 2006; Sethi & Somanathan, 2004; Reardon and Bischoff, 2011).

Meanwhile, the rapid increase in income inequality in the U.S. appears to be accompanied by a related increase in residential segregation by class. According to Reardon and Bischoff (2009), *both* income inequality and income segregation grew substantially in the decades from 1970 to 2000, the result of spatial concentration of the most affluent residents.

#### The Role of Public Schools

Thus, as metro migration patterns have changed and even reversed and patterns of segregation by race and income continue and worsen in some instances, a critical question remains unanswered by the existing research on these population shifts: What role do public schools play – given the many factors that affect people’s decisions about where they live – in

where different people end up and the on-going segregation and stratification across space and boundaries?

While a growing number of social scientists are attempting to explain these urban-suburban changes in terms of demographics, segregation patterns, housing and labor markets, there has been little systematic, multi-method analysis of the impact of public schools—their reputations, resources and enrollments in particular—on the movement of families across urban and suburban school district boundary lines (see Frankenberg and Orfield, 2013; Lareau, 2014). Nor do we really understand how racial/ethnic, socio-economic and political population shifts are impacting educators and their ability to serve rapidly changing student populations. If, as Leinberger (2008) suggests, the impact of these recent metropolitan migration patterns on cities and suburbs are likely to be profound, no less can be said of their potential impact on public schools.

Furthermore, we do know that, as with residential segregation, segregation in public schools appears to persist across urban and suburban contexts. For instance, Reardon and Yun's (2001; 2008) work demonstrates that suburban public schools tend to become more racially diverse initially as African Americans or Latinos move into formerly white suburban enclaves, but that over time, whites flee these public schools, as they did in urban school districts in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, leaving behind pockets of separate and unequal black and brown schools and districts in suburbia. We also know that racial and socio-economic segregation in public schools overall is on the rise (Orfield & Lee, 2007; Reardon and Owens, 2014), further suggesting that the movement of people over city-suburban boundaries is not leading to more integrated educational experiences for most students.

We also know that suburban school districts tend to be smaller because suburban counties – especially in the North and Midwest -- are far more fragmented, or divided, into tiny jurisdictions (Bischoff, 2008). This means that school segregation in suburbia is, on average, more insidious than it was in the large urban schools districts in the 1950s and 60s because any effort to “desegregate” students would require crossing legal, impenetrable and highly symbolic school district boundaries (see Bischoff and Reardon, 2012). It also means that racially and socio-economically segregated schools are not only separate, but due to their heavy reliance on property taxes, they are also extremely unequal. These issues of fragmentation and segregation as they play out in demographically shifting suburbs led us to study one northeastern suburban county that epitomizes the many challenges the suburbs now face as their populations change.

#### **Nassau County, Long Island: A Microcosm of All Things Suburban Circa 2014**

Of all the places in the country to study changing suburbs and their public schools, Nassau County, New York, just to the east of New York City on Long Island, embodies some of the most difficult hardships facing American suburbia today. We know, for instance, that New York State, including the New York City Metropolitan Area, is one of the most segregated states in the country (Civil Rights Project, 2014). Meanwhile, Nassau County overall is incredibly diverse in terms of race, ethnicity and class, but it is also one of the most fragmented, segregated and unequal counties in the U.S.

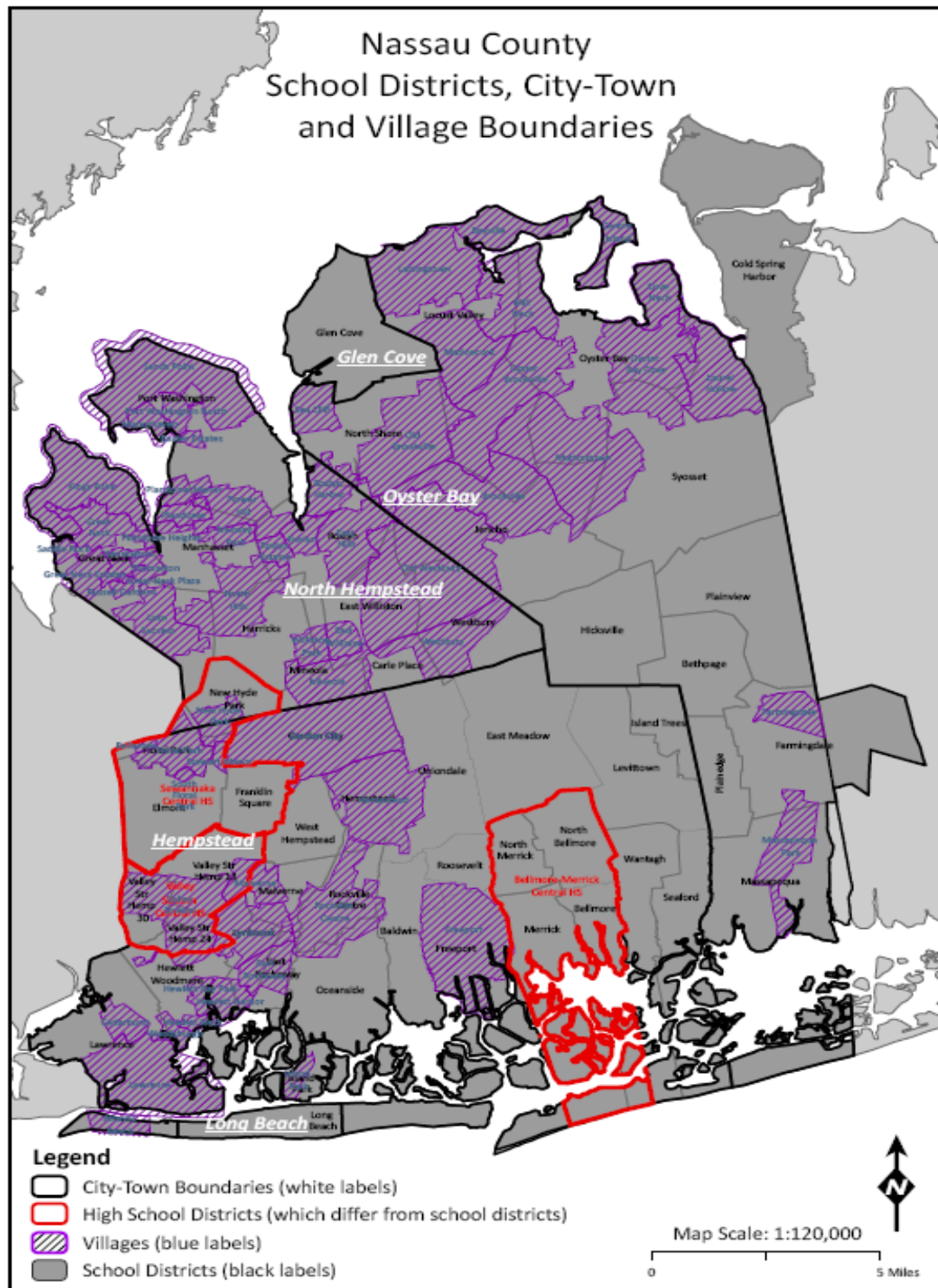
In fact, based on a number of indicators, Nassau County is even more divided by local (municipal and school district) boundary lines than other counties in the highly fragmented northeast. Bischoff (2008) notes that the New York/New Jersey metro area is one of the most fragmented nationally. More specifically, when looking at Long Island, Bischoff (2008) reports that compared to a national average of school district fragmentation measure of .72, which is the probability that any two randomly selected students will live in different school districts, the



two Long Island counties of Nassau and Suffolk have a fragmentation score of .986 combined (p. 16).

As illustrated in Figure 2 below, the 220 square miles of Nassau County are divided into three towns, two cities, 64 villages, hundreds of unincorporated hamlets, and 56 school districts.

Figure 2. Map of Nassau County School Districts, City-Town and Village Boundaries



Villages in particular appear to be the most significant municipal boundary lines to home buyers/leasers based on our research. They provide “local control” and several localized services (although these vary from one village to the next), including garbage and snow removal, fire fighters, and – perhaps most importantly – local zoning regulations. Property tax rates vary across village boundaries.

Meanwhile, the boundary lines for the 56 school districts serving a total of 225,000 students in aggregate intersect with these residential boundaries in rather inconsistent and unpredictable ways, only adding to the degree of fragmentation. For instance, there are school districts in Nassau County that encompass all or part of a total of nine villages. Similarly, there are villages in Nassau County that are divided by as many as nine school districts. These intersecting and intertwined boundaries often lead to a sense of local “identity” that is more tightly tied to school districts than to towns or villages, even though these municipal boundaries matter as well.

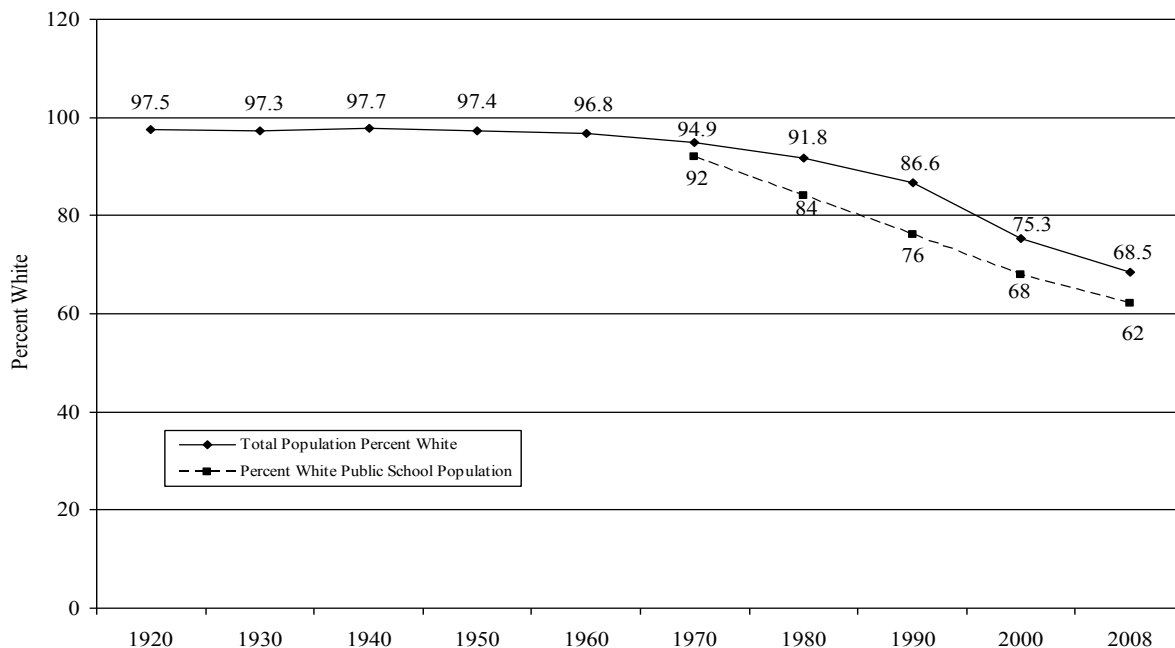
If, as several people we interviewed in Nassau County noted, school districts matter most in terms of where someone lives and the places they call “home” or where they say they are “from,” then they must certainly matter a great deal in terms of where people buy homes and how much they will pay for them. It is also true that when times are tough – when jobs are scarce and income to pay property taxes is tight – the public schools, which absorb, on average, about 65-70 percent of the local tax revenue on Long Island, will be the target of much scrutiny and criticism.

Our mixed-method, five-year study of Nassau County and its public schools examined how the residents “value” public education – as well as which public schools they valued the most and why. We did this through a variety of data collection and analysis – from statistical analysis of property values and school district boundaries to a survey of recent home buyers and about 300 in-depth interviews. What we learned is that the “value” Nassau County residents place on their public schools – both in terms of the “material value” of the price of housing and the “emotional value” of reputation, identity and appreciation of a place – is tightly tied to who lives in a given community and who attends the public schools. Such evaluations, we argue, are forces of segregation and inequality. But we argue that these evaluations, in light of changing racial attitudes, could also work in favor of efforts to create and sustain racially and ethnically diverse schools and neighborhoods.

### **The Segregated Housing Market from Place to Place: Similar Houses; Different Neighbors with Different “Values”**

Between 1950 and 1960, the population of Nassau County more than doubled to about 1.3 million. In the late 1960s, after builders like the Levitt brothers had constructed miles of single-family homes and the federal government had assisted white families in moving from cities to suburbs, the population of Nassau County was 97 percent white overall. By 1980, Nassau County’s overall population was still 92 percent white, non-Hispanic. But between 1980 and 2008, the white population began to decline more rapidly to less than 69 percent white, non-Hispanic. Meanwhile, the public school population changed even more dramatically during that time frame, with the white student population shifting from 92 to 62 percent for the county-wide average between 1970 and 2008 (see Figure 3 below).

Figure 3. Nassau County Residential and Public School Proportion White



Through much analysis of data on racial/ethnic and socioeconomic characteristics of students in Nassau County school districts over time, we found that demographic change (or lack thereof) can be described using four main categories:

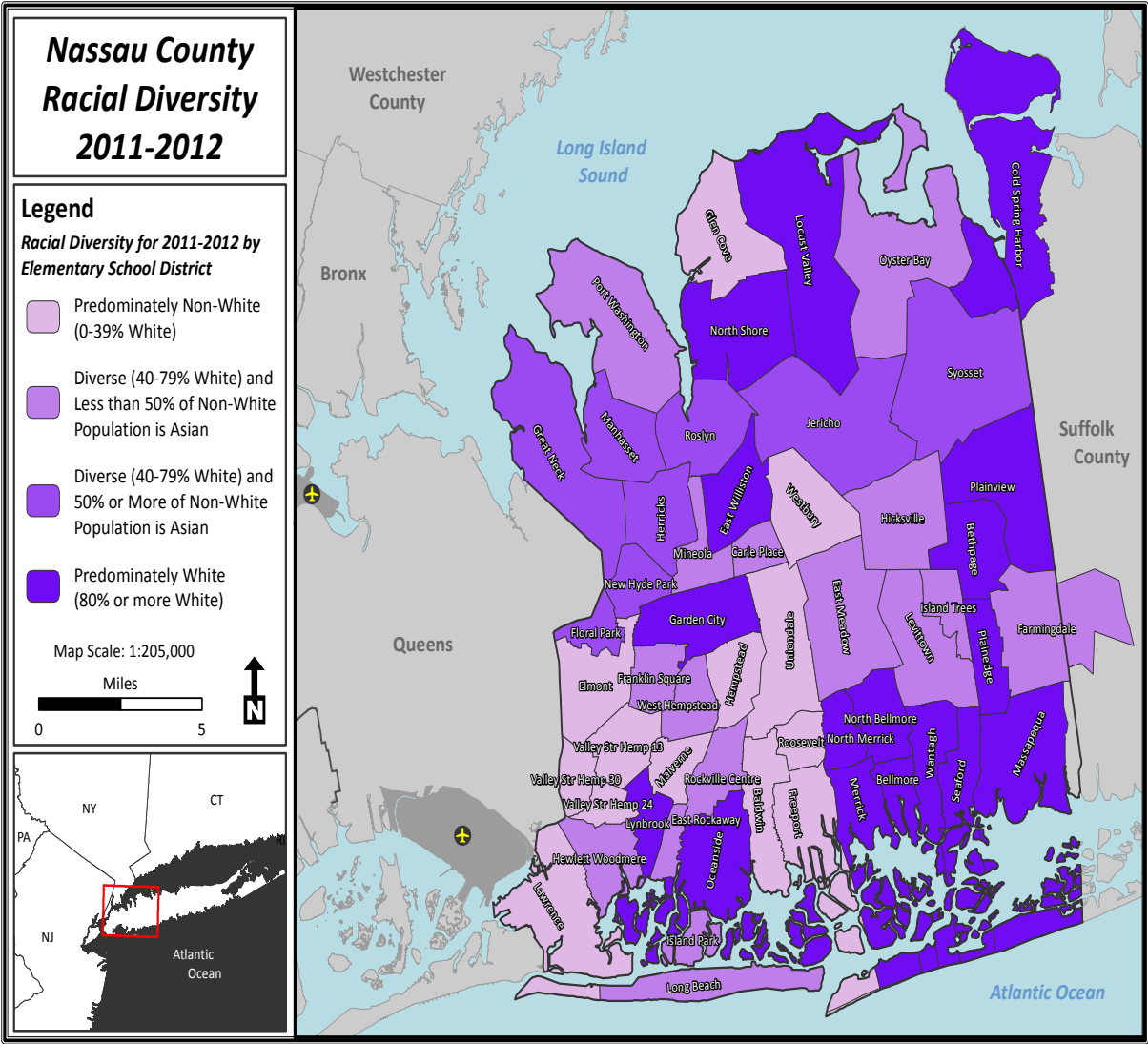
1. Suburbs and public schools that steadily remain predominantly white (and often, but not always, affluent).
2. Diverse suburbs and public schools with an increasing Asian population, as the white population declines.
3. Diverse suburbs and public schools with an increasingly diverse black and Latino population, as the white population declines.
4. Suburbs and public schools with virtually no white students remaining. These communities are usually home to residents of a variety of racial and ethnic identities, but are more likely to be predominantly black and/or Hispanic and less affluent.

We selected these four categories because although segregation and demographic change are often discussed in terms of a white/non-white paradigm, our interview data suggest that all demographic change is not the same in terms of how it relates to the shifting reputation and status of a particular school district. Thus, for our analyses, it is important to distinguish between different forms of diversification.

Figures 4 and 5 show the extent to which demographic change has occurred in Nassau County in the time period between the 1998-1999 and 2011-2012 school years. It is clear from these maps that there are far fewer predominantly white districts in Nassau County than there were just over a decade ago.

Figure 4. Nassau County Racial Diversity (by School District) 1998-1999

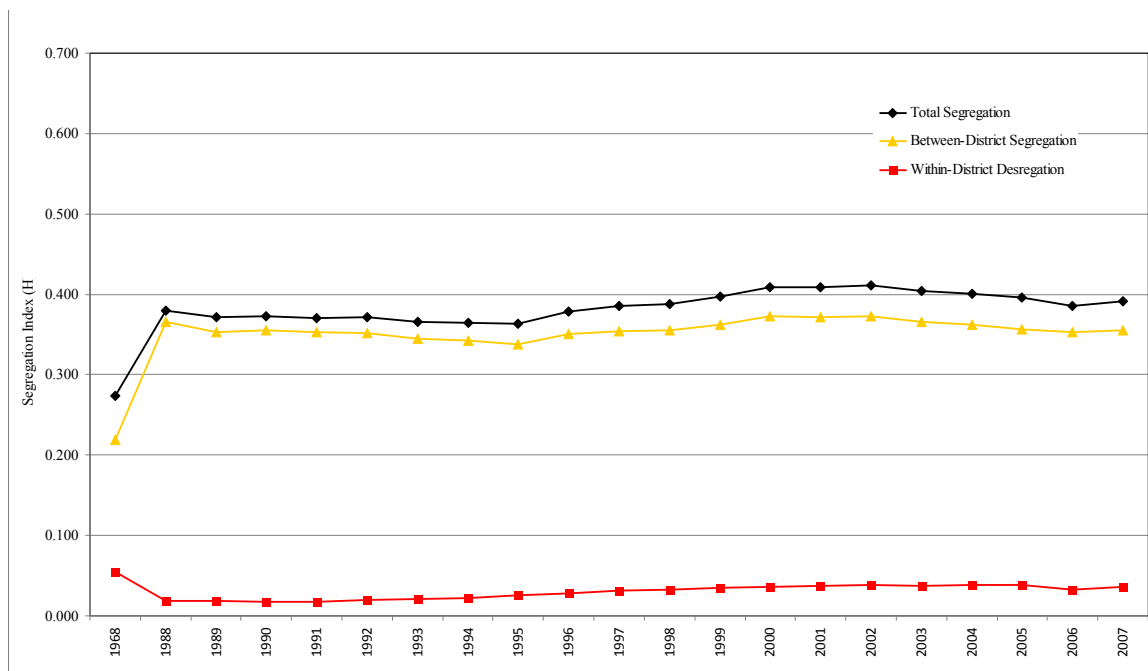






Still, the distribution of the white population and students of color is far from even across Nassau County's 56 school districts. Racial/ethnic segregation, as indicated by  $H$ , has remained steady at approximately .4 over the last several decades, which is more than double the national average. Importantly, roughly 95 percent of the segregation lies between rather than within districts. The red line at the bottom of Figure 4 below indicates the proportion of segregation that lies within school districts. The yellow line indicates the proportion of segregation that lies between districts, while the black line indicates overall segregation. Note that the yellow and black lines virtually overlap, indicating the tremendous amount of between-district segregation. These rather dramatic racial and ethnic distinctions across school district boundaries have implications for who moves where in Nassau County and how much they pay for their home.

Figure 6. Nassau County School Segregation Index ( $H$ ), Between and Within Districts



### School District Boundaries and Property Values

To fully appreciate how the demographic shifts noted above and the resulting racial segregation intersected with the “value” that homebuyers placed on houses across boundary lines, we conducted a statistical analysis of the prices that home buyers in Nassau County in the years 2007 and 2010 paid for their houses across school district boundary lines. In order to conduct this analysis, we obtained data from the Nassau County Assessor’s office on the “quality” of each home bought and sold during the time period. This data base included all the material, tangible factors we would think of that should affect the price of a home -- the size of the lot; the size of the house, including number of bedrooms and bathrooms; and characteristics of the construction, such as wood versus vinyl siding or a renovated kitchen. We also had the address of each house and were able to therefore, locate each residence within the boundaries of the school districts on Nassau County.

Our analyses indicate that patterns of demographic change, home buying and segregation overlap with the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century “housing bubble” and subsequent pop of that bubble in interesting ways. For instance, we found that in 2007, during the height of the U.S. housing bubble, homes in Nassau County school districts with black/Hispanic enrollments under 10 percent sold at a 50 percent premium over homes in majority black and Hispanic districts (roughly \$700,000 versus \$470,000). By 2010, however, when the housing bubble had burst and consequently the predatory lending and inflated housing prices in low-income neighborhoods declined, homes in districts with less than 10 percent black and Hispanic enrollments had declined in value by less than \$20,000 (a 2.5 percent decline), while homes in majority black districts had declined by well over \$100,000 (an almost 25 percent decline). By 2010, a house in a high-minority district was worth just over half as much as a home in a low-minority enrollment district.

In both years, substantial differences in home characteristics across low- and high-minority districts appear to largely explain these home price differentials. Homes in districts with proportionately fewer black and Hispanic students are larger in terms of both square feet and lot size, are typically newer, and have more bathrooms and fireplaces. County assessors also award homes in these districts higher ratings based on the quality and type of home construction. Unsurprisingly, school district racial/ethnic composition is also tightly linked with other district characteristics. High-minority districts enroll larger proportions of both ESL students and those who qualify for free lunches. But the most glaring disparities are in school district academic profiles. Over two full standard deviations separate high- and low-minority enrollment districts in terms of student test scores and post-secondary schooling.

These district characteristics are also reflected in the socio-economic backgrounds of school district residents. Household median income in high-minority districts is considerably lower, as are adult college completion rates. Residents in low-minority districts are almost twice as likely to have household income from dividends, interest, and rental properties. Interestingly, children in high-minority districts are actually more likely to attend private school. Our goal was to explore the extent to which home values and school district racial/ethnic composition are linked once we account for these tangible differences in home, school district, and neighborhood characteristics.

We employed an analytic approach often referred to as a boundary fixed effects model, which allowed us to estimate the relationship between school district racial/ethnic composition and home prices for two homes in the same neighborhood that were separated by a school district boundary. The models further controlled for a host of home, neighborhood, and district characteristics. *The most powerful finding to emerge from this analysis is that place (namely school district) and the different people who live and go to school in these different places continue to matter even after accounting for the physical or tangible qualities of the home.*

Table 1 displays the results of our boundary fixed-effects analyses. The first model in the far left column compares homes within 0.25 miles of the same school district boundary. Analyses using homes located so close to the same boundary—particularly in suburban Nassau County—are quite likely to share similar neighborhood characteristics. These analyses, which use 124 boundary comparison groups, indicate no association between school district racial/ethnic composition and home prices once we adjust for covariates related to home, district, and neighborhood characteristics. (The unadjusted black/Hispanic composition coefficient is -0.004;  $p < .001$ ). Apparently, the descriptive associations between 2007 home prices and school district racial/ethnic composition displayed in Table 1 can be explained by measured differences in home, school district, and neighborhood attributes. Even after

considering these school district and home attributes, homes sell for more in higher-income, wealthier, and more educated neighborhoods—characteristics that are obviously strongly linked to school district socio-demographic composition.

Table 1. School District Racial/Ethnic Composition and Home Values in Nassau County, 2007

	0.15 Mile Boundary Fixed Effect Models (n=3,347)			Full Sample (n=11,243)
<b><u>School District Characteristics</u></b>				
% Black/Hispanic	-0.002~	-0.001	0.000	-0.001***
% ESL	-0.003	-0.003	-0.002	-0.001
% free lunch	0.003**	0.003**	0.003**	0.004***
Academic profile <sup>1</sup>	0.099***	0.062***	0.062***	0.068***
Spending /pupil (\$1000s)	0.003	0.002	0.002	-0.001*
Tax rate <sup>2</sup>	-0.003*	-0.003***	-0.002**	-0.006***
<b><u>Home Characteristics</u></b>				
Home age		-0.001**	-0.001**	0.000
Square feet (100s)		0.002***	0.002***	0.002***
Lot size (acres)		0.220**	0.204**	0.160***
# full baths		0.051***	0.049***	0.057***
# half baths		0.040***	0.036***	0.028***
# fireplaces		0.057***	0.049***	0.040***
Assessor grade <sup>3</sup>		0.048***	0.042***	0.047***
Medium/heavy traffic		-0.039	-0.033	-0.023
<b><u>Neighborhood Characteristics</u></b>				
% Black/Hispanic			0.000	0.000
Med. househld inc. (\$1000s)			0.001***	0.001***
% homes non-work inc. <sup>4</sup>			0.001*	0.001***
% children private schools			0.000	0.000
% homes school-age children			0.000	0.000
% adults college grads			0.001***	0.003***
Constant	13.295***	12.348***	12.238***	12.343***
R <sup>2</sup>	19.72***	65.18***	67.53***	72.25***

~  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . Outcome is home sales price in log dollars.

<sup>1</sup> A composite measure of school district academic outcomes, including mean third and eighth grade mathematics and English test scores, New York State high school English, mathematics and physics Regents test scores, and the percent of district graduates who subsequently attended four-year colleges and universities. Measure is z-scored ( $M=0$ ,  $SD=1$ ).

<sup>2</sup> Tax rate per \$400,000 assessed home value

<sup>3</sup> A 17-level measure of home quality where 17="A+"; 16="A"; 15="A-", etc.

<sup>4</sup> Includes income from dividends, interest, and rental income.

The second model in Table 2 includes data from all homes sold in Nassau County in 2010. Note here the significant estimate associated with school district black/Hispanic enrollments, which suggests the presence of unmeasured variable bias potentially accounted for by the fixed-effect model in the first column. The third and fourth columns employ data from homes sold in 2010.

**Table 2. School District Racial/Ethnic Composition and Home Values in Nassau County, 2010**

	0.15 Mile Boundary Fixed Effect Models (n=3,057)			Full Sample (n=9,924)
<b><u>School District Characteristics</u></b>				
% Black/Hispanic	-0.002	-0.002**	-0.003**	-0.001***
% ESL	-0.001	-0.007	-0.007	-0.001
% free lunch	-0.001	0.000	0.001	0.004***
Academic profile <sup>1</sup>	0.094*	0.038	0.037~	0.068***
Spending /pupil (\$1000s)	0.001	0.001	0.000	-0.001*
Tax rate <sup>2</sup>	-0.003	-0.004***	-0.004***	-0.006***
<b><u>Home Characteristics</u></b>				
Home age		0.000	0.001	0.000
Square feet (100s)		0.002***	0.002***	0.002***
Lot size (acres)		0.019	0.019	0.160***
# full baths		0.027~	0.027~	0.057***
# half baths		0.021	0.021	0.028***
# fireplaces		0.036~	0.034~	0.040***
Assessor grade <sup>3</sup>		0.095***	0.093***	0.047***
Medium/heavy traffic		-0.010	-0.012	-0.023
<b><u>Neighborhood Characteristics</u></b>				
% Black/Hispanic			0.001	0.000
Med. househld inc. (\$1000s)			0.000	0.001***
% homes non-work inc. <sup>4</sup>			0.001	0.001***
% children private schools			0.002~	0.000
% homes school-age children			0.000	0.000
% adults college grads			0.000	0.003***
Constant	13.092***	11.818***	11.788***	12.343***
R <sup>2</sup>	17.63***	42.87***	42.86***	72.25***

~  $p < .10$ ;  $p < .05$ ;  $p < .01$ ;  $p < .001$ . Outcome is home sales price in log dollars.

<sup>1</sup> A composite measure of school district academic outcomes, including mean third and eighth grade mathematics and English test scores, New York State high school English, mathematics and physics Regents test scores, and the percent of district graduates who subsequently attended four-year colleges and universities. Measure is z-scored ( $M=0$ ,  $SD=1$ ).

<sup>2</sup> Tax rate per \$400,000 assessed home value

<sup>3</sup> A 17-level measure of home quality where 17="A+"; 16="A"; 15="A-", etc.

<sup>4</sup> Includes income from dividends, interest, and rental income.

*Importantly, the fixed-effect analyses and those using the full sample both suggest negative associations between school district racial/ethnic composition and home values, even after accounting for a wide array of covariates, including neighborhood racial/ethnic*

*composition and household income.* Specifically, both models indicate that a one-percent increase in black/Hispanic enrollments is associated with a 0.3 percent decrease in home values ( $p < .001$ ). Put another way, almost \$50,000 in price would separate two otherwise similar homes, one located in a district that is 30 percent black/Hispanic, and other located in a district with 70 percent black/Hispanic enrollments (given Nassau County's 2010 median home price of \$415,000). These findings strongly suggest that at least some proportion of home "value" differences in post-mortgage lending frenzy era is related to the racial makeup of the public school district in which a home is located.

### **Section Three:**

#### **Mounting Pressures on Suburban Communities and their Public Schools**

During the time period in which we studied Nassau County and its suburban schools (2008-2013), we heard from educators in virtually every school district that the mounting pressures of tight budgets, a new accountability system with a high-stakes teacher evaluation system, and the growing anti-public education politics had all come down upon them at once. This confluence of factors was often referred to as "the perfect storm."

While the "storm" was no doubt impacting all 56 public school districts in Nassau County and beyond to varying degrees, it appears to have hit those districts experiencing demographic changes in terms of their student bodies especially hard. These districts, as discussed in more detail below, are now serving a student body with different educational needs than the students they enrolled in the past. These needs range from limited English proficiency to lack of health care to the greater demands on students to take on family responsibilities as both of their parents work long hours to afford their suburban homes. These issues are hard enough to address in the face of budget cuts and a pressurized accountability system. Add to that the anti-public school politics that are sweeping the nation, and quite possibly related to the changing demographics of the students and the country, and many educators on Long Island find themselves fighting an uphill battle to maintain their reputations, and thus their attraction to home buyers who can pay their property taxes. A vicious cycle ensues.

In this section, we discuss three dimensions of the so-called Perfect Storm and question the sustainability of the current model of funding, governing and political support for suburban public education:

#### **The Perfect Storm Part One = Scarce Resources; Growing Need:**

##### **When the System of Locally Funded Public Schools Begin to Fall Apart**

Public schools in the U.S. and in New York State, particularly most of those in suburban school districts, are predominantly funded by local property taxes. Thus, the ability of local communities to fund schools at a high level varies incredibly from school district to school district depending on the value of the properties within that district and the ability of the property owners to support the public school budget. As a Nassau County official in the tax collector's office noted, of all the local municipalities and jurisdictions in the hyper fragmented Nassau – e.g. the three towns, two cities and 64 villages – for most people, their local school district is geographically the smallest, but it is the largest portion of their tax bill – usually 65 to 70 percent.

Furthermore, the more commercial property you have in a district, or the more industrial property – e.g. a local power plant -- the less of a tax and funding burden there is on the homeowners. According to one Nassau County superintendent who has worked in several school districts in the New York City metro area, including one with a power plant in it, these



plants can pay up to 30 or 40 percent of the local school district budget. Thus, sometimes, as is often the case on Long Island, the most affluent school districts with the highest property values actually have the lowest property tax rates and the highest per-pupil expenditures because of the commercial property located in the district.

In the best of suburban times, this system of public school funding led to large disparities between the “haves” and the “have nots.” In the current, difficult economic suburban times, as more of the affluent prospective home buyers move into luxury condos in the city, this system begins to unravel because only the most affluent of these geographically small, highly fragmented school districts can sustain themselves – and even they are struggling. To make matters even worse, this model of a self-sustaining suburban public education system is on the brink of disaster at the very moment that its student body is shifting from predominantly white and working-to-upper-middle-class to increasingly racially and ethnically diverse and less affluent overall.

Given these changing times and the shaky feasibility of the self-sustaining suburban funding model, it is no wonder that in 2011, the New York State legislature passed a property tax cap law, which requires the local governments and school districts to raise taxes by no more than two percent per year or at rate of inflation, whichever is less. Any override of the cap must be supported by 60 percent of the voters in the local community. This two percent property tax cap, coupled with the slow economy, a still weak housing market, and the rising cost of school district employee health care and pensions, forced all but one of the school boards in twelve Nassau County districts we studied to cut their regular operating budgets.

These budget constraints were real and felt across both affluent and poorer school districts. Because of the funding formula, most school districts are heavily reliant on local revenues for 60-70 percent of its total funding. This dependence on local revenue is problematic on several levels; not the least of which is that it perpetuates material inequality across district boundaries, while leaving each “tub” or school district on its own bottom.

Even in school districts that are not struggling, this system of funding is starting to weigh heavily on the local community. According to one school board member in a school district of very affluent, predominantly white homeowners:

... we get very little, almost no government aid, so essentially the 95 million dollar budget that we have, all save 4 to 5 million dollars, is borne by our residents. That is a tremendous challenge – tremendous. And now with the economy, the way it’s been has been an increasing burden on the residents of the district. I mean... at this point in time we want to maintain what we have and improve quality where we can, but we’re not at a point now where we’re going to be expanding with a lot of new programs and a lot of new things.

This school board member noted that her district is focused now on maintaining what it has and keeping the district intact and as positive and as strong as they can given the financial constraints. She did note, however, that despite the history of community support for public education, people have been hit hard over the last few years by the bad economy. She explained that “I don’t think there is anybody who lives in this town that doesn’t know somebody who lost a job or seen savings erode or everything else.”

In all the districts we studied, school board members and administrators talked about rising health care and pension costs for school district employees. In a stronger economy, when more school district constituents are working and able to pay high property taxes, the rising cost of these financial commitments is difficult enough to sustain. But when tax payers even in the

more middle and upper-middle class communities are struggling to maintain their fiscal commitments, the burden of paying for public school district employees' benefits has become overbearing – both politically and financially. According to a school board president in an affluent Nassau County school district with high property values and per-pupil expenditures,

I think the health care costs and the retirement costs, which for [our district] was assessed somewhere around \$80 million dollars in our actuary report about three years ago or four years ago, I'm sure its higher now. That's a real liability... it's gonna show up in the size of the budget that the public sees. Never mind trying to maintain the quality of education and plan for the kind of education a graduate [needs now].

In the less affluent communities, this struggle for people to keep supporting school budgets and the local public schools, especially as the demographics of the student population shifts more quickly than the residential population, is becoming even more problematic. In these districts, the older homeowners, most of whom live on fixed incomes, are predominantly white. Meanwhile, the public school population is now more than 50 percent black and Hispanic.

In one such district where the student population is now about 70 percent black and Hispanic, the local school board conducted a demographic study of the voters and found that only a third of residents had children in public schools, and the rest were either couples with no children or senior citizens. They also found that most of their seniors had grown children who had attended the district's schools in a prior era when it had been predominantly white.

The school board member noted that these seniors are the ones who get nervous about demographic change because they are worried about their property values. "They want the level of the schools to stay where they are so their property values don't drop, so they are very involved and concerned about it... Remember a lot of those parents, those senior citizens, when their kids were in school it was a lily white district and it's not anymore, so it makes them nervous." This board member added that the district has been trying "to win these elderly votes over" by sending students down the block to the senior center. "You know things like that, so I think we're keeping people involved in the schools as much as we can."

In another Nassau County school district that has shifted from about 85 percent white in 1993 to about 40% white today, the superintendent cited several efforts to reach out to the local aging white population to garner support for a school district that no longer looks like the public schools their kids attended. He said that he goes to senior citizens luncheons several times a year. He described the senior population as the "folks who have lived in [here] for 40, 50, 60 years, some of them all their lives and they're in their 80's now, and they love it here. You know if anything they don't want to leave. They're struggling to make ends meet as you can imagine on a fixed income. They will actually apologize to me if the budget number is tough on them. They'll say gee we're so sorry but my social security check, I want to do more, and we get that, and those are the senior citizens. They're pretty supportive considering the issues that they may be facing."

At the same time, the assistant superintendent in this district noted that the district feels a great deal of pressure to keep the school quality high in order to keep more affluent families – generally the white families who have lived in this district longer – from moving out. She noted that in her effort to reach out to these parents, she wants to form a group of these parents "we want to keep here, who are interested in high quality."

She and the superintendent both noted that they are doing all they can to make sure those parents don't leave and take their property tax dollars with them. These parents, she noted, "want their children challenged; they will not stay if we don't challenge their children."

Yet, at the same time this assistant superintendent noted that with the impending budget cuts, this is more difficult to do, especially when there are more students and more needs to serve.

#### Burgeoning Enrollments and Student Mobility

As we noted above, as of 2013, there are only 18 Nassau County school districts in which the student populations are still predominantly (more than 80 percent) white, non-Hispanic. This means that the vast majority of school districts in Nassau County are facing rapid demographic changes and in many cases, a large influx of students as larger and more families move to the suburbs.

We know from our interviews in 9 of the 12 districts we studied where student populations had changed significantly over the last three decades, that not only are these educators now serving students with additional educational needs such as bilingual education, but they are also often serving *more* students as new suburban residents. According to several reports, newer suburban families are more likely to house extended family members or renters in one “single” family home. This is in fact, a national trend in suburbia, reported in the news media, as more moderate-income and poor families move to the suburbs (Berube and Kneebone, 2006).

On Long Island, the demographic changes are putting pressure on local municipalities to make way for more mixed-income and multi-family housing. This has become an on-going battle between fair housing advocates and builders on the one hand versus local town and village zoning boards on the other. According to an expert on building and development issues on Long Island, the political resistance to building such multiple-family housing units in the suburbs is fierce, which means no local zoning board will allow such development plans to move forward despite growing demand in the suburban housing market. “It’s the local politics and the zoning boards take their cue from the people. They don’t make this up.”

In the midst of this political impasse, one way for city-to-suburban migrants to work around the lack of multi-family dwellings is to create them out of single-family homes. This, however, creates more pressure on the local school district because the same house is generating about the same amount of property taxes per assessed value as it did when only one family and fewer school-age children lived there.

Such shared living spaces are referred to as “illegal apartments” in some school districts where the local zoning is for single family and not two-family homes. According to one assistant superintendent in a school district that has changed dramatically in terms of the racial and ethnic makeup of its school age population- from over 90% white in 1993 to less than 30% white in 2012.

Sometimes people say well I’ll rent out the basement and I’ll get some extra money. The problem is that it may not be up to code or if you have a legal two family home it’s taxed at a different rate so you’re not paying your fair share of the taxes. If you get two apartments you’re gonna generate more garbage, you’re gonna need more services and a lot of those basement apartments are not really up to code. It’s problematic.

In fact, this is especially problematic for the public schools that are now educating more students per “single family” houses. Furthermore, as the educational and social service needs of the incoming students increase, and the need for more facilities and space is compounded. As one school superintendent who was the head of a County-wide organization of school administrators at the time we interviewed him, explained:

...We have schools on Long Island... that 30 years ago comfortably housed eighteen hundred kids, a high school, where now would be bursting at the seams with more than twelve hundred. Rooms have been wholesale

turned into specialty rooms for servicing kids with disabilities, for providing occupational therapy, for providing physical therapy, for providing more enhanced music, more enhanced science, you know art or whatever else you might have, more foreign language, more this, more that. You don't have the space because you're using it for programs that never existed. So that's one reason why, one major reason why the costs have gone up is the standard of demand on schools

Many Nassau County public schools are forced to address these issues amid budget cuts and concerns about maintaining academic "quality." According to one superintendent of a district that is also facing a rapid transition in its school age population, which reflects what he called "city dynamics" but without the urban infrastructure, such as health centers and more social workers, to address these needs.

We have certainly more youngsters with teenage pregnancy than ten years ago...small numbers but a noticeable change. Maybe its seven in one year versus one ok...that type of thing. We have more kids involved in the criminal justice system. We have more [Child Protective Services] CPS referrals... therefore our administrators are spending more time than they would have ten years ago or in other all White suburban school districts, involved in the systems outside of education because of the needs. It's still a small number of children, but very time consuming and we're not equipped like in the city [where] you could have a health center as part of the school... We don't have that.

This particular superintendent, who has worked in several suburban school districts over his long career, noted that one of his major complaints about how suburban public education is nested within a highly fragmented County governance structure is that the social services that could help the students his district now serves either do not exist or they are so fragmented that only some of the students enrolled in his school district live in the right municipality to access them. He noted, for instance, that his school district has pieces of three different villages in it, and that each of these is so small that they do not provide any helpful services for students. "One of my major complaints, again who am I talking to...the wall? - is the governance structure of Nassau County.... the whole thing is insane because you have the three towns and the two small cities... then there are villages.. Each of these entities are so small that they don't provide any services other than roads." Even when services may be available, this degree of fragmentation makes them difficult to locate, particularly for those new to suburbia and recent immigrants.

This superintendent and others we interviewed noted that ideally, the needed social services would be located in the suburban public schools – or at least coordinated through a collaboration between the schools and local service providers. He noted that under the current fragmented governance structure, the county cannot provide the needed health services for all 56 school districts;

"The governance structure defines the inability to address many of the major problems through good planning."

In addition to the greater social service needs of current suburban students, they are also far more transient, meaning that there is a much greater turnover in student population than ten years ago. In some districts, especially those close to the Belmont Race Track, which is a seasonal employer of low-skilled laborers, they see between 10 and 25 percent of their children coming in or leaving during the school year. As one superintendent told us, this high

turnover rate affects teachers' ability to plan their curriculum because "a quarter of the students are not the same students who started in the fall."

#### Cutting Key Resources Needed for a Growing High-Needs Student Population:

##### The Cost of Doing Education Right in the Changing Suburbs

Despite efforts to win local voters over to support school budgets, school boards who are now faced with the Property Tax Cap as well as the mounting costs of the employee benefits are forced to make difficult budgetary choices. All this is weighing on districts as the newly arrived suburban students are entering the schools with greater academic and social needs. One district we studied that has seen a large influx of lower-income immigrant families has decided to discontinue a kindergarten program housed at centralized center and designed to prepare all children for 1<sup>st</sup> grade.

A school board member for this district noted that the board was very careful with the budget not to curtail any of the districts educational offerings, but to do other things like put off some capital projects and get rid of school security, who was replaced with cameras and a system that buzzes people into the schools. They also tried to eliminate one of the district's social workers, but there was an outcry from the parents, so the board "found a way" to keep her employed. This board member noted that "It's really hard! 'Cause you don't want to eliminate anything. You know, you certainly don't want to cut programs, you know?"

The story of budget cuts intersecting with changing and more needy student populations is a common refrain across the now more racially and ethnically diverse school districts in Nassau County. The cost of special services for recent immigrants and low-income students add up quickly to place more pressure on the districts, as do the pressures from Federal and State laws regulating special and bilingual education. These special services and the expertise required of teachers and staff to integrate these students into the regular classrooms are "unfunded mandates" as local school district officials are quick to note, and they add another layer of fiscal burden onto the districts.

As one school board member in an increasingly diverse district explained: "We're really making every effort to really integrate the English Language Learners, and even the Special Ed kids into the main stream, so... I mean, you know, if they're pulled out for speech or they get additional speech help or ELL services you know, whatever it takes to get them to be part of the mainstream of the school fabric, that's what we're trying to do."

At the same time, several district administrators mentioned that they are trying to raise outside, private and philanthropic funding to cover their growing costs to educate their changing student populations. In a sort of Catch 22 that goes back to the demographic mismatch between older residents and the student population in these rapidly changing school districts, one superintendent noted that there are grants for low-income or racially diverse *communities* that he cannot apply for because they are based on the demographics of the entire community rather than on the 2,200 boys and girls that are in the school district. "So sometimes you know if that demographic could be extrapolated to the entire community we might be able to receive some additional grant opportunities, but it's not the way it's done."

#### Different Constituents in Increasingly Diverse School Districts Have Different Budget Priorities

As school district budgets shrink and painful cuts take place each year, local constituents often disagree about what should be cut and what should be prioritized and preserved. This can be an issue even in a racially or ethnically more homogeneous school district. But when residential and school-age populations are changing in terms of the racial and ethnic makeup as well as their national and cultural identities, differences in priorities are often demographic dividing lines.



In two of the 12 school districts that we studied in Nassau County, we conducted more in depth and case studies of one of their schools. Both of these two school districts had been predominantly white as late as the 1990s or early 2000s. By 2013, one of the schools that we studied was more than 50 percent Asian and the rest of the students were white, mostly children of longer-term residents of the area. The other school was only about 15 percent white, with a mix of Black, Hispanic and Asian (mostly southeast Asian) students.

In the school district serving the Asian and white students, the annual budgeting process had become extremely tense.

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We conducted in-depth case studies at high schools in two of the 12 school districts that we studied in Nassau County. Both of these school districts had been predominantly white as late as the 1990s or early 2000s, but have experienced different forms of demographic change in recent years. By 2013, one of them was more than 50 percent Asian and the rest of the students were white, children of longer-term residents of the area. The other district was only about 15 percent white, with a mix of black, Hispanic and Asian (mostly Middle-Eastern, Indian and southeast Asian) students.

In the school district serving the Asian and white students, the annual budgeting process had become extremely contentious. As the president of the district-wide PTA noted, this district struggles to pass its budget each year. "I cannot tell you how hard we've worked to pass those budgets, like literally we've been at carpool lines giving them flyers or talking to parents. Cars have tried to run us over. People have shown their shortest fingers. It's not been pleasant. And not just to me, parents who volunteered." She chalked up the tension in this middle- to upper-middle-class district to the larger economic situation, as more people are unemployed or underemployed. But, she also added that even before the economy went bad, it was a challenge. "I mean ours was a district that killed the budget by one vote last year -- one vote -- and then we had to go through the second process again."

This PTA President and many other people interviewed in this district noted that the budget impasse played itself out along racial and ethnic lines, with the Asian parents more likely to be advocating for program such as gifted education, the orchestra, or more AP classes, and the white parents advocating for the theater program, athletics and special education services. While this is an over generalization and there are people who do not fit this racial divide, the politics around the school board budget tends to play out in racial terms.

As one of the school board members in this district, who is white, noted, in recent budget negotiations, the board was on the verge of cutting funding for the high school play but changed its mind because a group of white students and parents came to the board meeting to protest. When he realized that he, as a father of four children in the district, knew these children and they weren't the popular kids and they weren't the highest achieving students, "But they lived for this one play... And if they cut that play it would have been cutting their needs; we couldn't let that happen. We had to figure out way to do it." He went on to explain that in this day and age, the focus can sometime be placed too heavily on academics at the expense of everything else. He also cited the tension in the district between the Asian and white

families about what the priority should be and noted that “it’s a tough balance and that the economy has not helped anybody” – leading to more fighting over scarce resources.

Another school board member noted that people move to this district because of the outstanding academic reputation that it has, and the parents are very supportive for the most part of that education. This reputation has, in recent years, contributed to the influx of Asian families “... But the biggest issue now is gonna be how do you maintain that education in today’s economic times?... The board’s biggest problem will be [inaudible]...in the past ten years or so probably at least. Money is tight.”

This sometimes leads to racial divisions. For instance, a recent bitter and contested school board election pitted an Asian against a white candidate. The Asian candidate, who ultimately lost the election, noted that at least part of the reason why she did not win was her racial/ethnic background. She said: “I was the most qualified candidate and people knew what I had done, but it had a lot to do with my...because they thought that if somebody like I was on the board then I would be all for APs and all for this and I wouldn’t be for the average child, which was never the truth.”

The tensions over the budget and school board elections in this one district help to illustrate the often contentious relationship between demographic change and a scarcity of resources in American suburbs today. We use this one case study and a set of issues discussed by virtually everyone we interviewed there to underscore this relationship. In other districts, as we noted above, this tension is also intergenerational as older white residents on fixed incomes find it harder to support public schools for students of color – for economic and political reasons.

#### **Measuring and Ranking Increasingly Diverse Public Schools:**

##### **Changing Suburbs in the Era of Accountability as the Second Factor in the “Perfect Storm”**

At the same time that the racial/ethnic demographics of our school-age population has shifted dramatically, policy makers in the U.S. have increased often well-intended efforts to build a better and more uniform educational accountability system. Indeed, over the last three decades, public schools in the U.S. have been required to measure student learning with greater frequency via state-mandated standardized tests. Beginning with competency, or basic skills, tests in the late 1970s, the idea that the “value” of public education can be depicted in a few test scores has become commonly accepted.

Since 1994, as suburbs were becoming increasingly racially and ethnically diverse, the federal government has played a central role in the accountability movement, forcing states to establish an accountability system or lose federal funding. At the same time, the accountability reform movement has grown increasingly uniform, and has given way to a national accountability system known as the national Common Core State Standards and assessments, now adopted by 45 states (Common Core Standards Initiative, 2012).

Initially, standardized tests in K-12 education were used mainly to identify students who were failing or those who were advanced enough to earn college credit in high school. Since the inception of *No Child Left Behind*, tests have been used to measure achievement for all students from grade 3 through high school (Lin, 2001). Increasingly, the tests are also being used to evaluate teachers and their schools: The No Child Left Behind Act required states not only to increase the number of tests students took – beginning in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and not ending until high school – but also to publish on-line school report cards based largely on test scores (Education Week, 2004).

In 2010, in order to qualify for federal Race to the Top funds, the New York State legislature passed a new teacher and principal accountability law, putting into place an accountability system known as the Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR). This

review process effectively rates educators according to several factors, including observations of their teaching and student outcomes, into one of four categories: Highly Effective, Effective, Developing Effectiveness or Ineffective. The APPR can be one factor affecting teacher or principal dismissal under the state law (see NYS Education Department, 2014).

At the very moment that the K-12 student population dips below 50 percent white, non-Hispanic, test scores, more than any other form of information about public education, have now been made widely available to the general public and are used to assess the “quality” of each school. In this way, the new system also perpetuates and even legitimizes a process of racial segregation due to a strong negative correlation between the percentage of black and Hispanic children in a school and its average test scores (Rothstein, 2013; Tienken and Zhao, 2013, Wells and Holme, 2006). There are many cultural and social explanations for this correlation that are not an indictment of black and Hispanic students’ intelligence, although those are too rarely discussed. Meanwhile, if test scores are the only measure of school quality that receive any attention, then schools that are not predominantly white, and/or Asian are rarely considered “good.”

A veteran English middle school teacher at one of our case study schools explained that this rise of the test-driven accountability system has fostered a one-dimensional comparison of school districts that differ dramatically in terms of their student populations and approaches to teaching and learning. She noted that when the state ELA exams were first issued, they were intended to let you know which students needed remediation before moving on to high school so that the teachers could intervene and help the students learn the skills they were lacking.

This teacher also noted that in the late 1990s and 2000s, as her suburban school district population was shifting from predominantly white to about 15 percent white with the remaining 85 percent consisting of a combination of other racial and ethnic groups, the policy focus on accountability “changed entirely.” Suddenly, she noted the accountability movement became much more “high stakes” and all consuming: “So it really changed its focus and its purpose throughout the years... now we’re in a testing culture...”. This long-time teacher and all of the teachers and school administrators we interviewed all agreed that there should be a system of accountability and assessments that inform instruction. But, she added, “there should be a balance, and we’re always lacking in balance I think.”

When such pressures to produce high test scores are placed on schools in a manner that strongly correlates to the race and class of the students, then efforts to create more racially/ethnically diverse schools are framed as though white and Asian families are “giving something up” because their schools will not be seen as “excellent” if they are more diverse (Wells et.al., 2009).

#### Teaching to the Test in Some Schools and Not Others

The accountability system, with its emphasis on standardized tests, also forces educators in “low-achieving” schools serving mostly low-income black and Hispanic students to fixate on raising test scores via a curriculum focused almost exclusively on the material tested, leaving little room for more project-based learning or pedagogy that builds upon the knowledge and understandings that students bring to school. Meanwhile, research on teaching and learning suggest that the best way to engage students is to build on their existing knowledge and then connect those understandings to more abstract and unfamiliar topics (Bartolome, 1994; Howard, 2010).

In comparing several different districts on Long Island we found, as discussed in our earlier report, that more affluent and predominantly white and Asian districts pride themselves on setting the bar much higher than expectations set by state mandates and focusing little on test preparation because they have confidence that their students will do well on the tests

anyway. Meanwhile, many educators told us that an approach to accountability that relies almost exclusively on standardized tests often has a negative impact on the educational experiences of all children, but particularly those of low-income black and Latino students. Such a system also works directly against political incentives to create more racially and ethnically diverse schools. When the entire educational system is not only separate and unequal along racial/ethnic lines, but also measured, evaluated and then “valued” almost exclusively according to test scores, the correlation between race and schools deemed to be “bad” based only on these narrow measures is high, exacerbating the race-based inequalities that already exist (Wells and Holme, 2006).

As a result students in less affluent and less white and/or Asian schools often lose more instructional time to mundane and test-prep oriented curriculum. According to one teacher:

What we hear teachers complain a lot about is where’s that love of learning, where’s the exploration, where’s the discovery, which of course are all valid concerns. And yet the testing has a piece, but what will happen is we’re just...it’s so extreme that it’s gonna become the evil thing as opposed to it has a place but it shouldn’t be everything. It shouldn’t be everywhere and every place. You know I think for the last marking period all we’ve done is test... it’s just test, test, test, and the kids...talk about test fatigue. And then they get desensitized to it. How significant is it if you’re doing it all the time?

Educators at this school and the other school districts serving Black and Hispanic students are concerned their students are becoming test-taking robots, unable to think creatively or to express themselves and their ideas clearly. As an English teacher explained when talking about her students’ inability to express themselves in writing or to develop a voice, “There’s no person behind the writing... I mean they’re 8<sup>th</sup> graders, they’re teenagers, but they’ve become like...they write a formula. It’s sad, because that’s not really teaching them how to write, so it’s very frustrating.”

A school board member in one of the districts that changed from 95 percent white to less than 60 percent white in a short period of time, talked about how the leadership of the district is trying to preserve some of the non-test-related programs such as art and music that make the school day more meaningful, especially for students who do not do as well on standardized tests. But when so much pressure is being placed on test scores and budgets are being cut, priorities need to be set. She noted that when her district held budget hearings related to the severe budget cuts, the board asked parents to come and tell them, if you had to cut something, you know, like give us a hierarchy, what would you want to cut first? And the majority of parents did not want us to cut any of our, our specials, any of our art programs or our music programs. She said, “If you’re talking about the whole child and, you know, really kind of encouraging children to flourish in all aspects of their personality and educational opportunity, then arts is as important as academics. And you can’t test those things... but the realization that tests are not the only thing that can determine... the worth of a school district.

The sentiments of these Nassau County educators are echoed across the suburban county we studied and no doubt across the state of New York and the nation. But in the context of an increasingly racially and ethnically diverse suburban county and its school districts these issues have a particular salience.

#### Racing to the Top for the Highest Scores

Many educators, school board members and parents we spoke to commented on the ways in which the educational system has fostered increased competition between and within small, unequal suburban school districts. As one this teacher noted that the policy and focus on

accountability has become a reform by comparison of all the districts because the scores are posted and ranked in the newspaper. The end result is that many of the more racially and ethnically diverse school districts rank lower on such comparisons via a single measure than do districts that are more homogeneously white, non-Hispanic or a mix of Asian and whites. To the extent that home buyers pay attention to these test scores, and our interviews and survey results suggest they do, such outcome differentiation and its correlation to race and ethnicity mean that more diverse school districts will lose the “race to the top” of the fragmented school district pecking order.

Furthermore, particularly in districts serving mainly lower-income black and Latino students, the new New York State teacher evaluation system, known as the Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) has added yet another layer of stress. Teachers expressed frustration at the tendency of the system to pit teachers against each other as they compete for higher scores and question the ratings their colleague received. Department chairs, for instance, note that teachers who had in the past been highly collaborative and collegial and had worked together to develop lesson plans, were suddenly comparing their scores on their teaching evaluations and questioning why some of their colleagues had gotten better scores.

APPR has also led teachers we interviewed to become increasingly frustrated with the challenging and burdensome home lives that some students are faced with on top of the pressures of school. A mid-career math teacher at the middle school we studied in depth, where the student population has become increasingly diverse racially and socio-economically, cried as she described the stress of the new APPR system. She said that many of her students have to care for their younger siblings after school while both their parents work to afford their suburban houses. In the past, this teacher said, she had been incredibly sympathetic to these students if they needed more time to get their homework done. Now, she says she has less patience with her students because her job is on the line, and they need to produce the data to make her look like the highly effective teacher she knows she is.

Parents, teachers, administrators, real estate agents, and school board members all talked about the very “public” significance of the test scores and district rankings. As the superintendent of an affluent district noted, the conversation in the field of education often gets too focused on standardized tests, especially in suburbia. “I think there is a suburban kind of obsession [with test scores] which is in part legitimate because your goal is to have your kid ultimately get a good job, so to a “good” college etc.”

This superintendent added that some of the test score fixation is “just fanned by... our popular culture ranking everything... which movie was the most attended this week and how much money did it rake in? The New York Times, I think it was yesterday or Monday has a ranking of what are the most downloaded songs, and, you know, I don’t care. There’s that obsession with ranking things.”

But much like the movie and music industry, rankings matter for school districts as well. As we explain in the following section, home buyers pay attention to such ranking and school district reputations, and those with the most money to spend on houses pay more attention than those with fewer housing choices. Of course, it takes money – district funds and family funds – to get the high test scores to begin with, so a vicious cycle ensues.

We interviewed another school board member in a district with test scores that are ranked mid-to-high among Nassau County school districts, but is also home to a growing number of constituents who are struggling to pay their property taxes. His thoughts about the increasingly burdensome accountability system was that it was “terrible.” He elaborated by saying that the school district has to do this, you have to do this test, this test, and now their forcing us to do things, spend money that’s ridiculous to spend on, on a school district that has



the best credentials going... And it takes away from expanding the horizon for our kids. Bringing in new programs. Bringing in new things for them to be able to experience, to figure out what they want to be in this world; that's what high school should be."

This local school board member is under the impression that the accountability system was designed to take money from more affluent districts with good scores and give it to school districts with lower scores. "Because of the test scores... the financial aid formula from Albany is gonna say, look at poor NYC, they need more money. The only way they're gonna get better test scores is if they get more money."

Clearly, the rise of high-stakes accountability for schools, educators and students has had a profound impact on public education across the country. For better or worse, it has changed the ways in which teachers teach as well as what students learn and do not learn in schools. The interaction between this new accountability system and American suburbia is even more profound. The ways in which fragmented and economically fragile suburban school districts react to these new mandates in different ways across their boundary lines appears to make them even more separate, divided, pitted against each other, and unequal than they were prior to the rise of tough love accountability policies or the demographic transformation of suburban school student populations.

#### **Anti-Public Education and Anti-Teacher Union Politics:**

##### **The Final Factor in the Perfect Storm**

As if the burden of the budget cuts and a heavy-handed, multi-pronged accountability system were not enough to keep educators in fragmented suburban public schools frazzled in recent years, the political context of these changes make the day-to-day experience of working in public schools even more challenging. The contemporary public sentiment toward unionized public employees in stable, well-paying jobs with subsidized benefits and pension plans has been far from positive over the last two decades as the number of decent jobs with benefits has continued to dwindle in all sectors of the economy.

The history of this anti-union and anti-public employee politics evolved out of a very different era in American history shortly after WWII when decent middle-class jobs and decent middle-class suburban homes were plentiful for those who had access to them. Then came the economic downturn of the late 1970s, and by the 1980s there was a growing anti-union sentiment in the country that produced more laws and legal decisions limiting the power of labor unions. Meanwhile, private corporations were flexing their muscles against the unions and workers, weakening the solidarity that had once built and sustained the labor movement. At the same time, the changing economy, workforce demands and corporate policies such as downsizing and sending jobs overseas, further weakened the political and economic standing of American workers (Greenfield, 2008). Long-time community members in rapidly changing suburbs have not been immune to this changing political ideology that has been fueled by research and media that placed much of the blame for the slow economy and the scarcity of jobs on those who have them,.

Even in the most affluent and still predominantly white school district we studied, the pain of the slow economy and the lack of well-paying jobs is being felt. According to one school board member in this district, the goal is on maintaining what they have and improving on it, given the financial constraints. She noted that while the community has always been very generous in its support of the schools, it has also been hit very hard in the last year or two. She said, "I don't think there is anybody who lives in this town that doesn't know somebody who lost a job or seen savings erode or everything else."

Those in the less affluent and increasingly racially diverse suburbs – generally 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> ring suburbs with the highest unemployment and home foreclosure rates -- tend to harbor the

most resentment against the employees of their local school districts that are heavily reliant on property taxes generated by these same constituents. A middle school English Department Chair who has lived, worked and raised her children in her racially diverse, middle-class suburban school district since virtually all the students were white 30 years ago, reflected on how the politics of public education has changed in recent years. She said that the teachers are being scapegoated for the fact that the fractured suburban educational system is falling apart – that the system can no longer be maintained. She said that the tax payers in her district are being told that the reason why they can't afford to live there is because of the rising cost of public education – namely “these teachers make too much money and they only work 9:00-3:00 and they only work 10 months of the year and they don't do anything.” The accountability system is tied to that scapegoating, she said, because it is the way the districts are going to demonstrate that educators in the public schools are no good. “This is who we're ganging up on now... We're being bullied.”

Many of the educators we interviewed talked at length about the scapegoating and bullying and the anti-teachers union politics. They cite misinformation in their local communities about the benefits that teachers have – e.g. perceptions that all teachers and their families have “free” health care, when that is clearly not the case. One teacher recalled being at a public forum where a community member complained about why the teachers have “all these health benefits and my husband has to pay for his. And there was a teacher present and she said well I have to pay for mine too. She says what do you mean? She said well we contribute 20% towards it. She says you do? She goes oh I just thought you just got it for nothing. And again that's misinformation that's perpetuated or allowed to persist because again it makes the teacher the target.”

When people pay for public education locally, the politics of paying for public education is local as well. When the larger political context provides an easy scapegoat – public education employees -- for the economic struggles of a growing number of local constituents, the day-to-day politics can, at times, become tense. Within small suburban school districts, where people know each other and have personal relationships with teachers who often live nearby and may have taught several children or more than one generation of the same family, it can be downright hurtful.

The middle school teacher quoted above noted, in talking about the anti-public education and anti-public employee politics in her racially diverse suburb:

They forget that teachers are homeowners as well and residents and taxpayers. I think when it comes time for budget votes...and that's when they look at members of the faculty and staff who are members of the community. I think they said it was like 30-35% of the faculty and staff of this district are members of the community. So ironically the community is complaining about the teachers but we're in the community. We're part of that.

The more intimate the community and more personal the relationships between educators and the parents and community members, the more cognitive dissonance individuals can feel about their simultaneous fondness for local educators and their frustration with the cost of taxes for locally-funded public schools. As one Nassau County superintendent noted, “People like their own school districts... People tend to love their schools, and love their teachers. They may think the teachers in that community make too much money, but they never say that about the teachers that their child has, that teacher is usually worth every penny.”

In one of the two in-depth case studies we conducted and described above, multiple interviewees talked at length about the financial pressures that burdened many of the long-term white residents in a school district that is now predominantly Asian. School board members told us about families on the brink of losing their homes because one or more parent was unemployed. This has created tensions in the community, especially when voters are tasked with approving the school district's budget. One of the school board members, who is white, voiced his frustration with teachers who lobby to get the budget passed and reportedly say to students "if you can't afford to stay here, maybe you should move."

He also noted, becoming teary eyed as he spoke of families he knows, that so many of the families in the community cannot afford to live in this district anymore, as their incomes have decreased or stagnated. "There isn't anybody that doesn't want to paint their garage door. Or let it look like that, like its falling off the hinges. No matter where you live, no. They can't afford to do it. It's... gut wrenching to see it. And, um... its affects the kids in a bad way. I see how my friend's kids... they really struggle." Despite his frustration with some of the educators in the district as he noted about, he also knows of other teachers and administrators who understand the struggles these families are facing, and they covered some of the costs of certain school activities for those students out of their own pockets. He said, "So you know, as much as I may feel like throwing a stick to them, in the same breath, they're helping people, so... it's a struggle you know."

Meanwhile, as the racial and ethnic makeup of our k-12 student population changes – on Long Island and across the country – the declining support for the public education system and its employees is no doubt related to a demographic mismatch between aging white homeowners and the children in the desks down the street.

When asked if she thought there was an anti-public education sentiment in her now-less-than-30-percent white schools district, a veteran teacher who lives in this district said, unequivocally, "yes." She noted that the increased pressure on public schools to act more like private businesses and to be more efficient in terms of spending, etc. coincided with the rapid change in demographics and what was called "the urbanization of suburbia that now the suburbs are really becoming more urban... And yes I think it's absolutely tied to that because when they're talking urbanization they're talking about demographics."

When asked if she ever considers the future of public education in suburbia, a veteran teacher in a demographically changing district noted:

Oh all the time, and I'm very concerned about it because my feeling is that unless we change the way we fund public education we're looking at a collapse. I truly see that. I wonder if, you talk about a conspiracy theory, I wonder if there is not...that's not a basis for it. This is a way to abolish public education... I don't see how much longer we can continue the way it is. The policy makers are not doing anything about it so I feel like yeah, I feel like it's absolutely threatening public education. Maybe there are people in power who are trying to accelerate the process. I think that very often and very sadly.

Ironically, while the property tax cap discussed above is somewhat helpful in that it limits the increases in the taxes local homeowners pay in these small suburban districts. According to one school board member, "The 2% [property tax] cap helped people. I dunno... it just gave them a little bit of a life line or did it just extend the pain 3, 4 years down the road -- For the school district, the homeowners, everybody.

But the tax cap has also, as we noted, has put much pressure on the educators to do more with less, while being held accountable for the standardized test scores of a changing and

unstable student population. The pressures put on students, administrators and teachers is becoming overwhelming for many. One veteran teacher, who had talked extensively about her love for her career and her students, became very emotional during her interview, expressing her sadness over the treatment of teachers and the state of public education in general in the current era. She went on to say, with tears in her eyes, that if she were starting her career now, she would hesitate to go in to teaching; "...nobody's really sure how it's gonna play out. To tell you the truth at the beginning of my career I couldn't imagine that I'd want to do this. I mean I would wonder who's gonna want to come into education in the next several years."

This teacher, like many of the educators we interviewed, questioned whether or not there a future for public education in suburbia. This context and this set of pressures being placed on suburban public schools have indeed, created the Perfect Storm.

#### **Section Four:**

#### **The Cycle of Segregation and the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of "Bad" Suburban Schools**

In suburban development post World War II people would select a community relative to the quality of the schools because the suburbanites were child bearing. They wanted the best possible schools for their kids. Now if you didn't have money you didn't have much choice. You'd buy the house where the house was affordable... The school districts are crucial to our housing values and people who don't even have kids in school districts often seek communities with school systems because it adds so much to the value.

- Former Long Island Planning Expert

The "perfect storm" of pressure points converging on suburban school districts produces anxiety in even the most affluent school districts. But the additional political and economic pressure placed on increasingly racially diverse school districts is worth noting because these districts help us better understand both the process of segregation and resegregation of communities and public schools as well as the devastating impact of this process. In other words, a school district's ability to address the perfect storm factors – or not – affects its reputation and whether it is perceived to be a "good" or "bad" school district. The more fragile or negative a district's reputation, the more difficult it will be for it to attract home buyers with resources to pay taxes and support the public schools.

In this section, we examine survey and additional interview data from our study as they speak to the relationship between **"tangible" or measurable school district characteristics** such as funding, student outcomes, property values and student demographics and symbolic or **"intangible" factors** such as the reputation, perception and desirability of the public schools and a community.

We argue that when the reputation or "desirability" of a school district declines – usually prior to measurable differences in the tangible factors -- it sets off a downward spiral that will eventually lead to a decline of tangible factors. Furthermore, we argue that the perception of a school district is strongly related to the race and ethnicity of the people who live there and send their children to school there. As we illustrated in Section Two above using a statistical analysis of property values and school district demographics, two very similar houses can have two very different values in the housing market depending on the race and ethnicity of the students who live on one side of the boundary line versus the other.

*In this section, we connect the dots of those differentiated property values as they relate to the migration of more black, Hispanic and Asian families to suburbia; the race of the students enrolled in separate, fragmented school districts; the “perfect storm” of pressures that make these tiny districts unsustainable; and the increasingly sharp distinctions between “good” and “bad” public schools, which is the process by which the fittest may survive the storm in the short run, but public education as a whole will be mortally wounded.*

#### The Material Consequences of Unreputable Public Schools

We have mapped and measured many of the tangible resources of public education – test scores and other outcome data, student demographics, per-pupil funding, etc. -- across the 56 school districts and then examined their relationship to migration patterns of recent buyers and renters in Nassau County. In addition, we have, through our survey of 5,000 recent Nassau County home buyers and our interviews with local officials, real estate agents, educators and home buyers, collected data on the more “intangible” factors that define school districts, including reputations, status, desirability, perception and identities.

Through our survey and interviews, we have learned how people make sense of these intangible factors and thus, what these school districts and the “places” they occupy symbolize, how they are defined as “good” or “bad,” and how those meanings differ across people and place. Our interviews in particular have taught us that these “intangible” factors, especially school district reputations, while sometimes grounded in “objective” data, are also interwoven with everything from tradition and nostalgia to folklore and myth. What is more problematic, however, is that they are closely tied to race and ethnicity, with districts enrolling predominantly black and Hispanic students automatically defined as “bad,” and those in predominantly white and/or white and Asian communities automatically defined as “good” – absent concrete data to support those distinctions.

We have also heard how most people – be they real estate agents, home buyers, or local officials and educators – are quick to narrow the scope of “tangible” factors that matter in the evaluation of the “intangible” value of a school system. In districts with high test scores, for instance, those scores become a focal point when people talk about the “good” reputations of those districts, even as residents or educators may admit some facets of these districts are overstated or not as “good” as their reputations imply.

Predictably, there is much correspondence between the “tangible” and “intangible” factors of school district quality. Furthermore, it is not new to point out the almost perfect symmetry between the racial and social-class make up of a school district and their “reputations” as “desirable” and “undesirable” places to live and send children to school, with the more white and Asian and higher SES districts always coming out on top. This is a relationship that has long been a defining feature of the U.S. housing market, particularly in the northern U.S. where racial and social class segregation had to be carefully constructed in a spatial manner and maintained without laws that mandated it (see Orfield, 1988). As Goldsmith (2000) notes, in the U.S. context, political leaders and the public have accepted “deep social inequalities as though they were God-given,” and they have embraced an exaggerated belief in the efficacy and fairness of the market to shape the value of places and construct “the bizarre spatial form of US metro areas” of which racial segregation is an essential feature.

Still, we argue that in recent decades, the relationship between race, class, and the ways in which tangible (material) and intangible (reputational) characteristics of school districts are intertwined has become increasingly legitimized by a stronger correlation between narrow measures of “good” schools and students – namely via standardized tests now mandated by the state and federal government, which are now published on state and school district websites. As a handful of researchers have shown that the “tangible” accountability measures that we

currently value in the U.S. help to legitimize separate and unequal schools and districts through their strong correlation with race and class (see Helms, 1992; Linn, 2001; Rothstein, 2013; Wells and Holme, 2008; Wells, 2014).

This linkage drives racial, ethnic and social class segregation and stratification across place and space, particularly in highly fragmented areas such as Long Island. In this way, tangible (material) and intangible (reputational) factors maintain an iterative relationship, often rising and falling together, creating a downward spiral and a set of self-fulfilling prophecies as “bad” districts are both seen as “bad” and then become “bad” or remain “bad” due to a lack of resources, loss of support, and high concentrations of poor students with relatively lower outcomes.

But there are also gray areas, where the relationship between the tangible and intangible factors is fuzzy, shifting and seemingly out of sync. These are the places where the meaning of a community and its public schools is being rewritten – where we can see and hear preferences and understandings quaking. In those instances, when the tangible and intangible factors are not aligned, home buyers will depend heavily on “intangible factors” or the word of mouth reputation of “place,” with schools serving more white and Asian students – whether affluent or middle-class – having the greatest value and thus the higher property values. They do this even as they tout the multiple benefits of diverse communities and schools in preparing children for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

#### The Symbolic Boundaries of Place, Race and Reputation

Our survey of 5,000 recent (2005-10) home buyers in Nassau County was designed to illicit feedback on how people moving into (or within) Nassau County made their decision about where to live. We wanted to know what was most important to them in terms of deciding where to live vis a vis the multiple boundary lines – municipal and school district – in the fragmented suburban county. We were particularly interested in the distinctions they made regarding “intangible” or “symbolic boundary” factors. Thus we asked respondents a series of questions about the factors that mattered most to them in choosing a community, with several questions specifically focused on the “reputation” of a school district or the “word of mouth” construction of the place and its schools.

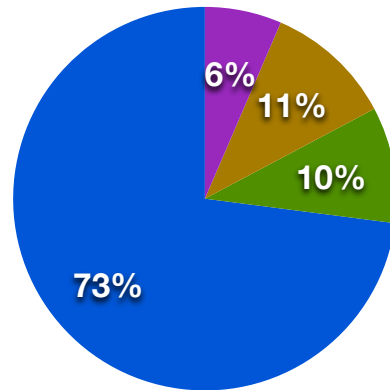
Because we only had mailing addresses for the properties bought and sold during this time period, we could only administer the survey by mail, with each mailing addressed to “resident.” Our final response rate was 10 percent, with a total of nearly 500 surveys returned. While this response is not as high as we had hoped, it is acceptable for a mailed survey, and our findings for several important questions are statistically significant.

As we described in Section 2 above, we developed four categories of school districts in Nassau County based on what we saw as the need to differentiate them in terms of their racial and ethnic distinctions. These are the same categories of maps used in the maps presented in Section 2 of this report.

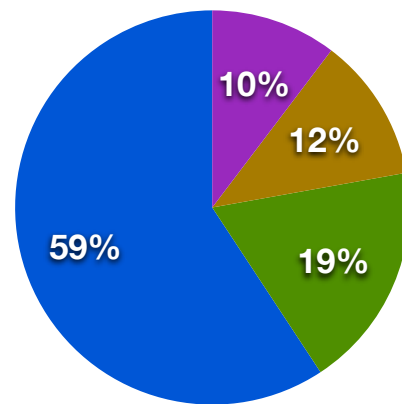
We have analyzed the survey respondents’ answers according to the “racial category” of the school districts into which they moved so that we could better understand how home-buyers in these different public school contexts made choices across 56 separate and unequal school district boundaries. After much analysis, we identified four distinct categories of districts based on the racial makeup of the total student body:

Figure 7: Charts of the Racial Makeup of the Public School Student Population in Nassau County

**Percentage of Each Race in 1999**



**Percentage of Each Race in 2012**



**Table 3: Number of Nassau County School Districts by Category**

	Category 1 Predominantly Nonwhite, with 0-39% of the Students White	Category 2 Diverse Black and Hispanic; White student population = 40-79% of district and less than 50% of students are Asian	Category 3 Diverse Asian; White student population = 40- 79% of district and 50% or more of students are Asian	Category 4 Predominantly White, with 80% or more of the Students are White
<b>2011-2012</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>18</b>

We chose to use these four categories because we learned through the analysis of our qualitative data that there were distinctions in terms of the “intangible” ways in which each of these four types of school districts were defined as “good” and “bad” districts, even when these distinctions did not precisely correlate with “tangible” factors such as test scores or per pupil funding. We wanted to use the survey analysis, therefore, as a way to explore broader differences in how home-buyers made sense of their choices.

We also analyzed the survey data using four other categories of school districts that were based on the average per-capita “income” of people living within a school district. Given the strong correlation between race and income in this country and on Long Island, however, the 56 school districts were clustered similarly into four categories by race and class. There is a significant relationship between race and income, with white, non-Hispanic and Asian respondents (as well as affluent respondents) far more likely to live in school districts with higher per capita income. The findings were also similar, with the intangible factors, such as school and district reputations, playing a larger role in the housing choices for survey respondents in both more affluent and more white and/or Asian school districts.

*Thus, what we learned from the survey, as we display in the following set of tables, is that there is a strong relationship between the racial makeup of the students in a respondent’s school district of “choice” and the degree to which they were persuaded to move to their district by other people’s perception of the quality of the schools.*

It is important to note as well that our demographic analysis of where respondents live shows no significant difference across school districts in whether the respondents have school-age and pre-school children, their self-ranking in terms of politics, nor whether they rent or own their current residence.

In the following data tables, we display the survey questions and results that we see as most relevant to this framing of our findings – namely how the symbolic and intangible factors matter to home buyers/renters. We found that this importance appears to be significantly distinct across the categories of districts organized by the racial makeup of the students enrolled. For instance, in Table 4 below, the question clearly asks the respondents to delineate between housing quality – e.g. “dream residence” and the social construction of place – or the desirability of their community. We see that in both the predominantly white and white and Asian combined (categories 3 and 4) communities, more emphasis is placed on what is desired by others – the social construction of place.

Table 4: Survey Question on Less or More Desirable Community

Question #13: Would you rather live in your dream residence in a <i>less desirable</i> community or in a residence you like less in a <i>more desirable</i> community?***			
% White Students by District Categories			
Predominately Non-White (0-39% White)	Diverse: Non-white Mostly Black and Latino (40-79% White)	Diverse: Non-white Mostly Asian (40-79% White)	Predominately White (80-100% White)
73.2%	86.9%	91.5%	92.4%
* p<.05    *** p<.01    *** p<.001			

The next three tables display the survey results from those questions that best highlight the findings about the important of “reputation,” “perception,” and thus, “social construction” of a school district in particular. This is not to say that the more “tangible” factors defining public schools are not important or significant across home-buyers in different racially configured school districts. But tangible factors aside, it appears to be the case that the difference in the importance placed on “intangible” factors, including the reputation of a district, the recommendation of a friend or family member, and the “word-of-mouth” understanding or social construction of district desirability is the greatest distinction across these school district categories.

Table 5: Survey Question on Importance of Reputation of School Districts

Question #37g: Before moving to my current residence, word of mouth and the general reputation of school districts was <i>very important</i> or <i>somewhat important</i> to me in learning more about the local public schools. ***			
% White Students by District Categories			
Predominately Non-White (0-39% White)	Diverse: Non-white Mostly Black and Latino (40-79% White)	Diverse: Non-white Mostly Asian (40-79% White)	Predominately White (80-100% White)
51.4%	73.7%	86.4%	78.8%
* p<.05    *** p<.01    *** p<.001			



Table 6: Survey Question on Importance of School Racial Diversity

Question #38k: More racial/ethnic diversity in the public school districts was a <i>very important</i> or <i>somewhat important</i> factor to me when choosing a place to live.			
% White Students by District Categories			
Predominately Non-White (0-39% White)	Diverse: Non-white Mostly Black and Latino (40-79% White)	Diverse: Non-white Mostly Asian (40-79% White)	Predominately White (80-100% White)
40.7%	46.7%	59.3%	33.9%
* p<.05    *** p<.01    *** p<.001			

Table 7: Survey Question on Importance of School Reputation

Question #38m: Reputation/how people talked about the schools in the public school districts was a <i>very important</i> or <i>somewhat important</i> factor to me when choosing a place to live.			
% White Students by District Categories			
Predominately Non-White (0-39% White)	Diverse: Non-white Mostly Black and Latino (40-79% White)	Diverse: Non-white Mostly Asian (40-79% White)	Predominately White (80-100% White)
53.2%	79.5%	86.5%	79.7%
* p<.05    *** p<.01    *** p<.001			

### The Value of Housing and School Districts: Where Tangible and Intangible Factors Collide

And finally, qualitative interview data of 300 local officials, educators, and parents in Nassau County reveal that “intangible” factors such as a school district’s reputation and desirability matter a great deal to those with “tangible” resources to bring to a school district. This finding demonstrates the extent to which the “value” of places – particularly communities and their public schools -- and home buyers who have the economic (tangible) resources to have choices of where to live are highly sensitive to the intangible reputation and status of the people who live there and their public schools.

This is not to say that the tangible distinctions across school districts with varied reputations are not real and meaningful – they are. *But our in-depth interview data suggest that there are moments in which the respondents see the gaps between the reputations and reality; between the intangible and tangible.* These gaps provide the instances where we can better understand both the fragility and the necessity of the iterative relationship between tangible and intangible factors. For in those moments, when respondents question their own understandings of place and value, they are quick to reseat the relationship, that is, the positive correlation, between intangible and tangible factors that serves to maintain the status quo and makes boundary maintenance so important.

The first of the two clearly defined themes within the data is “When the Reputation of Place Precedes It,” which explores the multiple ruptures within the otherwise strong positive

relationship between tangible and intangible factors that make a place and school district what it is. It turns out that the interview data include a fair number of instances in which respondents suggest that the reputation of a community or district is exaggerated or questionable based on their interpretation of the tangible information.

The second clearly defined theme is “When Location, Location, Location Means Association, Association, Association,” which illustrates the powerful relationship between the desirability of a certain place or school district and the status of the people who live there and send their children to those schools. At some level, the reputation of a place may be as dependent on who else is there as it is on specific resources or opportunities. This process of association can easily feed processes of segregation and stratification.

*When the Reputation of Place Precedes It*

Strongly related to the survey responses described above, the interview data clearly points to “recommendation, reputation and word-of-mouth shared understandings” as key reasons why people with resources and choices move where they do in Nassau County. Yet, what is interesting about our interview data with respondents who live and work in the more affluent and privileged areas of Nassau County – be they educators, local officials, realtors or recent home buyers/renters – is that there are often moments in which they question the voracity of their district’s good reputation and its effects on the local housing market. However, they frequently shift back to defending their district and its reputation by noting one or more dimensions of the “quality” of people who live there as a justification for the reputation. This also relates to the second theme below,

Interestingly enough, these same respondents also voice concern or dismay about the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in these high-status districts and schools, noting that such diversity is more representative of the “real world.” Still, status and reputation – especially as it corresponds to the status of the residents who live there – trumps “reality” or any doubts about the tangible factors or the downsides of racial/ethnic and socioeconomic homogeneity. In the end, what people *think* about a place is as important (sometimes more so) as what the place actually is.

Our interview with a white, upper-middle class parent who is one of the leaders of the district-wide PTA in the affluent school district in which she and her husband bought an expensive home 10 years ago, exemplifies one example of this theme. During the course of her interview, she questioned many aspects of the “quality” of the educational system in her district, but she did not question the fact that most people perceive the district to be very good and that those with the resources to live there will pay for the expensive housing and the property taxes that come with it. She noted that she thinks most people move there for the schools and the community:

My husband grew up in the next town over, and I think he always felt like this was better. I don’t know why. I just think its reputation precedes it. I think that many people believe that and I think historically they look to what they’ve heard more so than anything else. I don’t know how much research is actually out there that says this is so much better than that. I think it was really the...I like the location.

This now-stay-at-home mother of four school-age children has a background in science, and her critique of the school system, especially the science curriculum, were scattered throughout the interview in bits and pieces amid her understanding that people go to great lengths and pay a great deal of money to live here. Thus, she seems conflicted, noting that the reputation of the public schools may be overblown and not grounded in the day-to-day reality of

what students are exposed to in their classes. For instance, she said that despite “everyone’s” perception that the curriculum in this district’s schools is rigorous, she she did not see that in what her own children experienced. She said, “...everyone’s like there’s so much homework, there’s so much homework, but I don’t feel that way. I don’t think it’s that rigorous, but that’s not what I hear. There are a lot of parents that think it is too much, too much, and I don’t.”

She did note, however, that she thinks her children’s elementary school is a “happy place” and that the teachers are “very devoted and dedicated.” At the same time, she said the curriculum “is what it is” and thus, “There probably is room for improvement in it. I think the science is lacking. I have a science background, and I feel like if I learned the water cycle one more time...”

This mother also discussed many of the non-school factors that draw people to this community, including geographic location, easy access to transportation, and the aesthetic beauty of the “place.” But she frequently circled back to talk about the public schools and their strong reputation, which she simultaneously doubts and embraces:

The schools were always just considered fine, great. I don’t know, they were number one at one point and I think that carried through. Everyone still kinda thinks that. I don’t know if it’s very true, but it was a huge factor in our consideration and I think that you will find that many, many people that are coming now, moving into the town, will say that’s the motivation to come...

In a similar vein, we see many instances in which people put a lot of time, energy and resources into being in the “right” school districts based on recommendation, reputation and word-of-mouth shared understandings. Thus, there were many, many instances in which respondents questioned the tangible price or the market “value” of the property and houses in a particular school district, noting that outside of this district context, the prices people pay for certain houses are completely out of line with the tangible dimensions of their purchase. As the superintendent of one of the most highly ranked school districts (according to test scores, graduation rates and college acceptances) noted:

You move to [this district] for one reason. Very frankly you’re not moving here because the house that you’re paying \$800,000 for is particularly pretty... it’s not a particularly big house or pretty house. You’re moving here to send your kids here to school... My guess is I would show you an \$800,000 house that you would be unimpressed with. You’d say, ‘My God for \$800,000 I’m not buying that.’

Later in the interview, this superintendent also noted, in commenting on how people assess school district quality, that the reputation – or “word on the street” matters most, even more than the plethora of tangible data available online. “I think anybody who is college educated who has young kids and is looking for a house, while they may be looking at it’s a nice area, it’s close to the city, it’s a train ride to the city, I think as they’re doing that assessment they’re assessing *the reputation* of the school district”.

Even this school district official, who is a strong advocate for his district and a firm believer in the “quality” of education available there, questioned the “value” of the homes sold in his district and admitted that “reputation,” or the social construction of school quality – as opposed to (or in conjunction with) tangible data – is what drives the housing market. In the next theme on “associations” we explore these issues of “reputation” as they relate to *who* lives in a given school district.

*When Location, Location, Location Means Association, Association, Association*

The interesting aspect of this theme emerging from our data is that at its deepest level, the understanding of what a particular house is “worth” often times about much more than the decontextualized, rational assessment of the value of a piece of property and the home built upon it. Furthermore, it does not always map perfectly onto the test scores or other outcome variables of the students enrolled in the respective school districts. Rather, the evaluation is often about *who* lives there and the status of those people in the larger society as well as within the local context.

This space of social construction of a school district’s reputation and value is where tangible-intangible disconnections can occur. This is best illustrated by one Asian mother who we interviewed, who is involved in the PTA in her local school district, which is highly ranked in terms of student outcomes but is not one of the most affluent districts in the county. She compared her district to another, nearby district in which the residents are wealthier and the percentage of students in the schools who are white is higher. She estimated that the price difference between two similar houses on opposite sides of these school districts’ shared boundary would be about \$200,000, and that she had heard that even a small house in the other district could cost as much as one million dollars.

At the same time, she said she thought the curriculum and grading standards in her school district were much “tougher” than in the neighboring district with the higher priced homes. She then implied that houses in this less rigorous, but more affluent school district are more expensive because of who the people are on either side of the boundary line. She also noted that in the more affluent, less academically rigorous district, children are able to stand out easier among their peers due to less competition. She noted, for instance, that in her district, the student population is now more than 50 percent Asian and the course taking patterns of these students, many of whom are children of recent immigrants, is increasingly competitive and rigorous. She noted that this neighboring district is “more wealthy” and more doctors and bankers live there. She added that it is “More usually WASP.” The result is that although the district with the larger Asian population regularly “beats” the more WASPy district in terms of test scores and other tangible factors, the WASPy district has a reputation for being an expensive, more exclusive and desirable place to live.

A parent residing in another district, very much like the WASPy one described above noted that when she first moved into this district with its strong reputation and high property values, there was no diversity. She noted, “When I got here I felt like everybody was the same. Everybody was blonde and blue eyed and WASPy and American. Really like there was no other...” Still, this mother noted that in recent years, there has been some change as different people have moved in “where now we’re much more diverse than we were. In the last ten years a tremendous amount of...you know we have a lot of Greeks, we have a lot of Spanish, we have a lot of Asians. There are all kinds of people moving in, which is so nice that there’s a little bit of something different.”

Yet even as this mother embraced some degree of diversity in her school district, she was quick to note that only certain types of racial/ethnic diversity were allowed and valued. Thus, when asked if this demographic change in her district implied that in the near future it may look much like the neighboring school district with its overwhelmingly black and Latino student population, she quickly replied: “Oh no. No. No. We would never be like that, no. I just think it’s more open now than it once was, but I think that’s true of the whole world.”

This last findings section helps us consider the ways in which the reputation and perception of different communities and school districts on Long Island is strongly related to who lives there. This has strong implications for the ways in which racial segregation interact

with inequality in terms of tangible distinctions – student outcomes, funding levels and resources – across school district boundary lines.

Such perceptions of place and race are documented in other literature outside the field of education. What we have accomplished in this in-depth study of one fragmented and divided suburban county is how difficult it is to create and sustain racially and ethnically diverse suburban communities because the divisions are so great. In the last section of the report below, we briefly discuss some possible solutions to the impending fiscal and educational crisis in thousands of suburban communities across the country.

#### **Section Five:** **Implications and Possibilities**

In prior publications from this research and other writings by the authors of this report, top policy recommendations for addressing separate and unequal suburban school districts and communities have included the consolidation of the tiny, fiscally fragile and economically unviable school district into one or two county-wide districts. Another popular recommendation has been to promote more inter-district, voluntary integration plans.

In this report, after collecting and analyzing reams of quantitative and qualitative data, we are less optimistic that these are still the most important recommendations to make. While consolidation of small districts would no doubt alleviate some of the fiscal pressure that tiny, fragmented suburban school districts now experience, the vehement political opposition to consolidating school districts that are so deeply divided in terms of their material and reputational resources suggests this is not going to occur any time soon. The data and findings in this report help us understand why.

Thus, while increased efforts to consolidate the “back office” or administrative functions of school districts in counties such as Nassau are moving forward with some success, the resistance to wholesale consolidation of students, district names and identities and tax bases is fierce and came through loud and clear in the vast majority of interviews we conducted.

Similarly, efforts to implement inter-district school desegregation such as the magnet school programs developed by the Nassau County BOCES are worthwhile and have brought students from different backgrounds and unequal school districts together. But the demographic sea change occurring in the public schools on Long Island, coupled with several factors – the Perfect Storm – that are working against the sustainability of all suburban districts, particularly those that are the most diverse, mean that such interdistrict schools and programs will most likely only address a small part of the problem of separate and unequal schools.

Indeed, what has become increasingly clear to us in working on this research is that unless more is done to change the way in which we rank, measure and evaluate racially and ethnically diverse public schools and districts, we will never solve the problem of separate and unequal public education in the new American suburbia.

***As is clear from our data, metropolitan migration patterns will create racially and ethnically diverse suburbs as the trading places phenomena plays out. The question is whether we can sustain and support these diverse communities amid the migration patterns. If not, the future does not bode well for much of suburbia or for our diverse country as a whole.***

As long as racial and ethnic dividing lines exist and those districts that are either predominantly black and Latino or becoming more diverse in that direction are perceived to be lower quality, even when their outcome data – more broadly measured – do not warrant that distinction – the cycle of segregation will continue to repeat itself.

Furthermore, as we demonstrated in Section 4 of this report, when the status and reputation of a community is more closely tied to the race and income of the residents than

what is occurring in terms of the teaching and learning in the public schools, then the cycle of segregation will again repeat itself.

If we can support efforts to sustain racially and ethnically diverse school districts and to stabilize their residential and student populations, and find value in that diversity as an important factor in preparing children for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The future of our increasingly diverse country requires policy makers and leaders from DC to Albany to Valley Stream to do the following:

**Policy Makers Should Embrace and Capitalize on Changing Racial Attitudes in the U.S. Particularly Among the Younger Generations.**

Despite the policy trends and individual choices that have led to on-going patterns of segregation in both urban and suburban communities, a growing body of literature indicates that a substantial proportion of our post-Civil Rights society strongly values and desires exposure to diverse environments as an asset- both in and outside of schools (Powell, 2002; Adair, 2005; Orfield, 2001; Wells et.al, 2009, Stillman, 2012; Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley, 2012). Indeed, in the midst of increasing immigration and changing demographics, Americans of all racial and ethnic groups are increasingly likely to be accepting of cultural differences and to view diversity in social situations as a positive characteristic (Alba and Nee, 2003; Krysan and Faison, 2011).

The extent to which racial attitudes and perceptions of racial inequality have changed over time, particularly since the Civil Rights Movement, varies considerably by respondents' racial background. Although all respondents are increasingly likely to value diverse neighborhoods, school, and social groups, attitudes among whites have changed more, simply due to the fact that non-white respondents have favored diversity for longer and in larger number than whites in recent decades (Alba and Nee, 2003; Krysan and Faison, 2011; Louie, 2005).

Although diverse, integrated spaces are becoming more socially desirable, our society is still quite divided in terms of their perceptions of how far we still have to go to achieve racial equality. While nearly all whites dismiss ideas that blacks in particular are less intelligent and hardworking than whites, and fewer oppose interracial marriage, whites are increasingly less likely to believe that blacks continue to experience racial discrimination as a result of structural inequality and a history of slavery and oppression (Krysan and Faison, 2011). Black respondents, on the other hand, tend to report that these issues are still very much a problem in spite of shifts in racial politics since the mid 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Krysan and Faison, 2011; Louie, 2005). Asian and Hispanic respondents also cite experiencing discrimination due to their race, however, to a somewhat lesser extent than among blacks or other phenotypically dark-skinned individuals (Alba and Nee, 2003). It seems that among whites in particular, conversations around valuing and pursuing diversity in schools, neighborhoods, and other institutions has focused less and less on this goal as a way to address past injustices (Kasitzin et.al., 2008).

Addressing these racial divides on issues of past injustices and on-going structural inequality are best addressed through cross-racial dialogue and understanding. The need sustain racially and ethnically diverse communities is vital to our future as a diverse democracy.

*Attitudes about Diverse Schools: Policies Are out of Step*

Paralleled with these shifts in racial attitudes, desire for diverse learning spaces has grown in recent decades. Despite the many challenges and shortcomings associated with the introduction of school desegregation across the U.S., research has shown that in the decades following the implementation of these policies, interracial contact slowly increased and racism among whites declined (Clotfelter, 2001). Furthermore, a substantial body of work indicates that

students who attended racially diverse schools are more likely to exhibit progressive attitudes toward members of other racial groups (Wells et.al., 2009). As our society becomes more diverse racially and ethnically, support for integrated schools has only grown stronger. According to a recent Newsweek Survey, 71% of all respondents felt that increasing diversity and integration in public schools is important to their improvement. This number was higher among African American and Hispanic respondents than among whites, but is much higher among whites than in previous years (Cose, 2004). In fact, parents who are choosing schools for their young children commonly reference their desire for diversity as a factor in the decision-making process (Stillman, 2012; Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley, 2012).

However, recent research has also shown that even when parents consider diversity to be a benefit, they still tend to choose schools that are homogenous, oftentimes citing measures of school quality as the most important factor in making their decisions (Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley, 2012, Wells and Roda, 2013). And somewhat paradoxically, support for policies such as busing and race-conscious assignment has actually declined since desegregation policies were first implemented. Public policies have shifted as well to emphasize school choice and accountability above equity minded policies that promote diverse schools. Furthermore, the public school choice process is complicated by increasing inequality, stark segregation, and narrow definitions of “school quality” that align with demographic characteristics of schools. The unfortunate reality is, therefore, that even for parents who prefer diverse schools, these structural challenges make finding and choosing these schools very difficult (Wells et.al.; 2009; Lacireno-Paquet, 2013). Such findings lead to our next set of implications.

#### **More Specific Policies to Support Racially and Ethnically Diverse Communities and Public Schools:**

Actually efforts to stabilize diverse suburban communities date back several decades in places like Oak Park, Illinois outside of Chicago; Shaker Heights, Ohio, which borders Cleveland; or Maplewood-South Orange near Newark, New Jersey. These suburban communities and several others set out several decades ago, working with local realtors to assure that as Blacks and Hispanics moved in, white residents did not flee en masse, creating a downward spiral of lower property values, tax revenue and local services. Each of these communities has been successful in maintaining their racial and ethnic diversity without massive white and middle-class flight, and they now serve as beacons of hope for a growing number of suburban communities trying to do the same.

The Oak Park Regional Housing Center, a non-profit organization that has assisted in connecting renters and property owners to help racially balance neighborhoods for the last 40 years. Rob Braymeier, the executive director of the Oak Park Regional Housing Center has noticed a large upswing in inquiries from suburban communities across the country, which he attributes to two factors: First, the movement of the Baby Boomers and Boomlet to the cities has made people think about “what is going on in suburbs.”

Secondly, the Obama Administration has been more pro-active than any administrations in years in enforcing federal anti-discrimination laws. A good example is the 2009 Westchester County fair-housing case, which ended in a court order for this suburban county, just north of New York City, to build more mixed-income housing in its most affluent communities. In 2013, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) officials withdrew about 7.4 million dollars in federal grants earmarked for Westchester, accusing the county of failing to comply with the order. While Westchester officials argue that HUD is overreaching, the Obama Administration’s actions in this case have put local communities on notice about fair housing enforcement.

#### **An Old Movement in New Times**

For Braymaier and others who have been doing this work for decades, the uptake in interest in diverse suburbs signals not a “new” movement, but the resurgence of an old one whose time has finally come. In fact, when the Oak Park Regional Housing Center was founded in the 1970s, many Midwestern and Northeastern suburbs were working to stabilize diverse communities. Organizations such as the National Conference of Christians and Jews, (now the National Conference of Communities and Justice), brought people from diverse suburbs and towns together to share strategies. But the momentum waned in the 1980s when many older inner-ring suburbs became predominantly Black and the Federal government turned its back.

Hence the changes within HUD under this administration are seen as more than symbolic. Advocates of diverse suburbs argue that much like the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, their grassroots efforts require simultaneous support from the federal government. In the Philadelphia metro area, several southwestern suburban townships came together to found Building One Pennsylvania, a state chapter of Building One America, and they have been successful in working with HUD officials to develop a “mobility program.” This program assures low-income recipients of federal rent assistant vouchers, known as Section Eight vouchers, are not concentrated in one or two townships, but spread across several suburbs.

The federal Section 8 housing voucher program for low-income families can too easily become another mechanism of “racial and socio-economic segregation” unless a pro-active effort is made to help voucher recipients find housing in “high opportunity” communities. A proactive stance on the part of HUD officials to staff local housing authority offices with counselors to help move more Section 8 families into the affluent areas of the suburban counties is needed.

Still, there is only so much the Obama Administration can do absent support from Congress. In fact, some of the HUD’s most innovative programs were cut during the federal budget sequestration of 2013. Just one important example is the Sustainable Communities Initiative or SCI, which was a partnership between HUD, the Department of Transportation and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to fund hundreds of communities across the country to develop master plans for economically strong, environmentally sustainable, and “inclusive” communities. Unfortunately, the sequester and a lack of Congressional support has ended the SCI program after the initial planning stage.

According to people working within these SCI communities, the planning grants were invaluable in bringing different stakeholders throughout a region together – often for the first time – to think about growth, development and diversity. Unfortunately, these projects lack federal funds to move forward and implement their plans. Ironically, it is that regional planning “work” of the SCI grantees that is most needed to sustain already diverse suburbs.

#### **From Addressing Discrimination to Sustainability and Revitalization**

This shift in focus from addressing issues of racial discrimination to revitalizing suburbs that are already racially diverse is the growing trend in inner-ring and older suburbs. As Jay Readey of the Chicago Lawyer’s Committee for Civil Rights notes, the most important question for advocates of diverse communities to ponder these days is “how do you go beyond enforcing fair housing complaints to more affirmatively sustaining diverse communities?”

In Shaker Heights, Ohio, which has been pro-active on housing integration for decades, this shift is obvious. “We don’t talk so much about neighborhood integration anymore, we talk about stabilization and revitalization,” said Lisa Gold-Scott, Housing Attorney for Shaker Heights.

A long-standing home loan program called Fund for the Future was established in Shaker in the 1980s to assist home buyers in making “pro-integrative” moves into neighborhoods in which they would contribute to racial balance. But after the mortgage lending crisis in 2008, credit became tighter and more homes were converted to rental units as the



recession continued. By 2012, the Fund for the Future was no longer a viable model for sustaining a racially diverse and mixed-income community.

Now, Shaker Heights, with support from HUD and local non-profits, is focused on revitalization efforts including rehabbing vacant lots and foreclosed houses. They are building playgrounds and gardens in spaces where abandoned houses once stood and rehabbing old retail establishments that once housed auto repair shops to make office space for start-up tech companies. According to Gold-Scott, the sustainability of older suburbs like Shaker Heights goes well beyond ensuring fair housing now that the demographics have changed so much. She notes that when you have safe healthy homes and vibrant business districts, it has a ripple effect on the whole community. Thus, while the tactics to sustain diverse communities may change over time, the work is never done: “It is a never-ending process, and you can’t just rest on your laurels,” Gold-Scott said.

The idea that the work of sustaining diverse suburbs is never-ending and ever-evolving is echoed in other contexts, including Maplewood-South Orange in New Jersey where Nancy Gagnier is the Executive Director of the Community Coalition on Race. Modeled after the Fund for the Future, Maplewood-South Orange established a loan program in the later 1990s called Prism (Pro-integration Supplemental Money), which provided low-interest loans to homebuyers to purchase on streets where their racial/ethnic group was underrepresented. In recent years, Prism, like Fund for the Future, has evolved into a home improvement loan program to help community members hit hardest by the mortgage crisis and recession keep up their home’s external appearances.

The Coalition also formed a Realtor Advisory Group to test how realtors reacted to prospective home buyers of different racial ethnic groups. This effort has evolved as well, as fair housing laws have greatly restricted what real estate agents can say to prospective buyers about race. Ironically, some of the same advocacy groups that once wanted the tighter restrictions on how realtors could talk about race to prevent racial steering now bemoan the fact that these restrictions forbid realtors who understand the benefits of diverse communities and schools to talk about diversity as a selling point.

### **The Housing-School Nexus**

So in Maplewood-South Orange the Realtor Advisory Group now holds meetings with the local real estate agents and school officials about which neighborhoods are the hardest to sell and how that relates to perceptions of the public schools. They then recruit enthusiastic parents from those schools to give prospective buyers a tour. “These school tours are given by people who love the town and can say a lot more about racial diversity than a realtor can,” said Gagnier.

Such connections between residential patterns and perceptions of the quality of diverse public schools are critical. According to Gagnier, “housing policy is school policy.”

And while many supporters of communities like Maplewood-South Orange are happy to see HUD promoting inclusive suburbs, they bemoan the dominant education reform efforts of the last 30 years, which they see as working against diverse public schools. By promoting a narrow set of accountability measures that strongly correlate with race and social class of the students, schools that are more diverse often have “worse” outcomes on these narrow measures, thus lowering their rankings, even if there are good schools.

According to Paul Scully at Building One America, the “biggest area of frustration is the Department of Education,” which is seen as doing nothing to help promote racially and ethnically diverse schools despite much research evidence they best prepare children for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century economy and global society.

### **Educational Policies for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

The courts have ruled the “educational benefits” of diverse universities, schools and classrooms constitute an important, compelling governmental interest. Such diverse learning environments, the courts noted, better prepare students for a global society by reducing racial stereotypes and fostering cross-racial understanding. These rulings were predicated in part on a growing body of research across several fields, including mathematics and science, that show people working in racially and ethnically diverse groups come up with better solutions to problems. American corporations have been inspired by this research to provide employees with trainings on problem solving and diversity – strategies most of our most of our schools are not teaching.

If our demographic destiny, solid research evidence, employers’ demands, and the U.S. Supreme Court do not provide policy makers with enough incentive to promote racial and ethnic diversity in our public schools, then changing racial attitudes should. As we noted above, opinion polls and interviews show that a growing number of white Americans, especially young adults, harbor less racial prejudice than whites of a prior generation.

In addition, as we also note above, the percentage of Americans who support students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds attending the same schools has increased dramatically – at least in terms of what people say since the 1950s. Young adults, who are more likely to have attended diverse schools and have children in public schools today, express the most support for racially integrated schools and classrooms.

#### **Placing Far Less Emphasis on Narrow Measures of Achievement.**

The current heavy emphasis on standardized tests is detrimental to good teaching that engages students in creative ways. For students who live and will work in a racially diverse and culturally complex society, this strong emphasis on discrete bits of standardized knowledge and information is even more problematic. The current colorblind policy focus on standardized testing as the almost exclusive measure of high-achieving students and good schools and teachers does an educational disservice to students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Such understandings work against racially diverse schools in ways that are unfair and erroneous and often lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy via a downward spiral of diverse schools as students with more resources and higher test scores leave. Nearly 20 years ago, Elmore and Fuhrman predicted this downward spiral of more diverse schools measured by narrow, non-diverse measures. As state testing regimes were first being implemented, they noted that because prior student academic achievement and students’ social class are still the strongest predictors of how well a given school will do on academic achievement measures, “focusing state policy on student performance might simply concentrate high-achieving students in a few schools, thereby aggravating current disparities in the racial and socioeconomic composition of schools” (Elmore and Furman, 1995). Research my colleagues and I conducted on racially diverse high schools from the 1970s revealed that many of these schools had “good” reputations.

We learned from our historical case studies of these schools, however, that school reputations are incredibly fragile and need to be bolstered—and not undercut—by federal and state policies intended to hold schools accountable. Indeed, given everything that racially diverse schools have working against them in a racially segregated and unequal society, such policies should support these schools and not contribute to their demise (Wells and Holme, 2005).

#### **Final Word**

It is time for 21<sup>st</sup> Century policymakers to consider broader, real-world accountability measures that more accurately reflect the range of experiences of students need within a racially and culturally diverse society. How might our public schools – suburban and urban -- better prepare the next generation of Americans for life and work in culturally complex and

global society? Research, parents' intuition and common sense suggest that this mission is best accomplished in schools that more accurately reflect the cultural diversity of our increasingly complex society.

It is time for more policy makers to embrace the racial, ethnic and cultural complexity of our K-12 student population and endorse policies that support diverse schools and cross-cultural learning. A first step would be to decrease the emphasis on narrow measures of student achievement – e.g. standardized test scores – as the only way to define “good” students and “good” schools. In other words, policy makers should rethink *what* they are holding schools accountable for and whether they think preparing students for a global society is one aspect of a quality education.

If preparing the next generation to cross cultural boundaries and work in a global economy is a priority, policy makers should also support housing policies that sustain diverse communities and schools. Through scattered site moderate-income housing or programs to support stability in the housing markets of increasingly diverse 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> suburbs, policy makers and community members must act on the changing racial attitudes in this country to tear down decades-old structures of inequality and segregation. Assuring equal access to neighborhoods and schools for families of all backgrounds is first step toward embracing the potential of the most racially and ethnically diverse democracy in the world. Assuring existing residents and their resources – tangible and intangible -- to support public schools stay is a second important step.

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