

# Bixhorn: We must protect education on LI

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By Gary Bixhorn

Long Islanders have made an enormous investment in our schools. The investment is not just financial, it is emotional and intellectual. Our schools have benefitted tremendously from the time and effort that residents have devoted to making them as good as they are. Community members volunteer to serve on the school boards, participate in PTA, serve on shared decision-making teams and a wide variety of other committees and task forces. As a result of this participation, individuals establish ownership of their schools and a strong bond between the community and their school district develops. This investment has yielded a tremendous return.

Our schools are the finest in the state when measures of student achievement are assessed. By every measure maintained by the [New York State Education Department](#), our kids outperform students from across the rest of New York. This performance is even more impressive when you consider that public education in New York is rated second in the nation in the annual "Quality Counts" analysis prepared by [Education Week](#), which is the most comprehensive and credible study of school quality available today. Fifty-seven Long Island high schools, approximately half, are rated in [Newsweek's](#) top high schools in the United States. Nearly 20 percent of all Intel science award winners nationally are students in Long Island schools. Long Island is truly a rarified environment in terms of public education.

This begs the question, Why, after making such an enormous investment, would Long Islanders cede control of our schools to those in Albany who don't share our commitment to our schools? Why should Long Islanders, who sacrificed to build an exemplary system of public education that is the cornerstone of our region's quality of life, allow others to limit community control of the schools by the introduction of arbitrary caps and the continued use of unfair funding formulas? Long Islanders must retain control of our schools to protect the investment we've made and to assure that our children receive the quality of education that our communities support and demand.

What should we do? We should be fighting to change the state funding formulas to assure that Long Island receives an appropriate level of aid. A level that will enable us to reduce our overdependence on property taxes. A level that reflects the share of income and sales taxes that Long Islanders send to Albany. We should make certain that if a tax cap is introduced, it is fair to our region and allows communities to retain the right to vote on a budget prepared by the local school board pursuant to their legal responsibilities. We should resist all efforts to diminish local control of school budgets and personnel management. We should tell our elected officials to repeal mandates that the state has put in place that have driven up the cost of education. We don't need promises of "no new mandates," we need relief. We should tell the state to introduce a new pension tier to reduce future cost increases and work to restructure the state health insurance program to reduce premiums. There are many important matters we and our elected officials should be addressing, but we are being distracted by peripheral issues of little immediate consequence.

If we don't start paying attention to the real issues, the loss of state support for education as well as the threat to local control, our investment will face its own version of a Wall Street crash.

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