American Dream: State of Failure

by

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The American Dream: State of Failure

America is known for its very cyclical systems and its forward-thinking ideology of the "American Dream." This is commonly mistaken to be equally obtainable to all. What happens when you're a lower-class person? A person of color? What if you live in a county with some of the highest taxes in the country or a school district with an extremely low graduation rate? Systemic issues feed into the difficulty of achieving any sort of upwards mobility. This project takes an inward look at systemic issues feeding into inequality in state funded and regulated institutions, specifically public high schools. This paper is accompanied by a film that gives an inside look into the community members fighting against these issues.

The ideology of the "American Dream" is ingrained in American Society. There are three fundamental aspects that make up the American Dream: education, employment, and home ownership. These main categories are all typically considered to be consecutive effects of each other: you need a good education to get a good job to get a good home in a good place (typically a house in the suburbs with good schools). It emphasizes the importance of education and hard work in achieving upwards mobility, specifically socially and economically. The belief in individual success from one's hard work that the American Dream reinforces, ignores the truth of systemic and societal issues that work against those disadvantaged in America. The danger of the ideology of the American Dream is that it assumes everyone begins on equal playing fields. The only way this would be possible is if the effects of years of systemic oppression were not still impacting society.

This project is comprised of this paper and a film of the same title. This paper breaks down the idea of the American Dream and its emphasis on education as a starting point for

success. I then look at the racial imbalance within the public education system. The paper, as supported by the film, takes an inward look on the Hempstead School District in New York. This district has been declared in a state of failure with extremely low graduation rates and corruption. The research takes a look at how segregation and discrimination have played a major role in the growth of corruption within the district. It analyzes the way the students are falling into stereotypes and statistics by the state neglect and gives the students' perspective, a narrative often left unheard in these districts. Through interviews with community members, local government leaders, and scholars I address the potential changes that the district could benefit from since the state has yet to step in. The goal of this project is to give a voice beyond the local news media for the people of this community while backing their claims with academic support.

Education → Good Job → House in Good Neighborhood → Good Schools….. Repeat:

> American Dream, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or posture.
>
> –James Truslow Adams (1930)

The ideology of the "American Dream" was first published in James Truslow Adams 1930 book, *The Epic of America* and is defined above. The 1930's were when education started to be the societal norm as the American economy moved away from agriculture and towards more skilled professions. This ideology spread rapidly with the rise of patriotism specifically during the World Wars. The Common Education system was formed under the hand of Horace Mann during this time. The United States Education system and the current workforce go hand in hand and the format for public education was largely influenced by the demands of the economy (punctuality, 8-hour work days, regard for authority were all taught in schools to prepare children for the workforce which at the time was factory based). With child labor on the rise, formal organized education served to protect against exploitation of the youth. The American Education System developed to regulate education and keep it up to date with the demands of the economy. The United States Department of Education is the primary backbone in making sure this relationship continues, however it delegates power to each individual state. In New York State there is the Department of Education for the state and then districts are comprised of elected officials on a more local level.

Since the creation of the Common Education system, New York State has evolved into various newer layouts for governance of public education. These are laid out in the state

published article, “Guide to the Reorganization of School Districts in New York State.” The three main layouts used in the states include the Common School District, the Union Free School District, and the Central School District. The most common types of district in New York are the Common and Union Free. Hempstead follows the rules of the Union Free High School where the power is predominately given to the school board. Prof. Alan J. Singer, who has been vocal about the struggles in Hempstead District thinks reorganization of Hempstead School District would be integral to the high school’s success. Reorganization is used in New York State to merge school districts into one of these different structures. In New York State there are three Central School Districts, all falling in the same county (Nassau County) as Hempstead. In a place like Hempstead where issues of governance, financial strife and racial imbalance are major issues, shifting from being a Union Free to a Central School District could help resolve these issues greatly by combining the local schools into one unified district allowing for better distribution of wealth. As of 2015, New York State passed a law that allowed for people to override the elected school board and give power to the superintendent known as the Receivership Law. This is something yet to be seen in Hempstead, as they have turned over 21 superintendents in 20 years. In a district like Hempstead where corruption and abused of power is common on the school board this could potentially benefit the district greatly. This law was explained to me as giving a superintendent “super powers” and is rarely ever used in the state. In 2016 NYS issued a report titled “State Takeover of Public Schools: Lessons from the School of Hard Knocks” where they analyzed districts in different states that enacted the receivership law. The program acknowledges the difficulty to unite communities to make this happen but also the fact that financially it is difficult.

Racism and Segregation in Suburbia:

Segregation and internalized racism is what reinforces ideas of "good" and "bad" neighborhoods and as a direct result public schools. Johnson and Shapiro's work on exploring the thought process of white families when choosing these "good" environments helps establish the idea that segregation is a systemic issue that is inherently reproduced through the dichotomy of good and bad/black and white. In a system designed to "reward those in advantageous positions" it becomes extremely difficult to break this reproduction (173). Johnson and Shapiro's research revealed that "race is paramount in the minds of white parents when they make school and community choice decisions for their families" (174). The factors of race and standard are "intricately tied" to "decisions about community and education (175). This is enforced by laws and realtor pressure. There is a direct connection where subjects equated "good neighborhoods" to "good schools." These "good" schools are also a result of high property taxes found in neighborhoods with higher property prices, something not every family and typically people of color are able to afford. Their research acknowledges a belief that if black families move into predominately white neighborhoods the value of both the schools and property will decline, a clearly racist sentiment. Hempstead is considered to be one of these "bad" neighborhoods.

Industries took a shift during the world wars leading to an influx of African Americans in the workforce. After the World Wars ended and factory work began to dwindle, many people went out to live in the suburbs. However, African Americans were often denied these possibilities. In the New York Public Library exhibit *Black Suburbia: From Levittown to Ferguson*, sponsored by Hofstra University National Center for Suburban Studies, the issues faced as black suburbia grew are highlighted. "The 2010 Census revealed that the drop-in

population among many major American cities could be attributed, at least in part, to the suburbanization of African Americans."

Levittown, NY is known for being the birth place of suburbia. The famous Levitt formula for suburbia is to thank for reinforcing segregation in the suburbs. In post-World War II America, the G.I. Bill and the rush to start families led to the rise of William Levitt's Ford-style assembly line of mass-producing houses. While his technique landed him on the cover of *Time* magazine and a place in American history, there is often one major aspect of his character overlooked: he was a racist. Levitt had a vision of a "perfect" or in other words "*good"* neighborhood. His original leases state (in all capital letters)

> "THE TENANT AGREES NOT TO PERMIT THE PREMISES TO BE USED OR OCCUPIED BY ANY PERSON OTHER THAN MEMBERS OF THE CAUCASIAN RACE BUT THE EMPLOYMENT AND MAINTANCE OF OTHER THAN CAUCASIAN DOMESTIC SERVANTS SHALL BE PERMITTED" (Levittown Public Library Archives)

This wasn't just a result of Levitt's works but also other developers such as Robert Moses who had federal and state government support in creating infrastructures in New York that served to divded communities based on race, as describe in Robert Caro's book *The Power Broker*. The federal government promoted acts like these through the Federal Housing Agency. They gave bank loans on the premise that houses would only be available to whites (*All Things Considered*; "The Color of Law' Details How U.S. Housing Policies Created Segregation*"*). In 1948 this discrimination was still lawful and until 1968 it was still legal for banks to discriminate based on race who had to opportunity for financing. This structure for suburbia directly resulted in the divide in public schools that is still seen today across the country and on Long Island.

"All Roads go Through Hempstead"

The Village of Hempstead sits on the western side of Long Island in the county of Nassau, about 10 miles from Levittown the birthplace of suburbia. Hempstead Village has a population of approximately 55,000 and is predominately Hispanic (46%) and African American (46%), while only 5% are white. (Datausa.io)

Being an incorporated village, there is a mandatory position of village historian. Reine Bethany has been the village historian for the past two years where a $6,000 stipend is granted to her for preserving the village history. Bethany offered me insight into the history of the village. Hempstead is best known historically for its role as a transportation and trading hub on Long Island. The Hempstead Plains were known for their role in practicing for major wars. As a result of World War, I and the shift in the labor force, the first great migration brought many African American workers and soldiers to Hempstead where, although there was still segregation, was the most welcoming community to African American.

The first African American inhabitants worked as domestic servants and with the rise of WW II they would take on blue collar jobs in factories. Those that moved in the post war period were typically educated middle class people. Hempstead was one of the only places they had the ability to purchase a home. It was known for being the only place east of Jamaica, Queens to have major stores and doctors' offices in a single location leading it to be one of the first residential areas east of New York City.

The closing of the major air fields and the opening of hundreds of parking spaces at Roosevelt Field (previously known for the starting point of Charles Lindbergh's famous flight) caused an economic shift. Since most people would go to Roosevelt Field to shop, family owned stores closed down. This economic shift caused property value to decrease, allowing lower class families, often Hispanics and African Americans to afford to move into the village. In response,

the local government attempted to “revitalize” moving from being “majority minority” (a major aspect of the villages cultural identity) to be being majority white,

In the 1960s the local government took assistance from the Federal Government to rebuild the town, leading to the destruction of the shanty towns that were prominent in the village. The plan to revitalize the village included the requirement to include low-income housing. This was the start of revitalization towards Hempstead Village where “public image” was deemed most important in its efforts according to Bethany. In 1962 grant applications for the revitalization required the village to follow zoning ordinances over the course of 20 years.

Carol L. Clarke highlights the history of the village and schools’ issues through her paper, “Winning the Battle, Losing the War: The Forgotten but Enduring Legacy of School Integration Efforts on Hempstead, New York.” Here Clarke discusses the demographic of Hempstead as she experienced growing up there. Clarke states the divide of the village where “black residents lived on the west side of the village, in one of the oldest neighborhoods known as ‘The Hill’ eventually moving to the east known as ‘The Heights’” (Clarke 13).

Racialized Education:

In May 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education* officially ruled for the desegregating of public education institutions. 65 years later and segregation still plagues the education system nationally. Efforts to integrate schools were rare without a fight.

“The achievement gap” refers to a major disparity in education for immigrant and POC students verses their white peers. It is often seen that schools that have a predominately white student body have higher test scores, better facilities, more resources, and higher graduation rates. School segregation can be seen as a major force in the disparity between predominantly white and predominately black/brown schools.

Nikole Hannah-Jonez expressed in her interview in *NPR's This American Life* episode "The Problem We All Live" how acts of desegregation were either too late or not practiced long enough. She explains the achievement gap and how it is reduced the greatest through integration. She, like many who have studied this, believes that this allows equal access to **good** teachers and schools allowing for equal playing field in education. Hannah-Jonez explains how she grew up in an integration/ busing program in Waterloo, Iowa and found through longitudinal data that integrated schools produce more successful students. In the episode, Hannah-Jonez discusses the community that Michael Brown grew up in and how his school district was facing similar issues of racial imbalance within neighboring schools, something occurring in Hempstead as well This is no doubt a country wide problem. In Brown's community, there was a busing program implemented with a lot of push back from the community of the neighboring school (which was predominantly white). Hannah-Jones points out how few families of color often take part in these integration programs such as busing, something Carol L. Clarke noticed in Hempstead as well. Immediately after the passing of *Brown v. Board of Education*, these programs were popular but after time they dwindled and stopped.

Hempstead neighbors Garden City neighbors have a population of 22,000 (80% white). The poverty rate is approximately 20% in Hempstead compared with Garden City which comes in at 4% (Datausa.io) Hempstead currently has 43.6% graduation rate, yet Garden City has a staggering 98% (Datausa.io). This inequality had been the topic of debate in Hempstead School District for many years.

In the 30 years since Carol Clarke and so many other young African American children crossed those lines to integrate schools, little change has been seen. Clarke outlines the fight of African American families for equality in the public schools within the village's district. In 1949

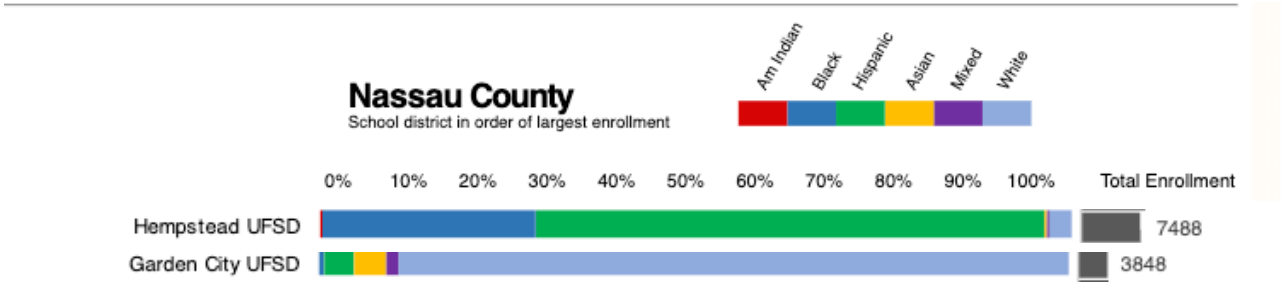
local African American families criticized the school board for “gerrymandering of school attendance lines” (Clarke 4). This came after the African American children were forced all into one elementary school, Prospect School. The population at the time was “over ninety percent black” in contrast to Ludlum School which was “ninety-four white” (Clarke 17). In 1960 there was a call to redistribute students to schools to integrate them by “ignoring the lines of racially segregated neighborhoods” (Clarke 5). The State Education Department recognized the “racial imbalance” and eventually the school board agreed to a “transfer program” similar to the idea of busing, within the district. Clarke acknowledges the past events of racial segregation as being the precursor of the current situation within Hempstead’s school district. It is important to note that NYS defines racial imbalance in schools as “a school in which the enrollment is wholly or predominately Negro” (Clarke 42). By this definition, schools in neighboring communities that are predominantly white are not viewed as facing these issues. Ms. Clarke has a unique perspective on the crisis in Hempstead as she was one of the first African American students to participate in the “permissive transfer” program within the Hempstead schools. Ms. Clarke’s father played a crucial role in advocating for desegregation and after his passing she took up the efforts on her own.

Erase Racism NY is a collective dedicated to resolving disparities on Long Island when it comes to race. In their 2015-2017 research, they focused on race in relation to local school districts. This research revealed there were major disparities across Long Island. Their research shows how in Hempstead School District the student body population is approximately 33% black and 60% Hispanic. The school district of Garden City, where the high schools are only 3 miles apart. They also take a look into the white population in comparison to the black and

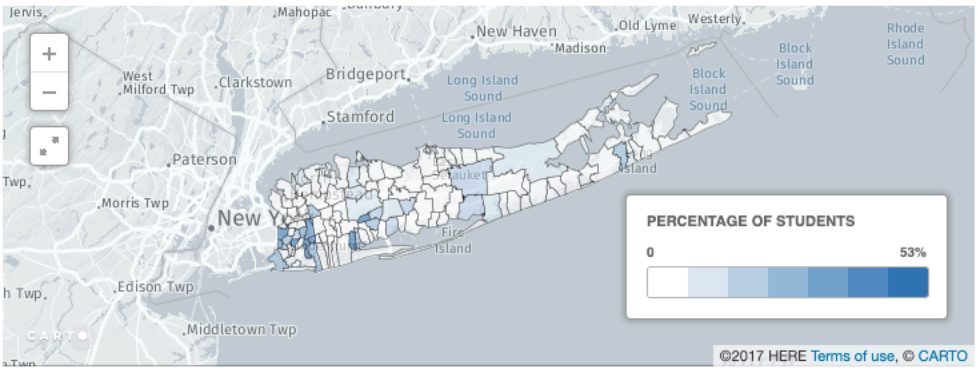
Hispanic populations. The data shows there are entire school districts with not a single Hispanic, Latino, or Black student population. (eraseracism.com)

There have been numerous reports of the issue of segregation on Long Island by local and national news outlets. Numerous reports by the state dating back to the 1980s have outlined the distress the school district is in, yet little has changed to positively affect the community. As the high school has gotten worse, so has the village all together and New York State has repeatedly let down the communities. A 2014 study titled *New York State's Extreme School Segregation* revealed that New York State has extremely low exposure rates of students of color to white students. The research in this study has proved that as the district becomes predominately minority it also "becomes more low-income."

(Source EraseRacism.Org)

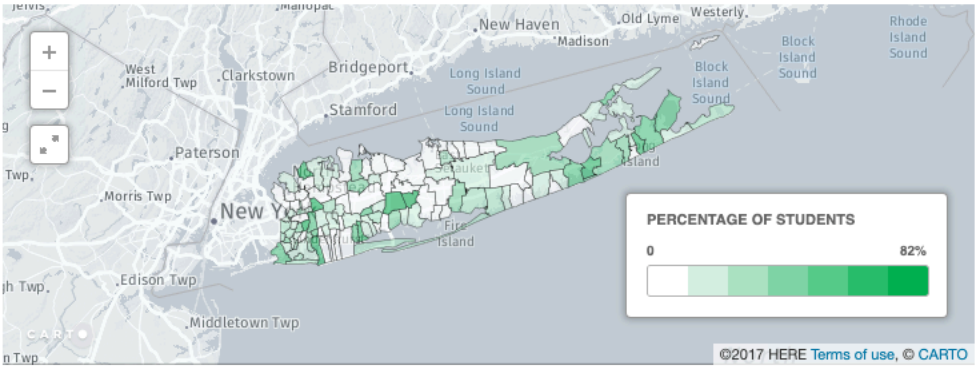


Black



Map created by russellchunhofstra

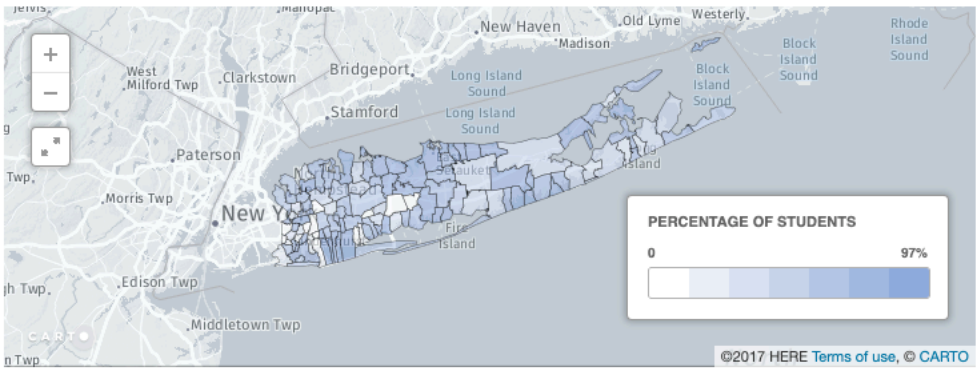
Hispanic or Latino



Map created by russellchunhofstra

"Not Enough…Not Enough"

White



Map created by russellchunhofstra

My first day visiting Hempstead was in October at the homecoming. I got a sense of the community effort that the school had. The students didn't think much of the fact their high school wasn't offering them the ability to reach their full potential. They were just teenagers

enjoying life. Their naivety is something that the community around them is most fearful of. I felt the way these students could be so heavily influenced by their surroundings and easily fall down the wrong path because their school wasn't offering them opportunities to thrive. There I met the schools track coach who pointed to a young girl and said, "she's the track star… that's who you want to talk to." After explaining my work to 16-year-old Renee, a sophomore track runner at Hempstead she gave me a huge hug and said she'd love to help me out. I then was introduced to the school's principal, Mr. Straun. Stephan Straun has been a topic of debate in the district as he is heavily supported by the school board despite claims against him for changing numbers of success rates within the school. When I told him about my work I stated "there is a lot of talk about this school in the media" and as he reclined in his chair with his feet up and arms crossed behind his head, he gave me a response that "there is not enough, definitely not enough bad news about us, just keep it coming." This response left a bad taste in my mouth as to how he could be so casual about the state of the school.

Walking into Renee's apartment for the first time, family photos align the wall and incents fill the air. A picture of the last supper painting by Da Vinci hangs on one wall and across the way a young faced woman in a United States Navy uniform hangs. Renee's mother served in the Navy leading to their moving often until they finally ended up in Hempstead. Renee lives with her mother and younger sister Maddy. Regla Dyson, Renee's mother, can light up a room with her poignant energy. She is dedicated to supporting her daughters and ensuring they have the best possible future. Renee is unlike many other students in Hempstead. She told me how much pressure this places on her. Renee is an outstanding student and athlete who has the potential to graduate early and has grades that make her an outlier among her peers. She can feel the tension being a student at Hempstead High School puts on her and her peers as they are

assumed to all be bad kids. The first day we met Renee tells me the tale of her geometry class. She was left without a teacher for almost the entire year as they were forced to struggle to learn material for the state exam required to graduate with an advanced degree. Hearing how they struggled to even have enough books in the classroom and how when other teachers would step up the school would not pay them, made me question drastically the leadership within the school and how the state could still expect these students to graduate when they are not even being properly taught.

State of Opportunity

I first met Governor Cuomo in 2015 at a rally for state funding for private school education. I graduated from high school with a New York State Regents Degree with Advanced Designation, and I am doing this project to graduate from a State University of New York institution. This was around the same time New York State rolled out its "State of Opportunity" campaign. The idea of New York being a "state of opportunity" has always stood out to me. The "State of Opportunity" tagline came to the public's eye in 2014 according to a timesunion.com article that documents the birth of the new marketing technique and all its guides and regulations. The "State of Opportunity" campaign stressed ideas of "compassion" and "progressive thinking." (Timesunion.com)

This new title for the state is interesting considering there are so many struggling to graduate high school because of their poor education system and neglect from the state. When the state does step in, the district is forced to pay for the interventions that take place even when they are already struggling. In October 2018 the NYS Regents Board Commissioner MaryEllen Elia sent Jack Bierwirth, a distinguished educator, to complete a full report of the school. One of

the biggest issues facing the district currently as outline in his report is the corruption that has been able to take over in rise of the neglect the state has left it in.

As a student in NYS, I have spent countless hours preparing and taking standardized state tests before there was an option to opt-out. These are all standard of the students within New York State. In order to graduate from a New York State High School, one must take a certain number of years of specific courses and they must pass the New York State Regents Exams in specific courses as listed below. When students fail one of these tests, they have to retake the exam again and again until they pass in order to receive their diploma. At Hempstead High School almost every student in the 2017 school year scored in the lowest categories on these tests (nys.data.gov). These averages make sense as to why so many kids end up not graduating from the local high school. Some student ended up taking test as many as 7 times to no success.

The big question covered by *The New York Times* and numerous other sources is, will New York State take over Hempstead? As for Dr. Signer, the answer is no, he feels the state simply does not care or else they would have already. It is the state that implements these requirements for high school graduation, but they are not accessible for many students in the district, many of who are English language learners. Sitting in the library archives for just an hour revels the decades long issues that the school has faced with no intervention by the state. The state has sent on Comptroller Thomas D. Napoli numerous times to gather data and the data repeatedly shows the issues within the district, but little is implemented to correct these issues or enforce change.

Jack Bierwirth's report highlighted 10 major aspects of failure within the district, the top being Governance. Hempstead's school board is comprised of many characters. There are currently six members: President Mr. LaMont E. Johnson, Vice President Ms. Carmen Ayala,

and Trustees Dr. David B. Gates, Mrs. Patricia Spleen, and Mr. Randy Stith along with District Clerk Mrs. Patricia Wright. The school board is possibly the most dysfunctional aspect of the district. Local newspaper *Newsday* stated in a 2018 article on the school board that "years of strife on the school board and management turnover have created a chaotic situation during which the system's buildings have deteriorated, gang warfare has endangered students and staff." (Newsday 2018)

The school board has been criticized by local news stations for its welcoming of a registered sex offender to board meetings as well as charges against trustee Stith for forged documents and larceny. The charges, however, are no grounds for his removal from the school board despite outcry from the community in favor of his removal. This was not the only school board member to face charges with many others charged for fraud and theft. School board meetings which are open to the public, are often packed with local news cameras and security guards as often fights break out. Other days the complete opposite happens when the board holds closed door meetings that are illegal and against the rules of their position. The community is struggling to be heard by a school board that has let them down.

Over the past two years, the school board has hired and fired newly appointed superintendent Shamon Waronker and all the professionals he brought in leading to a massive law suit between Waronker and the district for wrongful termination after the board released a "174 page document detailing 21 charges" (Newsday 2016) This added to the record 21 superintendents in 20 years that the district has held. In the past few elections there has been rapid turnovers in administration and school board positions while local government officials have held incumbent positions for years with no change or accountability. There is no doubt a direct connection in the poor schools and the community as Johnson and Shapiro's

aforementioned study on this reinforced. The community members have reached enough and have started to come together to try and unite the community in an effort to build a better district. A major aspect of this is improving voter turnout so that the community can have effective change in their school board.

Required Regents Examinations Regents Diploma	Required Regents Examinations Regents Diploma with Advanced Designation
Comprehensive English Algebra I Global History & Geography U.S. History & Government One Science **Total: 5 Regents Exams**	Comprehensive English Algebra I Geometry Algebra II Global History & Geography U.S. History & Government Living Environment and One Science from the Physical Setting Core. FLACS Exam **Total: 8 Regents Exams Plus FLACS Exam**

(Source: Holytrinityhs.org) (Source: Timesunion.com 12.11.14)

Overcoming the Incumbent

From 1988 to 2018 the 18th chair of the New York Assembly covering Hempstead and Roosevelt school districts which have both been declared failing schools by NYS, was held by Earlene Hill Hooper. Hempstead is known for its low voter turnout resulting in little change in the local government allowing important positions to have incumbents for decades. In 2018, Taylor Raynor challenged this position coming in as a new candidate. Bringing lots of skepticism to the polls Taylor was viewed as an outsider even though she grew up on the border of Hempstead and the neighboring town, Uniondale. Raynor has a background in psychology with a focus on growth within the community after years of neglect and little change.

Taylor Raynor has made it her mission to be a constant presence in the community to try and rebuild this lost trust. When meeting Taylor she had an energy about her that I knew she was there to make a change no matter what. I walked into her office that smelt of fresh paint and new wood floors. I was advised that the office she now sits in has not been renovated in the thirty years that her predecessor was in office. The change of the office was similar to the spirit that Taylor had. Taylor is a beautiful, young, African American woman who is highly educated and extremely determined. She has a presence that could fill any room and was eager to talk about what can be done. Alongside Taylor sat former board member Melissa Figueroa who has been a leading force in the change within the district. Figueroa is exhausted by New York State's constant reporting that seems to go nowhere. She is one of the only Latina leaders in the community where there is a major divide in cultures as the demographic of the community has shifted. In a community that sees how broken they are, the failure of good leadership within has done nothing but leave concerned parents trying everything they can to start change. Reine Bethany noticed that there seems to be a fall off as a result of identity. While they aren't

"learning differently, they are forced to face the world differently." This is something Taylor Raynor addressed in our interview as well. The students of Hempstead are often carrying major roles within their families such as translating and being a voice in very grown up ways and then don't have the acknowledgment or support from their school that they are carrying this extra burden.

Set Up for Failure:

When I first started this work, I made a Facebook post to try and find people to help out. I was given the phone number of a gentleman named Marcellus by a mutual friend. I was only told Marcellus worked with former gang members and we had difficulty maintaining conversation over the course of a year. Finally, after months of sporadic text and phone calls we met in the local Taco Bell in Hempstead, just feet away from the high school. Marcellus described our meeting as a gift from the universe as he has been looking to publicize his work more through film. Marcellus explained how he works to help former gang members get stable in their community outside the gang but also in helping reform what he calls the pipeline to prison.

Marcellus introduced me to three women who are standing in the front lines of the battle for better education in Hempstead. If you are from Long Island you might recognize the names Peggy Perkins, Thren "TJ" Shivers, and Storm Lee for being so vocal about the school's issues. When speaking with these three women I learned of the way the school handles students who act out or have high energy by suspending them. A 2018 *Washington Post* article quoting the Civil Rights Data Collection that typically black and brown students are targeted for suspension and arrest referrals than their white classmates. In the 10 years of working with students who have faced suspension, Marcellus has seen an inordinate number of students leaving school and not returning and alternatively joining gangs. In most school suspension is an easy solution for over

active extroverted kids. But the consequences are often detrimental and many times deadly. Storm Lee is a mother of three children. Her now 18-year-old son was arrested at age 16 after being suspended from school. As Marcellus puts it, “idle time is the devil’s playground.” When students are suspended, they are still required to meet the 180-attendance requirement by law. To fulfill this, as an informant that teaches within the school advised me, teachers’ take extra pay to meet with the students for one hour a day. This process is setting students up to fail. Storm’s son, Shameq ended up joining The Bloods gang in his time out of school. In an unfortunate event, Shameq was arrested as an innocent bystander was killed in the cross fire of his gang The Bloods with their rival The Crips. The same day I met Storm I had the pleasure of meeting her younger son, Shamer. Shamer is an energetic 6-year-old in the first grade in Hempstead Schools. He can make a beat out of anything and is comforting when he sees others sad. He acts older than most 6-year old’s, but he has the free spirit of any child. Shamer was recently sat down with the school to discuss taking him out of regular schooling and into the same system that failed his brother. They rather have him in tutoring than in the classroom. Shamer is by far more susceptible to gang violence because of his older brothers’ history and the district is very much setting him up for failure at an incredibly young age. This is one major aspect of the way Hempstead High School is failing its students.

Jared’s Story

It was these patterns that started my interest in this issue as I witnessed first-hand the way schools handle over active kids. The greatest appreciation I have for my high school is the fact that it introduced me to culture other than my own. By having friends from various different ethnicities and backgrounds I gained a respect I didn’t even know I was forming until after the fact.

In the first grade I remember sitting near the door of classroom 102, the tiny desks aligned in even rows. I sat in the second row; a boy sat next to me in the first row. His name was Jared. I remember the teacher always singling him out for some reason over the other kids. Yeah, he was a pain sometimes but something about this left me feeling uncomfortable. I befriended Jared overtime, helped him with his books when he broke his arm, said hello always. That's one of my few memories from that class. I remember in 5th grade things hadn't looked up for him. He was permanently labeled the troublemaker in class and he couldn't escape that title it seemed. He was eventually kicked out of school, something I remember being sad about. It always sat weirdly with me that him and the other students like him were constantly singled out. Looking around my class of about 30 students over the 8 years of my education in primary school there was this one unifying factor of all the trouble maker kids, they all happened to be people of color.

My high school was constantly considered the "public school of the Catholic schools" and it had about an equal ratio of black students to white students. I never made the connection, as a result of my privilege of not having to, until someone else stated, "it's called that because we have an equal number of black kids to white kids." This spun my head. I had been so sheltered by growing up in an elementary school of about 5 students of color that I never had to witness racism head on. Sure, I knew that racism existed, but it seemed to be this far off thing in the deep south. This was further emphasized to me by the high school's principal who drew the connection of the schools low enrollment because it is "the black and gay school", referring to the high number of black students in the school as well as the amount of out trans and gay students, something rare in Catholic schools.

As for Jared, I was worried he wasn't going to go to high school because I could already feel him being a target and didn't expect that to go away. He ended up going to my high school, graduating, and going off to college. Every day, I saw him in the hallway he would show off the big smile he always had, dap me up, as I reminded him to stay on top of his work and not get detention. On our graduation I hugged Jared one last time and he and I cried in each other's arms, he thanked me for always keeping an eye on him. Teachers that had known us for years were shocked to see this tough kid who always smiles break down and cry.

My high school taught me a lot about respecting others. If I had not gone to what one could consider a "desegregated" high school then I would never had learned the tendencies I had that came from my privilege, let alone even know I had any privilege. From a young age I was introduced to aspects of black and Hispanic culture because of my peers in school. I had days where I experienced first-hand how administration would single out my friends of color when we would all be acting up. I never would been aware of the injustices faced everyday specifically in educational setting. I thought about this a lot but never really thought it was something others had no idea about until I did. I was walking with four of my staff members at Jones Beach, where I worked in the summer. This was another major aspect of what I'll reference as my "whiteness awakening." The two girls of color and I were talking about them getting their hair done and the style weave they were going to get, a conversation that wasn't odd for any of us. The two white girls were extremely confused, they asked what we meant by taking the time to go to the salon and what they were going to get done. It struck me then, these girls have no idea about black culture because they never grew up with any people of color. This made me think about why.

Making this Film

Jared's story is something that has stuck with me. I saw how he struggled to defy the odds of the stereotypes and statistics that were stacked against him. There is an expectation of failure in American culture when it comes to young people of color. They are almost expected to drop out of school and to join gangs. When there are no other opportunities for success in a community it becomes easy for this to happen and these children end up becoming just another stereotype.

In Hempstead, the low graduation rates are what have caused it to be such a major point of conversation. There is an undeniable connection between the lack of proper preparation for state required test and high failure rates that students give up. There is also a major cultural divide that my time in Hempstead has revealed to me. The village has undergone drastic shifts in demographics and the majority of the community are Hispanic and Latino. The school has not adjusted to this change and there is a huge inconvenience of the language barrier that causes a disconnect in these students' education. When a system is broken, corruption can easily grow, and this is what we have seen within the district.

My first day in the Village I felt like I struggled to be welcomed. The village has constantly been referenced over the course of my research as not welcoming to outsiders. The community wants change and they want their voices heard. It has been a common sentiment in the American white consciousness that black people and hispanic people are inherently lazy, something reinforced by the media and current political rhetoric. When starting my project I had feared that this were true and I would struggle with finding participants. What I have grown to learn is there are masses of people willing to put in the work but negative narratives sell more newspapers and help keep corruption alive.

I have realized there is no place the community can come together and in Melissa Figuerroa's words: "to galvanize" to make positive change. My film has made the community hopeful that the issues they are all facing can be seen in one place. When screening it to local members of the community they are filled with excitement as they felt there was media being produced that would positively impact them. As a result of this film I have been asked to continue my work in the district by assisting the assemblywoman to document the years of neglect within the village by local government.

I think the perfect way to sum up my time in Hempstead comes from the first day I met Renee's mother. I wrote:

"I am sitting the Hempstead Public Library. I parked in the lot which neighbors the police precinct (my research teaches me of how the police have tripled in the past ten years or so). I walk through double doors, through a metal detector, past a security guard. I go to the bathroom and have to be let in by a pin pad. I find my place at a table in the reference section. I unpack my notes and laptop. I begin to look through archives but quickly get lost in my thoughts. I look around the small room. Bookcases stacked high and filed with reference materials. They are overlooked by a balcony that holds the older materials. The three librarians sit chatting at the desk. Above them are historic pictures of the first fire truck, the original police, community members, all white. The look down upon the piles and all who sit here. To the right the large picture of the police towers over a sign. The only sign to not reference the Dewey system. A sign to ease access. It reads, "Black History." In all four corners I am surrounded by cameras, eyes that are looking at everything I do. There is a sense of mistrust. There is a sense of authority *looking down,* not just any authority, but THE authority. They look down on the shelves that bare the history of this small village. That has holes of narratives. That has limited the voices that can

be heard. It is a perfect summation of what I would presume it is like to be a black or brown child/ human. Constantly looked down upon by others, waiting for you to mess up, waiting patiently with the power to make change but although they look down, they turn a blind eye. Corruption, Racism, Prejudice go by with no stopping. This is Hempstead. This is not the dream they deserve."

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