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New Rochelle school inequity untrue, officials say

BY DIANA COSTELLO
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NEW ROCHELLE - A new blog has ignited an old firestorm in this city.



Carlos Sanchez, top, sits with his wife, Lilliam Acosta-Sanchez, and their children, Isabel, 6, and C.J., 4, on the playground of Trinity Elementary School in New Rochelle. The family says there is a divide between the north and south end schools in the district in terms of achievement, expectations and discipline. (Tania Savayan/The Journal News)

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"I worked in the New Rochelle school district for 11 years," said Carlos Sanchez, 38, a former administrator at Isaac Young Middle School. "You see things and you are quiet and you really don't say anything. But when my children entered the schools, I saw it from a parent angle more clearly than before."

Accusations of a divide between north and south are a touchy subject.

Those who disagree with the claim say they are deeply offended by it. They do not understand what gives people the idea that certain schools are favored over others. Among other achievements, they point to the fact each of the city's schools has been recognized by the state

Education Department as "high-performing."

"Forgive me, but there has to be something right to how we direct resources and support our schools for them to achieve that level," Superintendent Richard E. Organisciak said.

"But if they have evidence, please bring it," he said. "There's nothing about this district or this community that people should fear speaking about publicly. This has been an open forum for both pleasant and unpleasant comments."

Eastchester Road is considered the dividing line between north and south, sometimes called New Rochelle's Mason-Dixon line.

The schools to the south are Columbus Elementary, Jefferson Elementary, Trinity Elementary and Isaac Young Middle. To the north are George M. Davis Jr. Elementary, William B. Ward Elementary and Albert Leonard Middle. While slightly south of Eastchester Road, Daniel Webster Elementary School often is classified as a "north" school.

Based on a lottery system, some children attend schools other than their community school. Both middle schools feed into New Rochelle High School.

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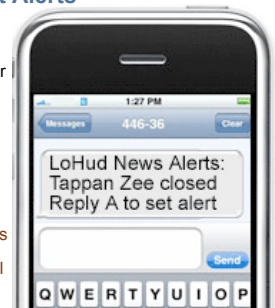
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Accusations that inequalities exist in the district are not new.

The district was the first school system in the North to be ordered by a federal court in 1961 to desegregate, after a judge found boundaries were intentionally drawn to isolate black students at Lincoln Elementary School.

But today's accusations are focused less on race and more on economics. And they're less about equal educational opportunities - the focus of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* desegregation order - and more about respect.

What is not disputed is that there is an economic disparity between the student bodies in the north and south schools.

According to the most recent state data, 64 percent of students in the three south elementary schools are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, compared with 27 percent in the three north schools. Similarly, 60 percent of students at Isaac Young are eligible, compared with 23 percent at Albert Leonard.

The difference is something school officials say is to be expected from a large urban district such as New Rochelle, which has a total enrollment of close to 12,000.

Nationally, the issue of class division in school systems has been at the center of the movement to better integrate schools. Several cities - such as Louisville, Ky.; Des Moines, Iowa; Burlington, Vt.; Omaha, Neb.; and Beaumont, Texas - have switched to using economics as the organizing principle for integration in the wake of the Supreme Court's 2007 decision that considerations of race are unconstitutional.

While even the most frustrated New Rochelle parents aren't calling for a massive reorganization of the schools, the class disparity is what some say creates a culture of inferiority in the south buildings.

For instance, two classes of students from Trinity Elementary School were forced to walk the perimeter of the playground for about 25 minutes during recess one day during the spring. Parents said the move amounted to corporal punishment for alleged inappropriate behavior. The superintendent said it was nothing more than a way to get in some exercise on a chilly day.

On another occasion, children from that same school were ordered to play in a field that parents complained was covered with goose and dog feces. While the superintendent said he invites anyone to find a field in Westchester that doesn't have such a problem, parents said it's symptomatic of more serious issues.

"I think there's a culture, there's an attitude, a feeling that it's OK for certain kids to be treated in certain ways," said Sanchez, whose daughter is in first grade at Trinity and whose son is 4 years old. "Everybody in New Rochelle knows there are problems in the New Rochelle schools. There are inequities. But everyone is afraid."

"We're the parents who are asking the questions, but we're not getting answers," said his wife, Lilliam Acosta-Sanchez, 34, director of Hispanic outreach for the March of Dimes Foundation. "When you ask questions, you all of a sudden become the problem. But we're talking about our children. So what's going on?"

Saying there are people in New Rochelle who seem to enjoy stirring up the "north vs. south" debate, Emery Schwerg, co-president of the New Rochelle High School PTSA, took offense to the allegations.

"We work our fingers to the bone trying to improve things for all children," she said. "I don't know what they can base that sort of criticism on because it's always easier to look across town and see that the grass looks greener, but that's sometimes an illusion."

"And I know within the district, the administration has bent over backwards trying to offer the same educational opportunities to every child," Schwerg said.

New Rochelle certainly has made an effort and greatly improved, said Samuel Spady, president of the city's branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. He remembered parents demonstrating outside the schools for more equitable treatment in the 1960s, and his younger sister was at Lincoln Elementary when it closed following the desegregation order.

But, he said, there is still a perceived division between the north and south schools that must be addressed.

"Are we divided on every issue that is racial? Not at all. Is it that some things just are never going to change? Yes. The question becomes, 'How do we deal with it?'" he said. "I'm not blaming the school for everything or the parents for everything. They have to work together."

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