Ruling could be felt at local level

Educators say anti-integration message sent by court decision will undermine needed efforts to challenge segregation, diversify local schools

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While yesterday's Supreme Court ruling rejecting school diversity plans will not directly affect Long Island's districts, educators say its anti-integration message will resonate in one of the most segregated regions in the country.

"What the Supreme Court has done is send a message that racial integration is not valued in our society and that message undermines the ability to bridge differences on Long Island and to challenge segregation," said Alan Singer, an education professor at Hofstra University.

Last year, staffers at the Long Island Regional Planning Board issued a report showing that, while black pupils make up 11 percent of the Island's students, the typical white student attends a district that is 5 percent black - virtually the same percentage as in 1991.

And disproportionate numbers of black and Hispanic students attend schools in a handful of districts that are more than 90 percent minority.

"For those educators who care about issues of diversity, this opinion sends a pretty chilling message," said Jonathan Becker, a professor of educational leadership and policy studies at Hofstra University.

No local districts promote integration through the methods used by Seattle and Louisville, the districts in the court case.

The potential effect of the ruling could be felt at a local level depending on how Long Island administrators interpret the ruling, said Marc Bernstein, superintendent of the Valley Stream Central High School District.

"If we are fortunate to have a diverse community and a diverse school within that community, can race be one of the factors the building
principal uses in assigning 100 fifth-graders to five different classes?" he asked. "The benefits of having students exposed to others from different cultures is extremely beneficial in a student seeing many sides of issues, learning to work with people of different cultures and in being prepared for the real world."

In the 1960s, '70s and '80s, the state ordered many districts to desegregate - including Huntington and eight others on Long Island.

"The essence of the [Supreme Court] decision was that they couldn't use race in admitting students to even out the population, but if you talk about Long Island districts, 126 operate on a zoning pattern. If you are a resident in the community - you go to that school," said Robert Manheimer, dean of the School of Education at the C.W. Post campus of Long Island University.

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