Schools fail to diversify, Minority population up on LI, but report finds racial makeup of most districts is largely unchanged; [NASSAU AND SUFFOLK Edition]
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Just as new Census data show that Long Island is growing increasingly diverse, the region's schools are more racially and ethnically segregated, a new study has found.

The report, released yesterday by the Long Island Regional Planning Board, found that while whites make up 70 percent of all students on Long Island, the average white non-Hispanic student attends school in a district that is 81 percent white. And although blacks make up 11 percent of the Island's students, the typical white student attends a district that is 5 percent black.

"There has been almost no increase in integration between the white and black school population on Long Island," said Seth Forman, acting executive director of the board and the author of the report, which compared state education statistics from 1991 and 2004.

The planning board, which met yesterday in Hauppauge, did not recommend solutions. But some members said they support consolidating districts in order to desegregate schools - a touchy issue on Long Island, where residents often value strong local government and many favor neighborhood schools.

"So long as we have public education policy fragmented over 124 school districts, there is no method for addressing a problem that crosses over these boundaries," said James Larocca, chairman of the planning board, which is advisory.

The report comes on the heels of new Census Bureau data showing that the percentage of whites on Long Island has dropped from 77 percent in 2000 to 73 percent last year. At the same time, the percentage of blacks and other minorities has grown, both among Long Island residents and in schools.

Despite those changes, white students' exposure to minorities has barely increased since 1991, the segregation study found. The average school district attended by whites was 5.3 percent black in 1991, and only 5.4 percent black in 2004, for example.

These findings mirror national trends, said Gary Orfield, professor of education and social policy at Harvard University, who studies segregation. "In every region of the country, we are experiencing major racial change and resegregation," he said. With Long Island's patchwork of small districts, Orfield said, the problem is worse. "It's the optimal condition for segregation," he said.
Some board members said the report underplayed the issue because many schools are more segregated than the averages suggest. For example, Wyandanch High School is only 0.2 percent white, according to state education data from 2004. Cold Spring Harbor High School, on the other hand, is only 0.5 percent black and 0.8 percent Hispanic.

"When blacks and Latinos are isolated from whites, they are most frequently isolated from resources and opportunities," said Elaine Gross, a planning board member and president of ERASE Racism, a Syosset-based advocacy group.