Newsday. A Benefit Of Sameness, By Kimberly A. Scott, May 16, 2004

When most Americans think of all-black schools, they think negative thoughts. Fifty years after segregated schools were declared unconstitutional, we tend to believe such schools offer few positive social or academic benefits compared with racially integrated ones. And we assume that black children would prefer to attend an integrated school.

Interestingly, we do not make any of the same assumptions about predominantly white schools. And, despite the accepted wisdom, research shows that segregation has some benefits for black students while integration has not always proven such a boon.

This is clear inside two elementary schools in Roosevelt, one of Long Island's most racially segregated and poorest districts where for several years I have been following the lives of 58 African-American girls. Rather than the chaotic social scene many would expect in a district with problems of low income, poor management, gang violence and low test scores, most of these girls show a keen ability to establish and maintain a strong female support network.

The peer groups help the girls learn to solve their disputes and keep them focused on career and life aspirations, rather than obsessing about their budding sexuality as many might expect. They don't fool themselves about their district's lack of resources, but they would not jump the line to switch to an integrated school.

Within these groups, sitting alone or with one other girl is unacceptable and girl-girl conflict is quickly resolved. When one was believed to be causing trouble for others, for example, several girls made plans to approach the disrupter and inquire about her motivations. "We're gonna hold a council and talk to her," one said.

Despite the stereotype of young black girls as being hyper sexual, when I first met them during the 2001-2002 academic year and they were in sixth grade, only three of the 58 girls admitted to having a "boyfriend." When eyes would roll at the mere mention of the boy's name, the "girlfriend" would quickly explain, "But it ain't nothin' serious. He's just my boo," which is slang for someone special.

At times, the unattached females would express distrust of boys and romantic relationships through warnings such as: "You shouldn't have sex with no man until you married!" Some would protest, arguing that, "If my Mommy and Daddy had waited until they were married, then I wouldn't be here right now!" The answer to them was, "Yes, but you don't need to do it!"

In fact, some groups have banned any talk of boys and/or sex. As one said, "If we talk about it, it will only encourage people to do it and nobody need to be doin' anything right now."

The majority of the peer groups focus on promoting individual girls' success. Aspirations range from, "I want to go to Yale ... have five kids, but not until I am like 25" to "I want to be a hairdresser." Regardless of the specific career, the girls demand that each individual have a goal and behave in a way that will help her achieve it. When one exceptionally soft-spoken young lady stated her desire to become vice president of a corporation, the group criticized her choice, one girl saying, "How you goin' to be vice president of anything when you don't speak up? You mumble everything so no one can hear you! How you going to have people listen to you, follow you when you don't talk?"

Once the future vice president began to cry and physically withdrew, the deserted girls quickly huddled and then encircled her to unanimously scream, "We're sorry!"

Even with their strong network and aspirations, none of the girls wears rose-colored glasses. They are acutely aware of Roosevelt's problems, and equally conscious of other people's opinions of them and their district. They knew how important it was for a local school bond issue to pass to give them more academic options, but they also stated the need for better teaching. One girl suggested that administrators make unannounced visits to classrooms to "see some of these teachers."

The girls were not surprised that surrounding districts oppose taking Roosevelt students. Said one, "They think we are dirty and stupid and it's no wonder with the media always talkin' about the bad in this here place."

As one girl explained, "One reporter came in and . . . I took him around the school . . . yeah I said that bathrooms need to be cleaned up, but I talked about a lot of stuff, like about the dance troupe going to Africa, the awards some of the kids get, the valedictorians, and the next morning the whole story was about the bathrooms!"

Even though they have had few if any interactions with white peers, the girls believe that life in a mostly white school would be fraught with social problems. The white girls, said one, "ask us stupid questions and all they want

us to do is braid their hair." Suspecting that white schools have more resources and opportunities, the girls still did not believe the social cost was worth the possible academic gains.

They wouldn't know it, but many other studies corroborate the girls' concerns. In New Jersey, just to give one example, I found that black girls in predominantly black, low-income schools were far more assertive than counterparts attending a multiracial middle-income school, where white girls became peer leaders and black girls their quiet followers.

Does all of this suggest that segregation should become policy? Not necessarily. But what if policy makers ceased to demand school desegregation and focused on creating an integrated school system that used children's peer group associations as one barometer of success? What if our school system expanded the concept of success, balancing academic achievement with social development? What if the media more evenly reported the lived experiences of students in segregated schools? What if a legion of black students from a publicly defamed, predominantly black segregated community - the Roosevelt girls, maybe - achieved, and their success had more to do with internal social forces than external reform efforts? Who would want to hear that story? More importantly, who would print it?