

Demographics as Destiny

By Robert A. Scott, President

If demographics are destiny, as a sage once said, then low birth rates in developed countries will be the defining demographic event of the 21st Century, according to Gary S. Becker. “The total fertility rate, which measures the number of births to the average women over her lifetime, must be at least 2.1 in order to prevent a country’s population from declining in the long run in the absence of enough immigration. There are now about 70 countries, which comprise almost half the world’s population, with fertility rates below 2.1...”¹ This includes all European countries, Japan, China, both Koreas, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

When we couple low and declining birth rates with increasing demands for intellectual and conceptual talent, we can see a crisis in the making. Only smart immigration policies can help right the balance. Immigration is our alternative in order to have sufficient numbers of people with the capacity for transformational thinking and the ability to make high level judgments in complex situations.

This is why many of us look at the current debate about immigration as incomplete and misguided. The discussion focuses on those with the lowest skills, view them as a “problem,” and pose solutions which would limit total immigration. Instead, we should be changing our immigration policies to set targets for the most talented no matter their country of origin. As it is, federal policy limits immigration to the same number per country without regard to the talent pool - - which limits the ability of universities, businesses, and labs to recruit needed scientists and engineers.

According to a 2000 Census, some 18% of Nassau residents were born in another country; about 11% of Suffolk County residents were born elsewhere. In total, 44,000 Long Islanders were born in El Salvador, 29,000 in Italy, 20,000 in India, 16,000 in China, and 15,000 in Columbia. Throughout the country, some 1 million new immigrants arrive each year, resulting in about 12 million permanent residents. The concern is that there are many who stay beyond their legal date and then lack appropriate documents. Nearly 70,000 high school graduates a year are undocumented and limited in their options.

Our immigration system must be fixed - - but not by expelling immigrants. Immigration is the reason many of our school districts have families from multiple countries speaking numerous languages and whose food stores, houses of worship, and dress add a rich diversity of cultures to local communities. While these changes and differences can pose challenges to teachers and administrators, they also present

¹ “Immigration Can Counter Low Birth Rates,” by Gary S. Becker, Wall Street Journal, September 1, 2006, p. A14.

incredible opportunities for children and adults to learn about the world and to broaden their perspectives. Such diversity can encourage interest and understanding in others and better enable our children and graduates to manage their lives in a changing world. Our nation needs those who are expert in other cultures and fluent in other languages.

To me, the diversity in our communities should be celebrated; we should focus on the opportunities presented and not just the challenges some believe are present. After all, our new neighbor could very well be the one whose child who will find the cure for cancer.