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## Taking action: LI school districts growing their own teachers

By Dandan Zou

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**B**rentwood wants there to be more Maria Palminteris.

Palminteri graduated from Brentwood High School in 1985 and returned to teach in the district five years later. Now with 32 years of experience in Brentwood, she shared her story in March with nearly 60 high school students during a meeting of a newly revived club to spark interest in teaching.

"It's about sharing with them that this is attainable for you," said Palminteri, who is retiring in June.

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Brentwood, along with Baldwin and Long Beach, is among the school districts across Long Island trying to revitalize, create or strengthen grow-your-own teacher programs as student activities have returned to nearly full swing following the COVID-19 shutdown. Educators said such initiatives can help address a staffing shortage and diversify the Island's teaching staff.

### WHAT TO KNOW

- **Several Long Island school districts** have revived, created or strengthened teacher pipeline programs as student activities have returned to nearly full swing following the COVID-19 shutdown.
- **The “grow-your-own” programs are designed** to steer high school and middle school students toward a path of teaching.
- **Educators said such initiatives help address** a teacher shortage and diversify the Island's teaching staff, of which 9.5% are minority teachers when more than half of the public school students are children of color.

[Less than 10%](#) of the Island's 36,000 teachers are minority, while more than half of the 421,000 public school students are children of color.

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The idea of growing your own teacher is decades old, though the number of similar programs in middle and high schools across the country is unclear, said Margarita Bianco, a University of Colorado Denver associate professor who co-authored [a 2018 study](#) that examined such programs.

In design, the initiatives range from club activities, as in Brentwood and Long Beach, to yearslong academies that offer teaching courses, including college credits, as in Baldwin. The schools typically partner with nearby colleges to host field trips and talks to demystify the college experience. Some allow students to shadow teachers or tutor younger students.

Elijah Dautruche, 5, a kindergarten student at Brookside Elementary School in Baldwin, raises his hand in class on March 22. Credit: Debbie Egan-Chin

“We want community-responsive teachers — people that understand the needs of the community, and who better than those students in that school now?” Bianco said.

In Brentwood, Kevin Coyne, president of the Brentwood Teachers Association, said at least 40 teachers are retiring at the end of this school year, and estimated 200 to 300 more would retire within the next five to 10 years.

In the 2020-21 school year, the 18,400-student district had 1,184 full-time teachers, more than 70% of which were white, while 97% of the student body were children of color, according to [data collected by the state](#).

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“We were seeing the early onset of the predictable teacher shortage,” Coyne said. “The bell rang for us.”

## Brentwood

Francisco Gonzalez, 17, wants to be just like his wrestling coach, Ralph Napolitano, who like Palminteri graduated from Brentwood in 1985.

**'Give me four years and I'll be back ... My heart is here.'**

-Francisco Gonzalez, senior, Brentwood High School

The senior said he plans to attend SUNY Cortland and return to Brentwood to teach physical education. He's already picked out his desk – the one currently occupied by a gym teacher who may be retiring in a few years.

"I'm always saying, 'Oh, you know, give me four years and I'll be back,' " Gonzalez said with a smile. "I tell everybody I want to come back here. My heart is in Brentwood."

Gonzalez said he wants to return because he feels he owes a lot to the school, particularly its athletic programs.

"They're what kept me on the right path in a bunch of wrong places in my life, like places where I could have easily made a bad choice or done the wrong thing," he said. "Sports is always what pulled me back in."

For Gonzalez, the revived school club will help him figure out what he wants to teach and about the process of becoming a teacher.

Under [a traditional route in New York](#), a bachelor's degree in teaching is required for someone to become a teacher, and a master's degree is required for the teacher to gain professional certification, typically within five years after qualifying for their initial certificate.

Teachers' salaries vary by subject and experience. On the Island, the [median annual wage](#) for an elementary schoolteacher is \$116,699, \$120,314 for a secondary schoolteacher and \$97,674 for a special-education teacher.

For others who are less sure of their career path, the club allows students to explore how it feels to be a teacher.

**'I'd like to know ... if this is right for me.'**

-Nelson Pineda, junior, Brentwood High School

"Since this club helps us know what to expect from teaching, I'd like to know what they mean by that and if this is right for me," said Nelson Pineda, 17, a junior at the high school.

Club activities are funded by a three-year grant from the New York State United Teachers. The \$5,000-per-year grant also went to teacher unions in seven other K-12 districts — Long Beach, Rockville Centre, Sag Harbor, Comsewogue, Farmingdale, North Shore and Patchogue-Medford — on the Island, according to Matt Hamilton, a NYSUT spokesman.

Amy Dan, an English teacher and adviser for the club, said the need for teachers is more urgent than ever as districts look to diversify their staffs.

“We don't have a diverse teacher population,” she said. Two or three decades ago, “Long Island wasn't as diverse as it is now. So there wasn't the opportunity for a diverse population of teachers to come into the ranks as there is now.”

## Long Beach

Angelica Bonilla, 15, had imagined “a bunch of little kids running around” before stepping into a classroom of preschoolers in Lido Beach on a sunny day in March.

Long Beach High School students Kelis Walsh (left) and Angelica Bonilla read to preschoolers at the pre-kindergarten center in Lido Beach on March 25. The high schoolers are part of a club created in January to spark interest among students to become teachers. Credit: Newsday/Alejandra Villa Loarca

The trip — her first — was part of the activities organized by a newly created club at Long Beach High School to encourage students like her to consider teaching. The club is supported by the district, the same NYSUT grant Brentwood received, and Today's Students Tomorrow's Teachers, a White Plains-based nonprofit.

“It's so functional, for lack of a better word,” said Bonilla, a Long Beach High School 10th-grader. “They have an established routine that they're really used to. That was really interesting.”

### **'The nerves just trickled away.'**

-Angelica Bonilla, sophomore, Long Beach High School

Bonilla was nervous about helping out in teacher Molly Drake's classroom, but her anxiousness subsided after she spent some time with the students. "The nerves just trickled away," she said.

And that is the experience her club adviser, Elizabeth O'Brien, wanted her to have.

"The purpose of [the club] was to look inside your own community to introduce ... children to teaching," O'Brien said. "It's hard to be in front of a class and know that you are the center of attention."

O'Brien said she'd be happy if any of her 15 club members becomes a teacher one day.

From left, Long Beach High School students Alejandro Celis and Ryan Allen read to preschoolers at the pre-kindergarten center in Lido Beach on March 25. Credit: Newsday/Alejandra Villa Loarca

"I'd love them to be teaching anywhere," said O'Brien, who returned to Long Beach in 1994 to teach music in the same district she graduated from four years prior.

"If they were teaching here, it's even better, so I know when it's my time to leave that they're replacing me," she said. "I replaced my high school band teacher, who replaced his high school teacher."

Ryan Allen, 15, may just be that student.

"[My band teachers] made a big impact on my life," the 10th-grader said. "I just wanted to be more like them."

Kelis Walsh, 16, said she is not yet sure if teaching is the path for her, but the club activities made her want to learn more.

One activity that has stayed with her was meeting Michele Darby, a former middle school principal in Amityville and Central Islip who came to speak to club members in February.

**'I've never had a Black teacher before ... it's hard trying to be something you've never seen before.'**

-Kelis Walsh, sophomore, Long Beach High School

"She was a Black lady like me," Walsh said. "When Dr. Darby was speaking, she just really inspired me because, you know, there's not any Black teachers in my school. There may be a guidance counselor. I've never had a Black teacher before, ever, so you know it's hard trying to be something you've never seen before."

Long Beach High School had four Black teachers and 16 Hispanic teachers in the 2020-21 school year. The rest of the total 139 full-time teachers are white, according to [data collected by the state](#).

Now that Walsh has sat in front of a roomful of young children, read to them and kept their attention, she said she feels the profession has become more real to her.

"It made [me] feel like that's actually what I think I could be one day," she said.

## **Baldwin**

Daniella McCoy, 18, has known she's wanted to be an elementary schoolteacher since she was 3.

When she was in elementary and middle school, McCoy turned her playroom into a classroom. She had a chalkboard, a desk and place cards to indicate where the students should sit. She would put on her mother's shoes and glasses, take attendance and grade tests.

**'I was able to actually feel like a little teacher  
without having to pretend.'**

-Daniella McCoy, senior, Baldwin High School

At times, she had her younger sister or cousins pretend to be her students. Most times, she talked to an imaginary audience in an empty room.

Until she joined the Education Academy at her high school.

"I was able to actually feel like a little teacher without having to pretend," the Baldwin High School senior said.

The program is one of seven academies at the high school. The education academy was established four years ago and has more than 75 participants. Students such as McCoy visit the nearby elementary school twice a week as "teacher assistants" to work on lesson plans and with students in small groups.

Baldwin High School student Lakiesha Juin, 17, teaches second-graders Rebecca Bennett, Journey Williams and Hailey Nembhard at Brookside Elementary School. Credit: Debbie Egan-Chin

The district partners with Molloy College, where students can take field trips and observe classes. Academy students also can take college-level courses that count as credit at Molloy or other higher education institutions.

Superintendent Shari Camhi considers the academy the district's grow-your-own program.

"We expect that a number of our students will come back to Baldwin when they graduate," she said. "Not only will they have the experience of their college program, but they'll have the experience of having been student observers and pre-service teachers in our school system."



Baldwin High School students Sarah Lantimo (left) and Lakiesha Juin teach second-graders Rebecca Bennett, Journey Williams, Olivia Bissereth and Hailey Nembhard at Brookside Elementary School on March 22. Credit: Debbie Egan-Chin

In June, McCoy will be one of the first five students to complete the academy.

“[To teach] is all I’ve ever dreamed of since I was very young,” said McCoy, who will major in education at Hofstra University. “The fact that it’s happening and just a few more years I’ll have an actual, real class and no longer have to talk to the wall [is] just very exciting.”

McCoy and others said they want to return to Baldwin after they graduate from college.

**'I plan to come back to Long Island ... and hopefully find a job here.'**

-Abigail Jarrett, a Baldwin High School senior

“I plan to come back to Long Island, and I plan to do my student teaching here and hopefully find a job here,” said Abigail Jarrett, 17, a senior at Baldwin High School. “Preferably Baldwin. I really do love Baldwin.”

**By Dandan Zou**

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Dandan Zou covers education for Newsday. Previously, she worked for a community newspaper in Maryland and a personal finance magazine in Washington D.C.

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