



MOUNT VERNON CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Mount Vernon Legislative Priorities Request

The Mount Vernon City School District is strengthening its teaching staff and implementing greater supports and interventions for students. As a result of our careful planning and delivery of services, virtually all of our sixteen (16) schools are now in a positive accountability status with The New York State Education Department.

- **The most pressing area is State Aid.** The Governor's proposal proposes a large reduction in our foundation aid, over \$2.8 Million. This is a drastic hit for a district steeped in poverty and struggling to provide equity to our needy children. We are already unable to provide educational innovations and some basic needs that others consider routine. We cannot raise taxes because the residents have their own financial distress.
- **We have tractor trailers** come in several times a month to provide basic food items to hundreds of poor people waiting in line for hours for provisions to sustain their households. Our health insurance costs alone will be going up by 11% in 2024-2025. Health insurance alone exceeds 14% of our budget and this increase of \$3.5 million already exceeds any capacity we have to make a budget work. We cannot provide equity for our children who have so little, while we are surrounded by such great wealth in our neighboring school districts. You may know that Mount Vernon has the lowest ability to pay and the lowest per capita income in the area. This has caused us not to raise taxes but twice in a decade.
- **Our teachers' contract** expired two years ago, and we cannot conclude agreements until we know how much we will get in state aid. We need your help. Our salaries are among the lowest in the tri-county area and it is increasingly challenging to attract staff each year. Each year, we travel to Albany to lobby for the help we so desperately need.
- **Tax Collection.** We took over collecting our taxes two years ago when the City of Mount Vernon failed to turn over some \$11.7 million in taxes owed to the school district from 2019. That number has decreased as the city has started to pay us, but we have another \$15 Million in uncollected taxes from the years since we started collecting our taxes.
- **Our transportation requirements for special needs children continue to grow.** We run one hundred and seven (107) buses every day to accommodate 22% of our population who have special needs. This cost exceeds \$10 million. Mount Vernon has the highest special needs percentage in the area and perhaps the state.
- **We have a homeless population exceeding 10% of our children.** As this population grows

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so does the need for funding for related support services for these students. We must provide door-to-door transportation for these children.

- **We are owed some \$10 million in back Building Aid.** This dates to 2009. To date, we have been advised that most of this money will be included in our 2027 funding. This would help ease our continued financial struggle.
- **Our Charter School Expenses continue to grow with little help from state aid.** The notion that our expenses are reduced when a child goes to a charter school is untrue and ridiculous. There is no savings at all, only a loss of revenue. Our charter school expenses are now more than \$12 million for the current year with now over six hundred and fifty (650) children going to eighteen (18) charter schools. If we did not have this impediment, it is not likely that we would have funding problems for next year.
- **Grants.** Several federal grants are due to expire this year, causing the district to take over the funding of certain critical programs. The elimination of these programs would cause irreparable harm to our children.
- **Due to the financial hardship** that our families endure, we have added numerous programs after school hours to assist parents while they try to earn enough to sustain their households. In many cases, the children have no food but what is provided at school. These programs and the extra food they require will cost more than \$2 Million this year. Some of this will be assisted by grant funding, but we expect it to be underfunded by \$800,000, which will have to come from local funds.
- **As a result of the sharp increase in the number of children with special needs,** we have been advised that we can expect to add eleven (11) kindergarten classes next year, all special education. In addition to the difficulty in finding space for these classes, we are facing an increased need for staffing as each special education class will require at least one aide and sometimes multiple aides. We also have to renovate classrooms to accommodate the special needs of the students.
- **Our Building Conditions Survey (BCS)** was just submitted to the state. All of our buildings were rated as unsatisfactory, with one building being rated as failing. We have more than \$300 Million in needed repairs. Some \$38 Million is life safety-related repairs, and there are no current plans to put out a bond and no possibility of providing local funds for even a single capital project. The result will be a further deterioration of our learning environment with our buildings having an average age of approximately eighty-five (85) years.
- **We expect some \$4 Million in certiorari obligations** in the current year. This is funded at \$500,000, and the balance will have to come from other funding within the budget. We have no reserve.
- **Our bond rating** has been lowered to B+ because of not raising taxes and the lack of fund balance. This means any borrowing will be very costly.



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The result of all these bleak declarations is that we are strapped and cannot offer as good a quality of education to our children as our wealthy neighbors, which raises the question of equity. Each year, all parties in Albany listen attentively as we plead for help and outline our vast needs. Each year we are told that everyone cares, and everyone wants to help our children. Each year, we receive the disappointing news that there will be no meaningful help.

We know that hope is not a plan for the future but all we can do is hope that someone will finally understand our needs and will do something more than make a promise to help, which does not materialize to reality. Over the years, district officials have sat in the offices of all the departments in Albany and outlined our desperate need for help. It is time to make a difference for our children. We are struggling while those around us flourish.

Equality means each individual or group of people is given the same resources or opportunities. Equity recognizes that each person has different circumstances and allocates the exact resources and opportunities needed to reach an equal outcome.

In conclusion, Mount Vernon is a community with diverse and extensive needs. Resources are needed to help our children achieve the equity they deserve both on an educational level and a socioeconomic level. We urge all parties to do all possible to provide a funding solution that will help our children and that will afford them the opportunities to thrive and become valuable contributors to society.

Thank you for considering the needs of the children of Mount Vernon.

Sincerely,

Dr. K. Veronica Smith
Acting Superintendent

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