



# MOUNT VERNON CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

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**To:** Honorable Members of the New York State Legislature

**From:** Dr. K. Veronica Smith, Acting Superintendent, Mount Vernon City School District

**Date:** January 29, 2025

**Re:** Testimony for Joint Legislative Hearing: Elementary & Secondary Education

I want to take the opportunity to thank the Chairs of these committees and the entire Legislature. As the Acting Superintendent for Mount Vernon City School District, I appreciate the opportunity to address you and discuss our priorities for the Executive Budget and its impact on our District.

In better times I would love to be here talking about Mount Vernon's academic achievements and educational priorities for next school year, but the current fiscal and structural state of the district must be put at the forefront. While we have numerous challenges, I will keep this to the four major ones:

1. **Significant decline in enrollment coupled with increased student needs:** K-12 enrollment has decreased from 8,190 in 2014 to 6,483. This represents a loss of 1,577 students, or 19.6 percent during this period, The forecasted 2033 enrollment of 5,168 students represents an additional loss of 1,315 students, or 20.3 percent, when compared to the current enrollment. Although we have had a sharp decline enrollment the number of classified students has increased. Currently nearly one out of every four students in the district are classified. Over the last five years, general fund costs for special needs students have increased from \$39 million to over \$60 million. This accounts for over 22% of the total budget.
2. **Deteriorating Infrastructure:** The 2023 Building Condition Survey cited \$124,892,989 in Priority 1-3 Health & Safety or Structural Issues.
3. **Rapid rise in transportation costs:** Transportation expenses are projected to be over \$19,000,000 for the 24-25 school year. The District budgeted \$12.3 million, leaving the District short \$6.7 million.
4. **Uncollected prior year school taxes:** The District has \$24,247,438 in uncollected prior year school taxes as of June 30,2024.

To properly address these challenges, the district will need support on both the local and state level. This month, Mount Vernon's Board of Education approved a reconfiguration model that will reduce the number of K-8 schools and close three of the current sixteen school buildings. This model better aligns the district enrollment to its buildings, maintains the core neighborhood schools that the community has favored, and greatly reduces expenses. We will be submitting a petition for the reconfiguration to the New York State Education Department by March 1<sup>st</sup>.

While we have been unsuccessful in the past with school tax increases, we will be proposing an increase this year. Even with cost cutting measures and the current state aid levels we will not be able to put ourselves on a stable path without appropriate tax increases. While we are working on increasing community support for the increase it should be noted that a proposed 0.5% tax increase was resoundingly voted down just a few years ago.

We are also working on proposing a roughly \$50 million capital repair bond to address the priority one and priority two needs in the building condition survey. By reducing the number of buildings in the district we can better focus on the needed infrastructure repairs throughout the remaining schools.

### **Students With Disabilities**

While overall enrollment has declined, the Mount Vernon City School District has seen an increase in not only the number of students classified but, in addition, the breadth of services required. Students are coming to the District with greater needs for expanded services. We urge the State to take action to increase support for services provided to our students with disabilities. The Rockefeller Institute report recommended consideration of removal of a weighting for these students under Foundation Aid and funding these services through another mechanism. This should be further explored.

### **Pre-Kindergarten Programs**

Increase funding for prekindergarten programs to reduce the local share cost. The district currently absorbs nearly \$3 million dollars in expenses from the general fund to meet the needs of the current prekindergarten enrollment. Unfortunately, we will not be able to maintain that enrollment with the current funding and fiscal situation.

### **Transportation**

Mount Vernon's cost per bus route increased over 40% from the previous year. It is estimated that we will spend nearly \$19 million in transportation costs this year which would be an increase of \$5 million dollars from 23-24. We have a high number of special needs students who require door to door transportation services and smaller buses. This greatly increases the

number of routes we need to run per day. We believe transportation aid specifically for special needs students should be increased.

### **Prior Years Supplemental Aid**

The unfortunate situation that exists is that we have waited over 10 years for roughly \$8 million dollars in prior years supplemental aid. Much of this aid is not expected to be received until 2027 or later.

### **Expansion of Special Services Aid for Career and Technical Education (CTE)**

Mount Vernon once had renowned in District CTE programs. We are currently in the process of an historic expansion of in District CTE programs that will afford students increased access to state-of-the-art programs. We are requesting an expansion of Special Services Aid to include funding for Mount Vernon to support in District CTE programs. The District's current CTE programs have proven to be impactful, providing our students with valuable opportunities for success after graduation.

Thank you for your continued support of the Mount Vernon City School District and our educational needs.