



TESTIMONY OF THE MOUNT VERNON CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

Dr. Kenneth R. Hamilton, Superintendent

Ken Silver, Assistant Superintendent for Business

February 6, 2019

INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon Senate Finance Committee Chair Liz Krueger, Assembly Ways and Means Committee Chair Helene E. Weinstein and honorable members of the State Senate and Assembly.

On behalf of the 8000 students and 1300 dedicated staff members of the Mount Vernon City School District, I thank you for this opportunity to testify today before the senate education committee regarding the governor's proposed education budget. My name is Dr. Kenneth R. Hamilton, and I proudly serve as the Superintendent of the Mount Vernon City School District. Joining me is Ken Silver, Assistant Superintendent for Business for the District.

I want to begin by saying, "Thank You" for your support of public education, equity and excellence. Because of these much needed investments into public education, the Mount Vernon City School District is strengthening its teaching staff, and implementing greater supports and interventions for students. As a result of your support and our careful planning and delivery of services, 15 of our 16 schools are now in a designated as schools in good standing as per The New York State Education Department.

PROTECTING THE MISSION AND PURPOSE OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS

In 2018 President Trump and Secretary DeVos sought to decrease \$9.2 billion from the budget. Thankfully, this did not occur. However, proposed federal cuts and the rise of for-profit corporate education systems could dismantle and derail the true purpose of public education, which is to create equity for all students, to prepare them with the skills to be successful in life, and to nurture their potential – regardless of their demographic footprint or geographical country or schools.

We share the concerns of the Board of Regents with the Governor's current recommended funding for New York State's schools.

The Governor has proposed a plan to merge 11 expense-based aides into one new category called "Services Aid" starting in the 2020-2021 school year. Ten of these 11 aid categories apply to

Mount Vernon and include **TEXTBOOKS, SCHOOL LIBRARY MATERIALS, COMPUTER SOFTWARE, COMPUTER HARDWARE, BOCES AID, SUPPLEMENTAL EXCESS COST AID, TRANSPORTATION, ACADEMIC ENHANCEMENT, HIGH TAX, AND CHARTER SCHOOL TRANSITIONAL AID.** The proposal from the Governor calls for the calculation of these aides to be done on an annual basis using the data base at SED from November, 2019, which is our actual expenses from the 2018-2019 school year. Aid in these 11 categories would only increase if there was an increase in weighted enrollment and the CPI. A big piece of this is the Charter Transitional Aid which is supposed to help us adjust to new charter schools opening in the area. We now have some 13 charter schools drawing our children away from the public schools. Although we have seen some children return to the schools as we improve the quality of our educational programs, those who remain in Charter Schools deplete funds and resources without having manifestation of any reduction in operating costs. A second example is our transportation expenses. Our transportation expenses for classified children are anticipated to be several million higher than last year. We have among the highest rate of classified children in the state, reflecting the challenging socioeconomic situation we face in Mount Vernon. Any calculation of aid based on enrollment and inflation would leave us millions short in aid. This would result in reducing staff, dismantling programs and services that we have restored from previous cuts that left the district without nurses, guidance counselors, after school programs and other essential services for our children. This proposal would greatly damage our efforts to provide equity in education for our most needy children. Mount Vernon is a high tax, poverty stricken community with nearly 10% of its population designated as homeless. Imagine how daunting it is to combat the psychological and sociological issues of educating children plagued with the issues of living in poverty, tethered to the dehumanizing, demoralizing, designation of homelessness. Few, if any of our surrounding school districts are faced with such tremendous odds. Our moral requirement that we provide for these children will be severely damaged should this proposal be enacted. While it is an issue of policy influence from your perspective, it is a social justice issue that will never be reversed, if we fail to ensure that the Governor knows and understands the implications of how the funding formula perpetuates such issues rather than reverses them.

There are other areas we need to consider as vital to the interests of Mount Vernon. The most pressing is our Foundation Aid. The Governor's proposal gives us a 1.8% increase in our Foundation Aid. Our health insurance costs alone will be going up almost 7% in 2019-2020. Health insurance alone exceeds 10% of our budget. We have long hoped for the Full Foundation Aid funding to finally be implemented so we can provide the equity for our children who start the race significantly behind their wealthier counterparts, yet the barometer by which they are measured and how resources are allocated fail to take these conditions into consideration. They must however, be able to compete in the workforce, for higher education and scarce scholarship opportunities with these counterparts because the world doesn't ask about your geography when it matters the most.

We are also owed some \$10 Million in back Building Aid. To date, we have been advised that the majority of this money will be included in our 2027 funding. This is unacceptable and grossly unfair to our students, our community and our taxpayers.

Mount Vernon is attached to up-county construction cost data. There has been legislation vetoed by the governor to include Mt. Vernon with NYC and Long Island in terms of the costs of construction. The effect of this problem is that our Maximum Cost Allowance (MCA) is lower than it should be and that we cannot do construction at the same lower cost as areas upstate. This makes our capacity to building these costs into our capital projects budget next to impossible and further exacerbates an age old issue that older school communities will never be able to combat without addressing this issue. We urge the passage of this legislation vital to our mission to educate our children in buildings that are safe, efficient and reflective of standards which mirror the rhetoric that all students matter.

MCA is based on a five-year period of funding. There has been legislation, also vetoed by the Governor, which would have allowed MCA to be based on 10 years meaning we would have double the MCA at any one time. This would have prevented major cutbacks in construction and renovation programs where we have exceeded the MCA for just the basics of construction.

In conclusion, Mount Vernon like the other districts represented here today needs your help. Our communities are unique and students' needs are complex and complicated. The issue of equity is quite simple. Children who need more should get more and that does not have to be at the expense of those who have the ability to pay. States must make our children the top priority. We urge all parties to reach high to help our kids and find a funding solution which will provide our next generation of learners the opportunities that our wealthy neighbors have enjoyed for decades. My name is Dr. Kenneth R. Hamilton. I am the Superintendent of the Mt Vernon City School District and the voice of the thousands of children whom you may never meet. While they may be faceless and nameless to you today most of them look like me. Most of them believe that the system will work and that their future is bright and in good hands. I hope we won't disappoint them. There are some things we can't change. But this one.... We can fix this! Thank you!