

**TESTIMONY ON NEW YORK STATE  
FY 2026-27 EXECUTIVE BUDGET PROPOSAL**

Submitted by Dr. Demario A. Strickland

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## **Introduction**

Good morning. I am Dr. Demario A. Strickland, Superintendent of the Mount Vernon City School District. I am honored to present testimony regarding Governor Hochul's FY 2026-27 Executive Budget proposal. Mount Vernon City School District serves approximately 6,800 students across 13 schools in Westchester County's most diverse urban community. Our district is working diligently to transform Mount Vernon into "the Jewel of Westchester" through our #MtVernonShines initiative, which encompasses comprehensive reforms focused on academic excellence, operational sustainability, and community engagement.

As a district under state fiscal monitoring through June 2027, we approach this budget with both appreciation for the state's increased investment in education and deep concern about provisions that could undermine the progress we are making. While we welcome many components of the Executive Budget, we must advocate strongly for policies that will enable Mount Vernon to continue serving our scholars with excellence while achieving fiscal stability.

## **Provisions We Applaud**

### **Foundation Aid Increase**

We commend Governor Hochul for proposing a \$779 million (3%) increase in Foundation Aid, bringing the total to \$27.1 billion for SY 2027. For Mount Vernon, this continued commitment to Foundation Aid is essential as we work to strengthen academic programs, reduce class sizes, and provide the high-quality instruction our scholars deserve.

Adequate Foundation Aid growth is necessary to enable urban school districts to negotiate competitive compensation packages that attract and retain high-quality educators while maintaining fiscal responsibility. The chronic underfunding of Foundation Aid in past years has made it extraordinarily difficult for Mount Vernon to provide competitive salaries while also investing in programs and services that students need.

The Foundation Aid Community Schools Set-Aside aligns directly with our priority to expand mental health and student support services. However, we urge the state to eliminate this set-aside under Foundation Aid and to fund Community Schools through a distinct appropriation. Mount Vernon has seen firsthand the transformative impact of community schools that integrate academic instruction with comprehensive support services, and we are committed to expanding this model across our district.

## **Universal Pre-Kindergarten Expansion**

The proposed \$561 million (52.5%) increase in Universal Pre-Kindergarten Aid represents a historic investment in early childhood education that we enthusiastically support. The consolidation of SUFPK into UPK Aid and the provision of \$10,000 or the district's Foundation Aid per pupil for every eligible four-year-old student served will enable Mount Vernon to significantly expand access to high-quality pre-kindergarten programming.

This expansion aligns perfectly with our district's budget priority to expand Universal Pre-Kindergarten programming. We are prepared to secure additional classrooms, hire certified early childhood educators, and develop age-appropriate curriculum aligned with New York State learning standards. Early childhood education is foundational to long-term academic success, and this investment will position our youngest scholars for excellence from the start.

## **Evidence-Based Math and Literacy Instruction**

We support the Executive Budget's emphasis on evidence-based math instruction and the requirement for instructional best practices in numeracy. The provision of \$2 million to NYSUT Education and Learning Trust for educator training, along with \$2 million for regional hub pilots and \$2 million for micro-credentials, demonstrates a comprehensive approach to improving mathematics outcomes.

Additionally, we appreciate the \$1.5 million allocation for the literacy pilot program. While Mount Vernon is not specifically named in this provision, we share Rochester and Yonkers' commitment to evidence-based reading instruction and would welcome the opportunity to participate in similar initiatives. High-quality instruction in both mathematics and literacy is central to our mission to provide student-centered excellence.

## **Technology and Infrastructure Support**

The establishment of Building Aid eligibility for renewable energy technologies, including ground-mounted solar panels, is a forward-thinking provision that will help districts like Mount Vernon pursue sustainable facilities improvements. This aligns with our commitment to sustainable operations and systems, one of the foundational pillars of our district's strategic framework.

## **Sensitive Locations Protection Act**

The proposed Sensitive Locations Protection Act, which protects schools, daycares, hospitals, and houses of worship from civil immigration enforcement except where a federal agent has a judicial warrant, is essential to maintaining safe learning environments for all students. Our scholars and their families must feel safe coming to school without fear of immigration enforcement actions. This protection is fundamental to creating the inclusive community and culture we are committed to fostering.

## **Critical Concerns and Needed Adjustments**

### **Charter School Funding**

In Mount Vernon, we have experienced firsthand the financial impact of charter schools on our district's budget. Each student who attends a charter school reduces our enrollment-based funding while our fixed costs for facilities, transportation, and administration remain largely unchanged. The continued expansion of charter school funding creates a two-tiered system that diverts resources from traditional public schools that serve all students, including those with the highest needs and those with disabilities.

Mount Vernon City School District is under state fiscal monitoring precisely because we are working to provide comprehensive services to all students while managing significant financial constraints. Charter school tuition payments place additional pressure on our budget and make it more difficult to achieve the fiscal stability the state rightfully expects. We ask that the state consider the cumulative impact of these policies on districts like ours that are working diligently to emerge from fiscal distress and put a moratorium in place on charter school growth.

### **Absence of Monitor and Health Services Funding**

The Executive Budget did not designate additional funding for the Mount Vernon Monitor. However, the absence of this funding does not diminish the very real need for state support as our district works to meet the requirements of fiscal monitoring while implementing comprehensive reforms.

We also note that the Executive Budget provides \$13.84 million in School Health Services funding for the Big Four city school districts (Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, and Yonkers) but does not extend this support to Mount Vernon despite our urban characteristics and comparable student needs. We respectfully request that the Legislature consider expanding health services funding to include Mount Vernon, particularly as we work to expand mental health and student support services as outlined in our budget priorities.

## **Mount Vernon's Specific Budget Priorities**

The Mount Vernon City School District has identified several budget priorities for the 2026-27 school year that align with and build upon the state's investments. While we appreciate the Executive Budget's commitments, additional state support in the following areas would significantly enhance our ability to serve our scholars with excellence:

### **Building Conditions and Facilities Infrastructure**

Our highest priority is addressing critical repairs and improvements to building infrastructure to ensure safe, healthy, and conducive learning environments for all students and staff. Many of our facilities require urgent attention to HVAC systems, roofing, plumbing, electrical systems, and accessibility improvements. We are conducting comprehensive facilities assessments to identify these urgent needs and developing a multi-year capital improvement plan.

While we will pursue available state aid and grant opportunities, we request that the Legislature consider enhanced Building Aid ratios for districts under fiscal monitoring to help address the backlog of deferred maintenance. Safe and modern facilities are fundamental to academic achievement, and our students deserve learning environments that reflect our commitment to excellence.

### **Technology Infrastructure and Classroom Devices**

We are committed to upgrading technology infrastructure and classroom devices to support blended learning and digital equity. This includes modernizing network systems, providing interactive boards, and ensuring that every student has access to appropriate devices. Implementing robust cybersecurity measures and ensuring reliable connectivity across all district facilities are critical components of this priority.

We support the Executive Budget's emphasis on technology and request additional categorical aid specifically focused on closing the digital divide in urban districts. Technology is no longer supplementary to education; it is central to preparing students for college and career success in the 21st century.

### **Establishment of True Bilingual Programming**

Mount Vernon serves a diverse student population that includes significant numbers of English language learners. We are working to design a dual-language curriculum that meets state standards and supports cultural inclusivity. This requires recruiting and training bilingual educators and ensuring access to professional development and instructional resources.

We respectfully request state funding to support the development and implementation of dual-language programs, including professional development for teachers, curriculum development, and specialized instructional materials. True bilingual programming not

only serves English language learners but enriches the educational experience of all students by promoting multilingualism and cultural competence.

## **Implementation of Primary Years Program (International Baccalaureate)**

We are developing a phased implementation plan for the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program (IB PYP) at designated school sites. This globally recognized framework will provide our scholars with rigorous, inquiry-based learning experiences that develop critical thinking, intercultural understanding, and academic excellence.

Implementation requires significant investment in staff training, curriculum alignment with IB standards, and partnerships with IB-certified consultants to guide authorization and compliance processes. We request that the state provide additional funding to support districts implementing IB programs or expand existing programs to include elementary-level IB implementation.

## **Addressing IDA Tax Incentives and PILOT Impact on District Revenue**

A critical issue that affects Mount Vernon and many other districts across New York State is the impact of Industrial Development Agency (IDA) tax incentives and Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) agreements on school district revenue. These agreements, while intended to support economic development, often result in significant revenue losses for school districts that must continue to provide services to residents of these developments.

We strongly advocate for equitable PILOT agreements that protect the District's tax base while supporting economic development. School districts should be full partners in PILOT negotiations, and agreements should ensure that districts receive fair compensation for tax incentives granted to private development projects.

We are developing a comprehensive analysis of revenue losses from PILOT agreements and will work with state and local officials to reform policies that disproportionately impact school funding. We request that the Legislature consider legislation that would require school district approval for PILOT agreements or mandate minimum payment levels that reflect the actual cost of providing educational services.

## **Conclusion**

Governor Hochul's FY 2026-27 Executive Budget includes important investments in Foundation Aid, Universal Pre-Kindergarten, and evidence-based instruction that will benefit Mount Vernon's scholars. We are grateful for the state's continued commitment to education funding and particularly for provisions that align with our district's priorities and our vision of Mount Vernon as the Jewel of Westchester.

However, we must advocate for adjustments to policies that undermine traditional public schools, particularly the continued expansion of charter school funding at the expense of districts serving all students. We also request consideration of additional support for facilities infrastructure, technology, bilingual programming, International Baccalaureate implementation, and health services that reflect the unique needs of urban districts like Mount Vernon.

Mount Vernon City School District is under state fiscal monitoring because we are committed to achieving both academic excellence and fiscal sustainability. Every dollar matters as we work to transform our district and provide our scholars with the high-quality education they deserve. We respectfully ask that the Legislature carefully consider the cumulative impact of state education policies on districts like ours and ensure that all students, regardless of where they live, have access to excellent public schools.

The Mount Vernon Shining Instruction Framework and our SHINES strategic pillars – Student-Centered Excellence, High-Quality Instruction & Innovation, Inclusive Community & Culture, Nurturing Partnerships, Excellence Through Financial Stewardship, and Sustainable Operations & Systems – guide every decision we make. With adequate state support, we will continue to build on this foundation and ensure that Mount Vernon truly shines as a beacon of educational excellence in Westchester County and across New York State.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. I welcome any questions and look forward to working with the Legislature to ensure that the final state budget supports the success of all New York's students.

Respectfully submitted,

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Mount Vernon City School District