

# The **KNIGHT TIMES**

Mount Vernon City School District Newsletter

Volume VII: Fall 2015

## **DISTRICT LOOKS TO FUTURE WITH 20/20 VISION**

### *Superintendent Unveils Plan for Districtwide Excellence*

At a recent school board meeting, Mount Vernon City Schools Superintendent Dr. Kenneth R. Hamilton unveiled his “20/20 vision” for the district. His goal, to create enhanced educational programs within a rejuvenated school system, was met with excitement and approval from both the community and Trustees present. His vision, including plans for two district-wide full-day pre-K “early learning centers” and plans to expand the district’s K-8 initiative to include all elementary schools, will provide enhanced educational programs for all students.

“All-day pre-K leads to early literacy, which is essential to student success,” said Dr. Hamilton. “K-8 buildings provide the continuity of care students need for emotional and academic stability.”

Dr. Hamilton’s vision calls for the development of three high schools as “schools of excellence,” incorporating the arts, science and technology. If approved, Thornton High School would become a performing arts high school, while Mount Vernon High School would focus its programs on career and technical education, and the International Baccalaureate program. Additionally, A.B. Davis Middle School would once again serve high school students, this time as a STEAM school (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics).

“We owe it to our students to restore excellence to every school in this district,” said Dr. Hamilton. “These schools will raise rigor through multiple pathways to college or the workforce and quality instructional programs.”

Dr. Hamilton’s vision requires the support of infrastructure upgrades to existing buildings districtwide. For example, pre-K classrooms will need bathrooms, and K-8 buildings will need science labs. New and improved athletic fields and play areas are also part of Dr. Hamilton’s vision.

*Continued on page 8*

## **Celebrate the Most Wonderful Time of the Year**

### *Mark your calendar!*

On December 5 at Mount Vernon High School, Dr. Kenneth R. Hamilton will present “The Most Wonderful Time,” a holiday concert featuring The Jenkins Brothers and special guest performances. Doors will open at 6:30 p.m., and the concert will begin at 7 p.m.

There is no charge for admission but please bring a canned good or unwrapped toy for needy families.



**The Jenkins Brothers will perform at the free concert.**



## SUPERINTENDENT'S LETTER



The 2015-2016 academic year is off to an extraordinary start. From our college fair and college application week at Mount Vernon High School to the launch of the 2015-2016 Superintendent's Reading Challenge, students across the district are highly engaged in the academic process. More importantly, they are making great strides in achieving the academic success that will allow them to compete with

students not only from Mount Vernon and Westchester County, but also with students from throughout New York State and the nation. To that end, I am so proud of the work and dedication of our students and staff, our parents and our neighbors. I am humbled by your commitment and dedication to transforming OUR school system.

As our students and schools continue to improve, it will be necessary to redefine what Mount Vernon is and who we are. We will need to make investments to continue providing higher quality education and facilities for our students and community. In this newsletter, you will get a glimpse of an ambitious academic vision for our schools. Developed in collaboration with our board of trustees, we have a plan that redirects resources designed to improve the quality of our schools and addresses years of neglect that have caused our facilities to fall into disrepair. This plan provides for a brighter future for our students and community. This vision will ensure the transformation of Mount Vernon schools continues.

I look forward to sharing a plan with the community in the very near future that will restore our schools and create tremendous educational opportunities for ALL of our students.

In closing, I want to extend to you my warmest wishes for a Happy Thanksgiving and a joyous holiday season.

Yours for the sake of all children,

**Dr. Kenneth R. Hamilton**  
*Superintendent of Schools*

## BACKPACK PROGRAM FEEDS NEEDY CHILDREN AWAY FROM SCHOOL

In an effort to assure that its neediest students don't go hungry when they are away from school, the Mount Vernon City School District has teamed up with the Food Bank for Westchester to provide a Backpack Program. As its name implies, the program sends at-risk students home with a backpack, but the backpack is filled with food, not books.

"This program is part of Mount Vernon City School District's continuing effort to strengthen the home-to-school connection," said Superintendent of Schools Dr. Kenneth Hamilton. "We make sure our students get the nutritious lunches they need while they're at school. This program enables us to make sure the neediest children are fed after they leave our care."

The Backpack Program is designed to help alleviate child hunger by providing hungry and at-risk children with nutritious, easy-to-prepare food on weekends and school vacations. Each backpack has six meals and includes protein, milk, fruit, grain and vegetables. In the backpack, there is also a recipe in English and Spanish. Being very aware that children receiving backpacks likely will share the food with siblings and other family members, care is taken to pack food items that can be easily shared and/or can contribute to a family meal.



## NATIONAL PARK SERVICE HONORS TURNER SCHOOLS



Jahzeel Stewart, a 5th grader from Turner Elementary School, and National Park Service Ranger Vladimir Merzlyakov addressed the crowd.

*The National Park Service hosted a recognition ceremony for the renaming of two Mount Vernon City School District (MVCSD) schools as part of its nationwide centennial celebration in early October. The two schools, which were renamed in May, honor Rebecca and Benjamin Turner, former slaves who established a homestead and raised a family near Saint Paul's Church in the city. The schools are now named the Benjamin Turner Middle School and the Rebecca Turner Elementary School.*

The event – held at St. Paul's National Historic Site, located at 897 S. Columbus Ave., Mount Vernon – acknowledged the local renaming efforts of Dr. Larry Spruill, city historian, and former MVCSD Trustee Elias Gootzeit. The event included music on the church's historic Erben pipe organ, student presentations, traditional African drummers leading the procession to the grave site and a floral homage at the grave of Rebecca Turner in the Saint Paul's Church yard. It celebrated the centennial of the National Park Service's efforts to foster a more complete understanding of our nation's history and urge a more inclusive future.

All 4th and 7th graders in attendance were deemed "National Park Rangers" for the day. The students were welcomed to the 350-year-old church by Dr. David Osborn, site manager at St. Paul's Church, NPS Park Ranger Vladimir Merzlyakov and Dr. Kenneth R. Hamilton, Superintendent of Mount Vernon City School District. Dr. Osborn noted that the Turners sat in the same church, heard the same bell ring and listened to the same organ play when they were parishioners.

"This is a great opportunity to celebrate the Turners' legacy in Mount Vernon and demonstrate to our students and families the rich cultural heritage of Mount Vernon and the beginnings of a rejuvenation of this city's schools," Dr. Hamilton said.

Rebecca Turner's 93 years spanned the American Revolution to the post-Civil War period, from her own enslavement to emancipation, all in the shadows of St. Paul's Church where she is buried. (The grave site of Benjamin Turner, who died decades before Rebecca, remains unknown.)



## NEW PRE-K PROGRAM BRINGS NEW HOPE FOR STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

After a summer filled with curriculum writing, renovations and planning, the Mount Vernon City School District opened the doors to its new full-day prekindergarten program at Mount Vernon High School on September 2. Parents, students, staff and dignitaries were overcome with hope as the new pre-K classrooms were unveiled.

Standing before a crowd of parents, teachers, administrators and elected officials, Pre-K Director Dr. Gayle White-Wallace spoke about the importance of prekindergarten in the development of student learners. “Studies have shown that children who attend pre-K are more likely to graduate high school. That is why this =full-day program is so critical here in Mount Vernon.”

Offering full-day prekindergarten is part of the district’s Early Literacy Initiative. The district’s vision is steeped in early literacy research, supporting the efforts of a rich pre-K-2 program, which will eventually lead to better outcomes or more college and career students.

The three full-day classes revolve around the Constructivist Method. The Big Day Pre-K program provides students with enriching literacy, mathematics, science and social studies experiences. Big Day Pre-K

curriculum teaches important content through learning centers, art, music and cooperative learning experiences.

“This exposure will place our students on a secure footing to be successful as they enter kindergarten,” said Superintendent Dr. Kenneth R. Hamilton.

The classrooms offer students an exceptional space to both learn and grow. The newly renovated classrooms feature many pre-K classroom amenities, such as a dramatic play area, smart boards, reading centers and classroom meeting spaces.

“Parents and families are an important part of this endeavor,” said Dr. White-Wallace. “Our new full-day pre-K program, combined with innovative technology and enhanced learning spaces, will help students become successful in the years that follow, and the combined teamwork of having engaged families will support their success.”



New pre-K classroom at Mount Vernon High School



District and community officials gathered for the opening of the new full-day prekindergarten program.

LIKE US ON



FOLLOW US ON



#MVCSD





## SUPERINTENDENT'S 2015-2016 READING CHALLENGE BEGINS

The Mount Vernon City School District officially kicked off its 2015-2016 Superintendent's Reading Challenge with events in each school building during the second part of October. The kickoff events were filled with music, performances and surprises to excite students and promote literacy both at home and in the schools.

The biggest surprise, by far, was the introduction of OLI the Octopus, the reading challenge's premier student motivator. OLI, which stands for Ongoing Literacy Initiative, will visit schools throughout the academic year to encourage students to take part in the reading challenge and check on their progress.

Based on a children's book character developed by District Clerk Rick McCormack and Superintendent of Schools Dr. Kenneth R. Hamilton, OLI is "sure to motivate the students and help create excitement about reading across the district," McCormack said.

District officials are so confident students can read more that they have set this year's goal at well over a quarter million books (K-2 students 35 books and 3-8 students 30 books). "I see no reason why our students can't read 300,000 books before the end of the school year," Dr. Hamilton said. "I have full confidence that our students will not only meet this goal, but also exceed it."



While last year's Challenge was successful, District Reading Challenge Coordinator Dr. Gayle White-Wallace knows that "our students can do even more to promote literacy and develop strong reading habits."

Over the next year, student progress will be tracked through a special counter on the district's website at [www.mtvernoncsd.org](http://www.mtvernoncsd.org).





## 2015 STAR SCHOLARS ARE SELECTED FOR COLLEGE PREPAREDNESS PROGRAM

**M**ount Vernon City School District selected four students as its 2015 Mount Vernon Star Scholars. The selected class of 2017 students are Agustin Mendoza, Michael Persaud, Taury Phelps and Judy Yu.

The Mount Vernon Star Scholars (MVSS) program was established in 2012 under the original direction of Mount Vernon residents Norm Savoie and Darcy Miller. The purpose of the program was to assist a select group of academically talented students at Mount Vernon high schools in gaining admission to selective colleges and universities in the U.S. The star scholars receive valuable one-on-one guidance from a volunteer mentor.

“The students honored this year will receive assistance in important areas such as test preparation and securing financial aid,” said Miller. “The volunteer mentors will help the star scholars navigate the complex college application process every step of the way.”

The program is open to all students enrolled in one of the Mount Vernon high schools who maintain a weighted-average GPA of 85 or better. Scholars are chosen in the summer between their sophomore and junior year, based primarily on their academic achievement in their first two years of high school and their commitment to continuing their education at the undergraduate level upon graduation from high school. While the designation is not specifically need-based, a student’s challenges in attending a top-tier institution of higher learning, including financial challenges, are factored into the selection process.

While the program is still young, MVSS alumni can now be found on the campuses of Case Western Reserve University, Denison University, Harvard University and the University of Connecticut. With sufficient resources, the program would like to be able to select five to eight scholars each year.

For more information, go to [mountvernonstarscholars.org](http://mountvernonstarscholars.org).



Pictured (from left to right): Shadae Leslie, Devita Mohandeo, Darcy Miller, Taury Phelps



Pictured (from left to right): Teresa Weber, Judy Yu



Pictured (from left to right): Tony Gamils, Melissa Amigon, Michael Persaud, Stephen Ball



## MOUNT VERNON SCHOOL DISTRICT AND JUNIOR LEAGUE OF BRONXVILLE HOST KRAFT MOBILE FOOD PANTRY

The Mount Vernon City School District's Wellness Committee has partnered with the Junior League of Bronxville (JLB) to host Kraft Mobile Food Pantry distributions. The JLB's Mobile Food Pantry program works in conjunction with the Food Bank for Westchester's Kraft Mobile Food Pantry and provides groceries to families throughout the Mount Vernon community in need of assistance. Through the Mobile Food Pantry program, participants can receive various healthy food options of fresh fruits, vegetables, dairy products and meats.

"The Junior League of Bronxville, in partnership with the Food Bank for Westchester, is pleased to bring the Mobile Food Pantry to the Mount Vernon community," said Junior League of Bronxville President Erica Sevilla. "Our efforts to alleviate hunger and improve nutrition in Southern Westchester have been greatly increased through our Mobile Food Pantry distributions."

"This is an opportunity for our school district and Junior League to join forces to help eliminate hunger in our community," said Adriane Saunders, chairwoman of the district's Wellness Committee. "All too often, our neighbors may not have the means to feed their families and may not know where to turn for help. This is our chance to say there is help out there. We are here for you."

The next distribution will be held Saturday, December 5, in the parking lot at Parker Elementary School. Please check the district's website for the specific distribution time. In order to ensure enough groceries are available, event organizers are requesting those wishing to participate pre-register through the following link, <https://goo.gl/Xc99LM> or by calling District Clerk Rick McCormack at 914-665-5235.



Volunteers hand out food at Parker Elementary School.

## Mount Vernon Schools Become Energy Efficient

The Mount Vernon City School District made history in July when it awarded a nearly \$40 million energy performance contract (EPC) to Honeywell Building Solutions. From all accounts, this is the largest EPC ever awarded by a school district in New York State.

Through the EPC, the Mount Vernon City School District will take significant steps to become energy efficient by upgrading or replacing significant numbers of aged and/or obsolete infrastructure including boilers, lighting fixtures and ventilation systems.

According to Ken Silver, Assistant Superintendent for Business, "Over the next 12 to 18 months, the district will replace 34 boilers in 15 buildings. These are some of the oldest boilers in the district that literally cost thousands of dollars and countless man-hours each year to maintain. They will be replaced with state-of-the-art, energy efficient equipment that will provide worry-free heat to our buildings for years to come."



Aging boilers at Mount Vernon High School will be replaced.



Mount Vernon City School District  
165 N. Columbus Avenue  
Mount Vernon, NY 10552

**Board of Education**

Adriane G. Saunders, President  
Serigne M.Gningue, Vice President  
Charmaine Fearon  
Rosemarie Jarosz  
Omar McDowell  
Micah J.B. McOwen  
Darcy Miller  
Wanda White  
Lesly Zamor

Non-Profit Organization  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
Permit # 5140  
White Plains, NY

\*\*\*ECRWSS\*\*\*  
Postal Patron  
Mount Vernon, NY

## Dads Take Your Child to School Day

The Mount Vernon City School District, in partnership with the City of Mount Vernon and the Mount Vernon Youth Bureau, participated in the statewide “Dads Take Your Child to School Day” on Tuesday, September 22.



*Continued from page 1*

## Dr. Hamilton's Academic Vision

“New athletic fields will serve the needs of our student athletes in competitive sports,

Dr. Hamilton added. “The advancements will also improve the district’s value and curb appeal, which will increase community pride.”

In order for the superintendent’s vision to become a reality, it needs financial support. A bond proposal to cover costs will be put before Mount Vernon voters in 2016.

### ACADEMIC VISION HIGHLIGHTS

- A districtwide pre-K early learning center
- Nine K-8 Schools
- Three or more high schools as schools of excellence, incorporating the arts, science and technology, and CTE/IB Studies in academic programming

**The effort must be supported with:**

- Infrastructure upgrades to existing buildings district wide
- New and improved athletic fields and play areas