

A new statement was posted on Friday night (10/28) by Dr. BC to clarify that contrary to what was written in the statement released on 10/27, the school improvement grant funds flowed to the company Just Inspire have not been the focus of any audit.

Both statements are available at the school district website <https://www.mtvernoncsd.org/>

Below are both statements, in chronological order. After the 10/27 statement was released, I sent an e-mail to the school board and the NYSED School Improvement Grants Accountability office. Those emails are included here after the 10/27 statement. At the end of this document are my questions regarding the 10/28 statement.

10/27/2022 Statement from Board of Education President Adriane Saunders and Superintendent Dr. Bennett-Conroy

The Mount Vernon City School District Board of Education and Dr. Waveline Bennett-Conroy, Superintendent of Schools, believe that transparency is critical to the credibility of school district leadership and its ongoing relationship with members of the community.

Recently, questions have been raised about the contractual procurement process and use of grant funding. These questions deserve answers, and not merely reassurances. While the State Education Department annually audits all aspects of grant funding usage— and these routine audits have not documented any meaningful irregularities— the Board of Education and Superintendent Bennett-Conroy believe that an objective review of the grant procurement process and related issues is necessary to confirm this status for our community. Therefore, the Board will immediately retain the professional services of outside experts who will review the past several years of transactional data and interview all relevant parties to create an objective set of conclusions about this element of district operations. We look forward to sharing these findings when they are completed.

After reading the 10/27 statement, I sent the following e-mails:

First, to the Mount Vernon school board:

Dear School Board Members,

In the statement you released regarding the questions surrounding the use of School Improvement Grants (SIGs), you said the following: “While the state education department annually audits all aspects of grant funding usage-and these routine audits have not documented any meaningful irregularities.”

1. If you are in possession of audits of the SIGs, please release them to [the] public without further delay. Or, provide us with a reason why you are not releasing these audits.
2. If you are not referring to specific audits, but instead to NYSEDs process for reviewing self-reported LEA SIG info (i.e., a type of “desk audit”), then you should clarify this. As it stands, one would think that NYSED has audited the SIG grant money that flowed to Just Inspire and found no “meaningful irregularities”. Again, if that is the case release the audits. If it is not the case, clarify you statement.

Second, to the NYS Education Department “School Improvement Grants Accountability” unit:

Greetings,

The Mount Vernon School Board released a statement regarding questions surrounding the use of School Improvement Grants (SIGs). In particular, the community has questions about \$8.5m in SIG grant money that [flowed] to a company named “Just Inspire”. The Journal News published an article about it today: <https://www.lohud.com/story/news/education/2022/10/27/mt-vernon-schools-just-inspire-grant-money-questions-outside-investigation/69594662007/>

The statement from the MV school board said the following: “While the state education department annually audits all aspects of grant funding usage-and these routine audits have not documented any meaningful irregularities.”

My questions are as follows:

- 1) Did NYSED “audit all aspects” of the MV SIG grants that flowed to Just Inspire?
- 2) If NYSED did audit the MV SIG grants, can you please send me a copy of the audits or direct me to where I can get a copy?
- 3) If NYSED did not audit “all aspects of grant funding usage” as stated to the public by the Mount Vernon school board, can you clarify what type of audit (if any) NYSED did do? Was it a “desk audit” of self-reported SIG costs, for example?

Statement from Superintendent Dr. Waveline Bennett-Conroy

10/28/2022 Statement from Dr. Waveline Bennett-Conroy

In a joint statement from myself and the Mount Vernon Board of Education that was distributed to media on Wednesday, October 26, it was noted that *routine audits by the state have not documented any meaningful irregularities*. As Superintendent of Schools – and the individual who was previously responsible for the development and execution of all grant-funded programs – I want to clarify this statement and acknowledge my role in suggesting its inclusion in the statement.

ESSA (Every Student Succeeds) grant funding comes from the New York State Education Department from funds disbursed by the federal government. Exhaustive documentation is required for both funding applications and ‘desk monitoring reviews,’ which include items like confirming certification and licensing requirements for staff working in the programs; payroll documentation; policy and program fulfillment; community awareness and engagement; and many more.

To be clear, all of this information is self-reported by the district, but in its review, we have never been cited by the State for any deficiencies or irregularities. I recognize that this does not expressly constitute an ‘audit,’ which is why I fully support the Board of Education in its stated intention to have a third-party professional firm analyze our grant procurement and execution.

My contribution to the statement by including these words should have been clearer, and I want our community to know that this was my doing, and not that of the Board of Education.

Here are my questions and concerns about the 10/28 statement by Dr. BC:

1. In her role as Assistant Superintendent for School Improvement, it was Dr. BC who recommended millions of dollars in federal school improvement grant money flow to Just Inspire. I find it troubling that she suggested language in the 10/27 statement that would lead the public to believe these grant dollars were audited, only to come back a day later to say that was incorrect.
2. The 10/28 statement says that “Exhaustive documentation is required for both funding applications and ‘desk monitoring reviews,’ which include items like confirming certification and licensing requirements for staff working in the programs; payroll documentation; policy and program fulfillment;” I have a few thoughts about this:
 - a. Recall that we paid Wellcore and Just Inspire *hundreds of thousands of dollars* to file the “applications” for school improvement grants. One basic question is why? Why didn’t Dr. BC file these applications as the Assistant Superintendent of School Improvement? Couldn’t the hundreds of thousands of dollars we paid to Wellcore/Just Inspire to file the applications have been put to better use? I’ve filed a FOIL request with NYSED for these applications. Reviewing the applications will help me understand whether we paid a fair price to have Wellcore/Just Inspire file an application for school improvement grant dollars *that were already earmarked by the federal government for school districts like ours*.
 - b. A “desk monitoring review” by NYSED does not typically include review of the details of subcontracts awarded from the school district to a company like Just Inspire. So, when Dr. BC writes NYSED confirmed “certification and licensing requirements for staff working in the programs”, is she referring to Mount Vernon school district employees (“staff”) who participated in the use of SIG grants or employees/subcontractors who worked for Just Inspire? The same question holds for “payroll documentation”. Furthermore, if Just Inspire hired Mount Vernon School District employees as subcontractors to fulfill the terms of the contracts, the question is why did we need to flow grant money to Just Inspire to pay our own employees? Further still, is that even legal given labor law rules (and worker’s comp requirements) for 1099 labor vs w-2 employment, not to mention union contracts.
3. Why hasn’t the school board provided the public with a statement answering the following questions related to nepotism:
 - a. What is the relationship between Dr. BC and Marlon Stephenson? It has been said that he is her son. If so, this raises very serious nepotism concerns.

To quell “rumors”, the school district needs to release an official statement about this relationship. An audit is not required for an answer to this question and given the nepotism concerns an official answer is past due. Quite simply, it is wrong not to officially address this concern.

- b. It has been established that Mr. Stephenson worked for Wellcore, but *did he also work for Just Inspire and if so in what capacity and given what credentials?* Did he or does he have an ownership interest in Just Inspire? Given that Dr. BC named him as our school districts' Director of Business and Grants and given that in September Mr. Stephenson recommended SIG funds be subcontracted to Just Inspire, it seems wrong for the Board of Education not to disclose full details about Mr. Stephenson's relationship to Just Inspire. To delay is to further erode public trust.

Finally, I have to say that I'm growing weary of what feels like cat and mouse games with all of our city's cost centers- the library, the urban renewal agency, the IDA, the board of water supply, the main city budget, and the school district. All in, these cost centers represent over 400 million dollars a year, and there are serious concerns about the financial management and internal oversight of each one of them. *It does not seem like a stretch to draw a line from the questions about financial management to the service issues experienced by city residents, including poor outcomes for students, crumbling infrastructure, and a stagnant commercial tax base.*

If Mount Vernon is the "Jewel of Westchester", it kinda feels like there are jewel thieves afoot, and that's not a good feeling.