

Universal Pre-K Funding

An Opportunity for a Regional Pre-K Center in Mount Vernon?

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Prepared by Chris McDonough, Ph.D.

Purpose

This brief explains how New York State funds universal pre-K (UPK), where Mount Vernon stands, and why the 2026–27 state budget creates a two-year window for the district to convert one of our three closed school buildings into a regional pre-K center serving southern Westchester. It is intended to inform board discussion; it does not commit the district to any course of action.

How UPK Funding Works

The state allocates pre-K funding to each district individually, based on a target enrollment number set when the district first establishes its program. Districts draw down funds as reimbursement per enrolled child; the statewide minimum rate has been \$5,400 per child in recent years. Allocations a district does not claim are not banked, transferred, or pooled — they lapse. Districts are not required to contribute local funds, though many do, because the state rate has not covered the actual cost of operating a classroom.

In 2024–25, the state made \$1.22 billion available for pre-K statewide. About \$1.05 billion was spent, leaving roughly \$170 million unclaimed. NYSED attributes the gap to three recurring causes: operational burdens (reporting, delayed reimbursement, procurement), demographic shifts, and workforce and financial constraints — chiefly a per-pupil rate too low to make new classrooms financially feasible. The most frequently cited barriers to full enrollment were family preference for other arrangements, lack of space, and high operating costs.

What Changed in the 2026 Budget

Two provisions of the budget enacted in May reshape this landscape. First, the minimum reimbursement rate nearly doubles, to \$10,000 per preschooler. Second, every school district will be required to offer a full-day pre-K seat to every eligible 4-year-old whose family applies, beginning in the 2028–29 school year. Districts that have never operated a program — including much of southern Westchester — must build capacity from a standing start within two years, and their documented obstacles are space, staff, and willing provider partners.

Where Mount Vernon Stands

In 2024–25, Mount Vernon had \$3,929,524 in available state pre-K funding. We spent \$3,299,056 of it (84%) and left \$630,468 unclaimed. We also spent \$2,562,985 in local funds — meaning nearly 44 cents of every dollar this district spent on pre-K came from our own budget, not Albany's.

The board should be candid about the unspent \$630,468 before anyone else raises it. Senator James Skoufis, a leading voice on pre-K accountability, has said publicly that unspent funds lie “squarely at the feet of school districts, their administrators, and their boards.” Our position is defensible — at the old \$5,400 rate,

expanding seats cost more than the state reimbursed, the same math NYSED documents statewide — this fact must be stated, not hidden. At the new \$10,000 rate, our first obligation and easiest win is to fully utilize our own allocation. The unclaimed \$630K represents roughly 60+ seats at the new rate.

Where Our Neighbors Stand

The table below, compiled from the NYSED appendix, shows 2024–25 figures for Mount Vernon and eighteen nearby Westchester districts. Eleven of them claimed zero state pre-K dollars — they operate no state-administered program at all, so their full allocation lapsed.

School District	Local Funds Used	State Funds Used	Unspent Available State Funds
Ardsley	unknown	\$0	\$545,400
Blind Brook	unknown	\$0	\$356,400
Bronxville	unknown	\$0	\$567,000
Dobbs Ferry	unknown	\$0	\$442,800
Eastchester	unknown	\$0	\$1,015,200
Edgemont	unknown	\$0	\$464,400
Harrison	unknown	\$0	\$1,058,400
Hastings-on-Hudson	unknown	\$0	\$432,000
Irvington	unknown	\$0	\$475,200
Mamaroneck	\$0	\$338,220	\$1,428,040
Mount Vernon	\$2,562,985	\$3,299,056	\$630,468
New Rochelle	\$3,266,539	\$1,831,201	\$418,653
Pelham	unknown	\$0	\$761,400
Port Chester	\$0	\$1,460,000	\$2,040,000
Rye City	unknown	\$0	\$1,063,800
Rye Neck	unknown	\$0	\$421,200
Scarsdale	unknown	\$0	\$1,339,200
Tuckahoe	\$18,000	\$216,000	\$99,900
White Plains	\$0	\$2,178,643	\$1,396,543
Total		\$9,323,120	\$14,956,004

Data notes: District figures are 2024–25 actuals from the NYSED report appendix. “Unknown” local spending reflects districts that did not operate state-administered pre-K and were not assigned to the final program report. The table reflects a selection of southern Westchester districts near Mount Vernon; other Westchester districts with large unclaimed balances (e.g., Ossining, \$1.01M; Bedford, \$914K; Byram Hills, \$740K) are omitted for geographic reasons but strengthen the countywide case.

Nearly \$15 million in state pre-K funding allocated to this corner of Westchester went unclaimed in a single year — enough, at the new rate, to fund roughly 1,500 full-day seats. Superintendents in opt-out districts

told New York Focus the old funding structure was “inadequate to support a high-quality program” (Harrison) and cited insufficient state funding (Scarsdale). That excuse expires with the rate increase and the mandate. Every district in this table must offer seats by September 2028.

The Proposal: A Regional Pre-K Center in a Closed Mount Vernon School Building

Mount Vernon recently closed three school buildings. One of them could be converted into a regional pre-K center — a shared facility where Mount Vernon operates full-day, high-quality pre-K classrooms serving our own children first, with additional capacity contracted to neighboring districts that lack space to meet the 2028–29 mandate.

There is direct precedent. In the Capital Region, Mohonasen and Scotia-Glenville are converting a soon-to-close elementary school into a shared pre-K site intended to serve hundreds of 4-year-olds across four districts. Regional consolidation is also consistent with the direction of NYSED's own 2024–25 UPK Consolidation Study, which called for streamlining funding and improving flexibility.

How it would be funded. The primary mechanism requires no change in state law: money follows the child. When a neighboring district places a 4-year-old in our center under an inter-district agreement, that district claims its own state allocation — at \$10,000 per seat — and pays the center. Their unclaimed allocations in the table above stop being lapsed money and become operating revenue flowing through Mount Vernon. Southern Westchester BOCES may be a useful vehicle for structuring multi-district participation; BOCES entities already appear as pre-K fund recipients in the NYSED data.

The secondary, legislative ask. The district can separately advocate — through our delegation and citing the \$170 million statewide lapse — for the state to create a startup or capital grant stream drawn from historically unclaimed allocations, targeted at regional pre-K facilities in high-need districts. This should be framed as seed money for conversion costs (pre-K building code compliance, bathrooms, playground, outfitting), because UPK operating funds cannot be used for capital conversion. This request requires legislation; it is worth making, but the center's viability should not depend on it.

Risks and Open Questions

Demand from wealthier districts is unproven. Family preference was the most-cited enrollment barrier statewide, and young children need care close to home. The realistic near-term partners are adjacent, space-constrained districts (Eastchester, Tuckahoe, Pelham, possibly New Rochelle overflow), not the county's wealthiest. The mandate helps — opt-out districts must offer a seat to every applicant and may treat a regional center as compliance capacity — but enrollment projections should be conservative.

\$10,000 per seat may still be below true cost. Schalmont spent roughly \$1.1 million to open three classrooms, including hires the district hadn't anticipated (nurse, custodian, security, aides). A Long Island daycare coalition testified that private pre-K there often exceeds \$17,000 per child. A regional center gains economies of scale a single-district program lacks, but the district would need a real pro forma to make an idea like this actionable.

Capital conversion costs are unfunded. Renovating a closed building to pre-K standards is a capital expense outside UPK reimbursement. Sources could include a capital reserve, EXCEL/building aid, or the legislative ask above — this needs its own analysis.

Our own utilization gap. The strongest first step, and a prerequisite for regional credibility, is claiming 100% of Mount Vernon's own allocation at the new rate.

Recommended Next Steps

1. Direct the administration to present a plan for fully utilizing Mount Vernon's state pre-K allocation at the \$10,000 rate, closing the \$630K gap.
2. Commission a feasibility study for the regional center: building condition and conversion cost for the candidate site, staffing model, enrollment scenarios, and a break-even analysis at \$10,000 per seat.
3. Authorize exploratory conversations with Southern Westchester BOCES and superintendents of adjacent districts about inter-district pre-K agreements ahead of the 2028–29 mandate.
4. Ask our state legislative delegation to sponsor a startup/capital grant program for regional pre-K centers funded from historically lapsed UPK allocations, and to clarify with NYSED how allocations will scale under the new rate.
5. Confirm with NYSED's Office of Early Learning (Erik Sweet, Executive Director, erik.sweet@nysed.gov, 518-474-5807) the rules governing inter-district placements, eligible-agency status, and transportation reimbursement for pre-K.

Sources: NYSED 2025–2026 Prekindergarten Spending Report (Nov. 1, 2025); New York Focus reporting (Mar. 9, May 28, and Jul. 7, 2026); analysis of NYSED appendix data.