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## School Districts Urged To Open Check Registers

**46** To mark Sunshine Week, the Mackinac Center for Public Policy is launching an initiative that aims to open up the check registers of Michigan's public school districts and place them in comprehensible form on the Internet.

Sunshine Week, which began March 16, is a national initiative that stresses open government and freedom of information.

The research and educational institute headquartered in Midland said it will begin contacting Michigan school districts directly to stress the value of spending transparency and to facilitate access to this information, according to Policy Analyst Kenneth M. Braun. The Mackinac Center will then compile a single web listing for districts that participate.

"Michigan spends about \$19 billion a year in local, state and federal tax dollars on public education," said Braun. "That's quite a significant number when you realize that the state's total budget is \$43 billion. Anything school districts can do to be open about how they spend tax dollars will enhance people's confidence and promote accountability."

Montrose Community Schools in Genesee County has already provided the model for other districts to follow. Parents, taxpayers, school employees, reporters and anyone else can use that district's web site to see how school resources are spent.

"It is admirably open and detailed," Braun stated. "We know

that Bushey Radiator charged the district \$45.50 for repair work, and we can see exactly how much was spent on buns and milk for the cafeteria."

Checkbook transparency will join the Mackinac Center's Michigan School Databases, which already provide revenue, expenditure and collective bargaining agreements for every public school district in the state.

"Last year we published 'A Michigan School Money Primer,' the most comprehensive description of taxation, appropriation and budgeting for Michigan K-12 schools," pointed out Dr. Ryan S. Olson, the Mackinac Center's director of education policy. "Along with this primer and our interactive finance database, this new checkbook database will be a helpful tool for media, educators, administrators and residents."

In addition to shedding light on the details of public education spending, it is anticipated that the web site would save taxpayer dollars by allowing schools to shop for more cost-effective suppliers of goods and services.

"We want taxpayers to know where their money is going, and school districts to find out if they're getting the best deals on everything from hamburger buns to bus radiators," Braun said. "In the long run, this can only benefit schools. Voters tend to reward good public stewardship."