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Grandmother spearheads transparency effort to put school district check registers online

By [Special to The Clare Sentinel](#) on May 3, 2009 in [Clare County-wide](#), [Clare Schools](#), [Farwell Schools](#), [Featured](#), [Harrison Schools](#)

To friends at The Clare Sentinel:

I very much appreciate your kind endorsement of public school financial transparency in the form of online check registers, and would like to share some good news: For all but the nation's very largest school districts, getting checks online is a simple matter of sorting out payroll and HIPAA-related checks then posting what's left over as a PDF. Also, this process is usually not weekly but once a month as part of normal preparations for school board agenda packets; as many school boards are already viewing their district's checks online it's a simple matter of letting the public also view the checks.

Since compiling the nation's first roster of districts posting checks 2 1/2 years ago I've since remained in contact with many of the superintendents — there are now over 460 districts posting in at least 31 states, with over \$60 billion in annual transparency — and they tell me that the entire process takes at most 3-4 minutes. So rather than the 10-minutes-per-week estimate in your newspaper, it's actually only a tenth that amount of time once a month.

It's always helpful to see how other folks have done something we're considering doing ourselves; for your readers interested in viewing samples of how districts are doing this across the nation, here's a link to my national roster: www.peytonwolcott.com/temp/CheckRegistersUSA_AL.html

If you have any questions, or if I may help you in any way, please let me know. I do this work as a full-time volunteer and turn down kind offers of financial and other assistance from vendors and others in order to be able to be free of ties and encumbrances. We can all be grateful to superintendent Mark Kleinhans of Montrose Community Schools for being the first district to post in Michigan; those who have followed in his footsteps in Michigan owe Mark a big thank you for leading the way.

Here's a recent article (see below) with more information, regarding school districts posting check registers online (www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/apr/19/schools-pushed-for-fiscal-transparency).

What a great idea this transparency movement is.

As one indicator of just how great, during the time Mackinac Center has worked to enlist 28 districts, we have persuaded more than 10 times that number here in Texas — 309 — and we're volunteers, not paid professionals.

So you can see how popular this movement has become. It's the original win-win, so hard to come by.

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SCHOOLS POST THEIR SPENDING ONLINE

By Andrea Billups

WASHINGTON TIMES

SUNDAY, APRIL 19, 2009

Schools across the nation are posting district checkbooks and other financial documents online as part of a national transparency trend for communities seeking a little taxpayer sunshine on public spending in the midst of the country's fiscal crisis.

In February, the Farmington Public School District paid \$859.68 for Dell printers, \$14.95 for a book copy of "The Very Hungry Caterpillar" and \$182.50 for glass repair. Residents of this 12,000-student Michigan district can see online exactly where each dollar is going, down to every last eraser, uniform and case of bottled water. "It connects them with their taxpayers in a trust relationship and shows that we are spending your money wisely, and we're not afraid to show you," says Kenneth M. Braun, who serves as director of the Midland-based Mackinac Center for Public Policy's "Show Michigan the Money" project.

His center has asked all of the state's 551 school districts to make a move toward more accountability by putting their check registers on their school Web sites. It also has been contacted by other states who'd like to participate.

"I'm not presuming there is great malfeasance in these districts," Mr. Braun adds of the center's efforts. "It's more of a good community relations thing. We think everyone should do it, not just school districts, but other levels of government. It establishes trust within a community in a situation and time when the trust is kind of shaky."

Indeed, one Michigan district signed on after a payroll clerk embezzled more than \$1 million before being brought to justice. In another Michigan school system that now complies with the checkbook project, the FBI and Justice Department prosecuted two employees for stealing, he said.

Now, the marketplace for those communities has been opened to scrutiny, even creating a little competition that allows new vendors to offer a more cost-effective deal. Trends of favoritism are exposed, making the process more fair.

The move dovetails with President Obama's vows to use the Internet to make government more open by, for example, putting online a detailed accounting of his nearly \$800 billion economic-stimulus bill.

In Horseshoe Bay, Texas, grandmother and education activist Peyton Wolcott is spearheading her own effort to encourage districts there to open their financial books to the public. In October 2006, she started a personal crusade to compile a national roster of districts who open their check registers. She now counts 450 districts in 31 states.

"We've achieved so much by asking people to do this voluntarily," she said. "It's been very encouraging to see how many people around the country are interested in this kind of transparency now."

In Texas, 309 districts are now online, including such large school systems as Dallas, Houston and San Antonio. "Our school district spending is out of control. Our kids' curriculums are not good. Before the check registers went online, all the districts would show were bar graphs and pie charts of where the money was going," she said. "But you can't have meaningful conversation about a bar graph and pie chart. The numbers are so big." "There is this saying that I love: Politics is local but school politics is localer," she laughs, quoting one of her friends.

Not all states are buying into such an idea, however - at least the notion of making such a posting mandatory for schools. In Colorado, legislators killed the School Finance Transparency Act in an education committee last month. The bill would have required all districts to post a searchable version of the district checkbook online. Opponents argued that posting checkbooks on the Internet was time-consuming and a burden on existing staff, although the Colorado measure offered state school systems two years to implement the open-document law. But Mary Reynolds, Farmington schools' executive director of business services, said personal payroll information is simply sifted out and the district's Web master posts the rest on their Web site.

"This is an easy thing to do, and I just think that it's the right thing, since we are a public entity that takes in public dollars. We're online 24-7 ... and we're available to discuss it with anyone who has a question."

A measure similar to Colorado's was rejected by Texas lawmakers two years ago and yet another is before Michigan legislators this spring.

In Illinois, where about 42 districts have posted checkbooks online, Paul Miller of the "to-do tank" Sam Adams Alliance is applauding such efforts for open school finance records - and shaking the trees for even greater government scrutiny.

"With transparency, you are going to have more school districts accountable to children and the parents instead of unions and special interests," Mr. Miller said. "It's a huge no-brainer. Parents have a right to know how their money is being spent on their children's education."

His organization is spearheading a Wiki-based project called Sunshine Review, a comprehensive analysis and transparency evaluation of all 3,140 counties in the United States.

The Alliance uses a 10-point checklist that measures budgets, taxes, contracts and lobbying efforts, as well as

provides information about elected officials and administrators. The details are compared around the country, with Arizona earning highest marks for transparency while Arkansas came in last. The site has had 1.5 million page views since it started in July 2008 and more than 18,000 pages of records have been created by contributors Wiki-style, Mr. Miller said. The Review will soon turn its attention on school districts after its project with county governments is complete.

www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/apr/19/schools-pushed-for-fiscal-transparency/

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