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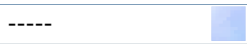
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Some school have their books wide open online

Posted by [Dave Murray](#) | [The Grand Rapids Press](#) December 10, 2008 10:19AM

Categories: [Education](#), [Featured](#), [Finance](#)



The Waterford School District spent \$252.65 at a place called Coffee Break, Inc. on Sept. 3, and paid for it with check No. 139244.

I know this because the district is one of a handful that posts its entire check register online so residents know how much is being spent, and what it's being spent on.

That's the idea behind the Mackinac Center's "Show Michigan the Money" campaign.

Policy analyst Kenneth Braun said making such information available to the public has become a trend in other states, and the Midland-based think tank started to make a push in Michigan.

"We believe that getting more information out there is a good thing, and really the changes in technology make it easy enough to do," he told me.

Waterford is joined by Montrose, Clawson, Bullock Creek, Bloomfield Hills, Farmington Hills and Chassell Township school districts as well as intermediate districts in St. Clair and Oakland counties. Links to each of the districts are available at www.showmichiganthemoney.org.

Braun said he started with schools on the eastern side of the state, but is planning to target some West Michigan schools soon. He said he typically approaches administrators and board members to point out how others are able to post the information.

I wondered if the postings on the Web sites were presented in a way that people who are not CPAs can figure out what's going on and was pleasantly surprised.

Then I figured that if I could determine how much Waterford was spending on coffee supplies, then there must be a ton of locals who question where every penny goes.

In a way, that's pretty neat, considering it's their money, and they should have a voice in how it's spent or offer suggestions for improvement.

But I also wondered if it required staff to spend a chunk of their day responding to questions.

Luckily, Waterford Assistant Superintendent Thomas Wiseman spent a chunk of his day answering my question.

"The online check register does not cause any problems," he told me in an e-mail. "It really has not raised any further questions from our citizens. We have always provided detailed check registers for our citizens at Board of Education meetings. This is just another way of getting information to our citizens. It is another effort on our district's part for transparency in the way we operate. It has not caused any problems."

Naturally, my next question was to the folks here in Grand Rapids. After all, if decent-sized districts like Farmington and Bloomfield Hills offer this up to their residents, why aren't we seeing it on Grand Rapids' newfangled site, which shows videos of school board meetings and short documentaries about individual schools?

Spokesman John Helmholdt said he likes the idea of transparency and fiscal discipline. But he said the cost and time of maintaining everything online is "a major challenge."

"This would be a matter of prioritizing dollars and staff time," Helmholdt wrote.

"Our books and finances are already fully transparent and available to the public. Furthermore, our Finance Committee is an open meeting that is also videotaped and posted on the Internet and Channel 27/902.

"All agendas and most if not all supporting financial documents are available for viewing and download on our Web site. So the question becomes 'Does the public want us to redirect resources and staff time to this project or continue investing the dollars in the classrooms, in the students?'"

Braun said no other district has said throwing the checks online would be too expensive, though he did say some have said their Web sites aren't advanced enough to support the program.

But even if Grand Rapids is slow to post, I wouldn't be surprised to see some of our other districts, especially those eager to show how well they handle finances, get such information out there for all to see.

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COMMENTS (4)

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Posted by **momuhs** on [12/10/08 at 11:57AM](#)

LOVED the quoto "Grand Rapids' newfangled site" referring to the NEW WEB site GRPS launched two weeks before school started. However none of the links to the schools work and John Helmholt nor any other GPRS Franklin employee understands why that's a problem. GRPS spends all this money on a new WEB site which kills all modern form of communications between schools & parents. Parents use to be able to email teachers & councelors, check schedules for conferences, sports or other student related activities; no more, we are back to waiting for the rarely seen newsletter that is two weeks outdated when it does come. Union High School has gone so far as to set up a Union community calendar on some westend local website to try and get information to parents.

Just another well thought out GRPS project.

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Posted by **Diggeee** on [12/10/08 at 1:58PM](#)

Anyone look at administrative costs? Teachers teach kids while administrators shuffle papers and fill their waste baskets. Maybe teachers should earn more money than administrators? Maybe we should Compare schools to the local hospital, there doctors deal with the ill and administrators also shuffle papers. Who makes more there? Remember administrators do not teach kids and seldom enter a classroom. If schools were a factory, administrators would be classed as indirect labor as they add no value to the end product.

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Posted by **gregsteimel** on [12/10/08 at 2:08PM](#)

""We believe that getting more information out there is a good thing, and really the changes in technology make it easy enough to do," [Mackinac Center's Kenneth Braun] told me."

I agree. Transparency is a good thing. However, the Mackinac Center's love of transparency ends at their own doorstep. Ask them who funds their operations. They won't tell.

Corporations and conservative foundations support the Center, but which ones, and how much the Center's 'research' conforms to their bottom lines we won't know until the Center opens its books too.

It's hard to accept the Center's sincerity when they won't live by the same rules they propose for the rest of us.

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Posted by **truthavenger** on [12/10/08 at 3:29PM](#)

Mr. Steimel,

Are you the Greg Steimel of "MEA Research?" Are you on the MEA's payroll? If so, is that what determines your views of the Mackinac Center? Or are they your own views which just coincidentally agree with the MEA's views?

Isn't your employer the organization that unsuccessfully sued the Mackinac Center in 2002 to get its mailing list?

School districts should be transparent because they are PUBLIC ENTITIES, spending the PUBLIC'S money, for PUBLIC services. Private organizations supported by voluntary donations are under no such obligation.

It's the same reason no one is asking you to post your personal checkbook register online. You're a private individual, not a public entity.

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