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## Our view: Put checkbooks online

by Midland Daily News

Published: Thursday, June 11, 2009 12:54 PM EDT

There's transparency and then there's transparency.

When it comes to government bodies and in particular public schools, transparency can mean many often contradictory things.

As publicly funded organizations, almost all information is supposed to be open and available to the public. But like a window with a blind, three curtains and that hasn't been washed for 20 years, accessing that information can be daunting for members of the community.

The Open Meetings Act and Freedom of Information Act were designed to codify the ways the public can gather information and provide guidelines for organizations in granting that access. But as with many good intentioned ideas, the application of the laws has fallen far short of the spirit.

Exceptions, exemptions, denials of requests, court challenges and legal opinions have only further muddied the waters until many community members feel almost powerless to access information on public schools.

And that kind of transparency in theory but not in fact only breeds suspicion and conspiracy theories.

Freeland and Bullock Creek schools have gone a long way towards tearing down the curtains and washing the windows when they began posting their checkbook registers online.

We encourage all school districts to join the roughly 40 districts statewide so far who have begun posting their checkbook registers online as part of the Mackinac Center's "Show Michigan the Money" transparency project.

And let's not stop with school districts. All governmental entities should look into ways to make their governing more open.

It's not only good for community members, but also for those who participate.

After all, it's hard to harbor seeds of doubt when accountability is only a few mouse clicks away.

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### Reader Comments

The following are comments from the readers. In no way do they represent the view of ourmidland.com.

Stan wrote on Jun 11, 2009 1:06 PM:  
" Well done MDN! Great editorial.

Now let's see if MPS rises to the challenge - or continues to hide something. "

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Careful Stan wrote on Jun 11, 2009 1:20 PM:

" Be careful Stan, you almost made a negative comment about MPS schools...that could get the comments shut down for this article.. "

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**UNDERstan** wrote on Jun 11, 2009 2:23 PM:

" Actually, the only thing that we need to be concerned about is if there was anything said in this paper that STAN didnt have a "Know it all" opinion about.8 "

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**Mills Graduate** wrote on Jun 11, 2009 2:26 PM:

" I completely agree with this article and think MPS should follow the path that's been cleared for them via Bullock Creek and Freeland Schools. Let's make this a truly "transparent" process - without skewing the definition of the word - and work together to achieve what's best for the students, because ultimately, that's what this SHOULD be all about. "

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**Blind Trust** wrote on Jun 11, 2009 6:04 PM:

" I agree with this article also.As far as MPS goes I don't see why it should be a problem.Everything should be on the up and up. At the last board meeting one of the board members said, I almost have a blind trust of the administration. If that is the type of people looking out for the best interest of our students and our tax dollars we should have the right to make sure it is the right thing, not just some blind trust going on. I believe this is the mentality of the board and maybe it used to work but with our current leadership it doesn't seem to be working anymore. "

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**Chris** wrote on Jun 12, 2009 12:19 PM:

" What part of "Public" Schools don't the MPS school administrators not understand. I agree 100% with putting an accounting of our tax dollars online. Transparency is critical and always has been. Other school systems across the state have completed this task and they are still operating, did not seem to cause any calamities that i am aware of. "

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**Trust** wrote on Jun 12, 2009 12:32 PM:

" When Ellinger agrees that all administrators will take a pay freeze, then has the board agree to give him an extra 5 days of vacation, it just goes to show that his biggest concern is for himself. If he has the nerve to ask for an extra 5 days of vacation at a public meeting, what is being done outside of the public eye? We will probably never know, because they refuse to put the checkbook online. "

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**To trust and others** wrote on Jun 12, 2009 3:50 PM:

" Please try to be more supportive through these times. ALL this information is publicly available TODAY. It takes resources and time to put the register on the web. Would you rather MPS spends time on that or finding ways to reduce costs?

Besides, really what good is putting a register online? Few folks look where the spending is going anyway. Seeing a check does nothing to indicate how/why the spending is occurring.

As for the superintendent. He didn't ask for those days. And FWIW, he didn't even use up the vacation days he received for this year. Did you take all your vacation days? He didn't. Ellinger is likely one the most compassionate supers in the state. I can't say the same for the union leadership- nor for some of the posters to the MDN. "

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**To Others** wrote on Jun 12, 2009 4:53 PM:

" It takes resources and time to put the register on the web" Yeah, lots of time and resources. A report is generated, then forwarded to the technology department to put a link on the website. I would guess 20 minutes in total, and it only needs to be done 4 times a year. Also, if Ellinger didn't use his days, and didn't need those days, why did he accept them? Why didn't he tell the board he didn't think it would be right to take them? Ellinger is selfish and arrogant and feels he can do whatever he wants with the district. "

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**To All** wrote on Jun 12, 2009 8:27 PM:

" It is public knowledge already. I don't see the harm of doing it, and I don't see it as "suspect" that it isn't already done. They have cut so much staff that they (the IT department) likely have their hands full without adding more to their plate. The problem I see is that posting data like that without any context will lead to more murkiness than it will Transparency.

I don't feel the Superintendent is arrogant or any of that especially when compared to the previous one. I can't imagine how it would be to do a job like that, no matter what he does someone complains. At what point to draw the line and do your job to the best of your ability and ignore all the rhetoric? "

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**Stan** wrote on Jun 12, 2009 9:19 PM:

" For those who question why transparency is needed for government, perhaps the words of Thomas Jefferson can help explain it: "Public expenditures should become as clear and intelligible as a merchant's books, allowing any man of any mind to comprehend them, to investigate abuses and consequently to control them."

If that's not enough for MPS to comply, what is? Why is it so hard for the bureaucrats to understand IT'S NOT YOUR MONEY? "

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**To to trust and others** wrote on Jun 12, 2009 10:41 PM:

" Just what would you like to see people do to be more supportive? I think we the people showed support by voting in that millage and where did that get us?From what I heard the next board meeting on 6/22 has even more fun things to announce and all the while the leader of this entire mess is "accepting" more vacation days? And by the way, I work for MPS and no, I didn't take all my vacation days because I don't get any. I do get sick days and I did not use all of them and I will now lose them which won't matter because MPS has layed me off. My \$8,000 a year pushed them over the edge I guess. All of that is the least of my problems, my children are not getting the same education they were even a year ago.Bottom line is our class sizes are getting bigger, employees are being layed off, VITAL programs are getting cut and Mr. Ellinger and the teachers are profiting all at the same time. Sorry, I have a hard time being supportive of that. "

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