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EDITORIAL

'Show the money' project a good thing

Special praise is warranted for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in Midland.

Its "Show Michigan the Money" project has steadily found increased participation throughout the state. School districts throughout Michigan are being asked to regularly post their checkbook registers or any other comparably detailed expenditure reports on the Internet for public inspection. The project has been ongoing for less than year.

At least nine of Michigan's 20 largest public school districts now provide online check registers. At least one of every seven Michigan public school students now attends a district that provides such online access to its expenditure details.

A comprehensive list of school districts that have posted their checkbook registers online can be found at www.mackinac.org/9329.

The "Show Michigan the Money" project provides a Web page of hyperlinks to the check registers of districts that are known to post them regularly. Links to comparable expenditure reports from other districts will be added as the Mackinac Center becomes aware of their existence.

The "Show Michigan the Money" project site is located at www.michigan.transparency.org.

Kenneth Braun, director of the project, said the center started targeting Oakland County schools at the beginning of the school year in the fall of 2008.

"The longest focus has been on Oakland County and it's been the most successful," Braun reports. "By this time next year, it will be the exception as opposed to the rule that more schools are online."

"I praise Oakland County for showing the rest of Michigan how it can be done. The majority of districts can and will do this on their own accord, voluntarily just because they were asked."

Braun notes that any tax-supported public governing body should be doing something like this, whether a school system or a governmental unit.

He stresses, and we agree, that conscientious officials should do this on a volunteer basis, it should not have to be mandated.

Again, we commend the Mackinac Center and the school districts that have opened up their financial records to the public online. It is taxpayer money but some officials sometimes seem to forget this. In this time of tight budgets and a slumping state economy, school districts more than ever need to be, as the center states, more "transparent" in their financial operations.

Right or wrong, school districts are being heavily criticized for their expenditures and are becoming more and more the focus of public attention. Opening up the books in a manner suggested by the Mackinac Center can only help improve the school district's public image.

But more important, it's simply the right thing to do.