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Making it much easier to follow your tax dollars

BY BROOKE DOLLENS TERRY
SPECIAL TO THE STAR-TELEGRAM

Every legislative session, school administrators head for Austin to ask state lawmakers for more money. They claim that current spending is not adequate to provide students a good quality education. Yet per-pupil expenditures, adjusted for inflation, have tripled since the 1960s. Taking all costs, including facilities, into account, Texas spends more than \$10,000 per pupil each year.

Do schools really need more money?

One way to hold schools accountable is to post their spending online and let taxpayers examine their monthly expenses.

Eleven school districts already make this information available by posting their check registers on the Internet. Residents of Big Spring, Bremond, Lovejoy, Malakoff, Marble Falls, New Caney, San Angelo, Dallas, Katy and Spring Branch school districts can view their district's monthly expenses with a few clicks of the mouse.

Last month, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) posted five months of its expenses on the Internet. These 11 school districts and the TEA are leading the way in financial accountability and open government.

Legislation filed in the current session would require all school districts to make this information available. HB 2560 by Rep. Bill Zedler, R-Arlington, would enhance open government and fiscal accountability by requiring all school districts to post their check registers online, list each expense's purpose and classify it as instructional or non-instructional. Giving taxpayers the tools to easily access and identify how school districts are spending taxpayer money shines light on spending practices and brings new accountability to these decisions.

As anticipated, all of the current online check registers account for the usual monthly operating expenses of copiers, telephones, utilities, fuel, books and field trips. But that's not all.

In December 2006, one school district spent \$677,657 in legal fees, \$381,196 for what the district classified as union dues and \$35,500 in consulting fees to lobbyists. That same school district ran up a \$2,832 tab at Lawry's Prime Rib on the taxpayer's dime in December. The restaurant's Web site boasts of "luxurious finishes, rich woods, award-winning food and exceptional service." Taxpayers might find some irony in a lavish steak dinner at a time when most school administrators insist that there is no fat to trim.

Another large school district, in January 2007, spent \$6,191.71 at golf and country clubs and more than \$24,000 at hotels such as the Renaissance Hotel in Dallas, the Omni and Radisson Hotels in Austin and the Adams Mark Hotel in St Louis.

Another surprise is the amount of money schools spend on fast food. One small school district spent \$19,060.28 on fast food from September 2006 to February 2007. It is entirely possible that the tab for fast food can be easily explained to taxpayers, but it is important that taxpayers know their money is being spent for this purpose.

Cries that our schools are underfunded ring hollow when they spend money to lobby the Texas Legislature, dine at fine restaurants, stay at expensive hotels and play at posh country clubs.

Taxpayers have a right to know how and where their money is being spent. What better way to hold schools accountable than by letting the sun shine on their checkbooks and allowing taxpayers to examine their spending?

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