

# School spending stacks up

Critics take aim at districts' procurement card purchases, but officials defend program

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Batavia resident Carl Dinwiddie didn't expect the pages upon pages he got when he asked Batavia Public School District 101 for a year's worth of purchases made with its procurement cards.

He pulled out eight pages of restaurant expenditures alone. According to his research, the expenses included three purchases at Tribella Bar and Grill in Batavia totaling \$1,027.37; 21 purchases at Panera Bread totaling \$1,426.03; and 17 purchases at Dunkin' Donuts totaling \$838.

"I didn't expect that they were so free and loose with the taxpayers' dollar," Dinwiddie said. "They were living high on the hog while taxpayers were cutting back and cutting back to pay their taxes."

Dinwiddie and others have begun to question what school districts in central Kane County are buying with procurement cards, or P-Cards, and whether there is enough oversight to detect fraud, waste and abuse.

"I'm thinking there's not enough accountability with the use," said Patti Lopuszanski, a resident of St. Charles School District 303.

School administrators here said that employees are trained on how to use P-Cards, which are given to those responsible for some aspect of purchasing within a building.

Authorized users include administrators, department chairs and maintenance

## By the numbers

*The P-Card numbers are from the 2012-13 school year.*

### St. Charles School District 303:

- Panera - \$8,229.78
- Ice Mountain Water - \$730.98
- Charlie Fox's - \$1,301.83

### Batavia Public School District 101:

- Jimmy John's - \$2,589.18
- Pal Joey's - \$4,668.92
- Dimple Donuts - \$297.01

### Geneva School District 304:

- Aurelio's - \$857.42
- Taylor Street Pizza - \$607.38
- Apple Villa Pancake House - \$651.37

### Kaneland School District 302:

- Paisano's Pizza - \$3,598.25
- Subway - \$994.88
- Starbucks - \$140.66

workers, district officials said.

"Everything requires a receipt," said Donna Oberg, assistant superintendent for business services at Geneva School District 304.

In cases where employees accidentally use a P-Card to make a personal purchase - they grab the wrong card at a store or forget to logout of their P-Card account while shopping online - the district is reimbursed, administrators said.

"They don't get twice to say, 'Oops, I forgot and used my P-Card,'" St. Charles Superintendent Don Schломann said. "We will take those things away if you're using it inappropriately."

Administrators said P-Cards are a convenient way to buy curricular materials and consumable goods, such as supplies for family and consumer sciences classes; registering for workshops and conferences; and purchasing items online.

"It keeps our business office from ultimately hav-

ing to cut lots of little small checks," said Jeff Schuler, superintendent of Kaneland School District 302.

Lopuszanski, who is researching P-Card use at several districts, said she is concerned about how much money is being spent on items unrelated to students, such as large steak dinners, when teachers put much of their own money into their classrooms.

For example, Batavia's P-Card transactions for the last school year include a \$297 dinner at Eddie Merlot in Louisville, Ky., for then-Superintendent Jack Barshinger, Chief Academic Officer Brad Newkirk and Assistant Superintendent for Finance Kris Monn. Six days later, district officials spent \$1,930 on a dinner at Morton's The Steakhouse at Wacker Place when they were in Chicago for a conference.

"They're not holding back and going to Denny's," Lopuszanski said.

When asked about those meals, Monn said the district

"It stacks up so much. It's like a sense of entitlement that's grown over the last who knows how many years because nobody's watching the store."

**Carl Dinwiddie**  
 Batavia resident on procurement cards

is not commenting on specific expenses from the past 12 months.

Although Batavia's policies don't include spending limits, Monn said, the school board's Policy Committee recently talked about modifying the policy about board member development and what would qualify as legitimate expenses.

Batavia School Board President Cathy Dremel said the new board - three new members were elected in April - will be sensitive to taxpayers' concerns and that their money is being spent wisely.

"We have so many good policies in place, but I think what we want to do now is look with a more critical eye," she said, adding there's a desire to make professional development "very taxpayer appropriate while still getting the full benefit of the training."

Districts also are buying food locally. Panera Bread, Jimmy John's, Aurelio's Pizza, Charlie Fox's, Dimple

Donuts, Paisano's Pizza and Pal Joey's are among the eateries detailed in their P-Card transaction summaries.

Supplying employees and visitors with snacks and bottled water are common courtesy for certain events, administrators said.

"If you're sitting in a meeting and you're there starting at 8 a.m. and going until noon, it's not unusual to have something small for people to snack on," Schломann said. "I think it's a reasonable thing for people to have comfort."

Schuler had similar views.

"If we're hosting an event with visitors from our building, welcoming them in, I don't think it's uncommon in any industry to provide some level of hospitality," Schuler said.

Both superintendents said the money spent on food accounts for a fraction of their districts' total budgets.

"They certainly don't add up to a large amount of purchases," Schломann said, noting booster clubs reimburse the district for food bought for some events, such as awards banquets. "Certainly, I don't think it adds up to 5 percent of the total purchases you see there."

Dinwiddie, however, doesn't think taxpayers would be very happy if they saw the pages and pages of P-Card expenses, he said.

"It stacks up so much," he said. "It's like a sense of entitlement that's grown over the last who knows how many years because nobody's watching the store."