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## Wicomico school travel expenses scrutinized

*By Greg Latshaw  
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SALISBURY -- The Wicomico County school system is viewing every out-of-town conference or business lunch with increased scrutiny as it prepares for big budget reductions.

"We would anticipate the (seminars and conferences) budget to be substantially and significantly reduced," said Superintendent John Fredericksen.

Last year, the school system spent \$485,800 on all expenses related to professional development, paying for everything from plane tickets and hotel stays to large orders of doughnuts from Devage's Subs & Donuts in Salisbury. The spending is down from 2008, when the school system spent \$534,600 as part of its seminars and conferences budget. Grants pay for a portion of the expenses.

Wicomico County Councilman Joe Holloway has requested that the school system provide more detail on the expenses. He said he is surprised that there have been about 3,000 transactions over the past two years. Furthermore, he is skeptical of the necessity of a number of the expenses, including lunch at Hooter's, coffee from Starbucks and big purchases from Adam's Ribs.

"I have some real questions about why some of this activity is taking place," Holloway said.

Holloway has obtained more than 200 pages of transactions from the school system. The documents include the cost of the transaction and identify the business involved in the purchase, but don't include a receipt of the transaction or provide details on the expense.

Fredericksen said the school system is pleased to comply with Holloway's request for more detailed information and will likely have the information to him by the end of next week. About the Hooter's purchase, Fredericksen added: "It's not a strip club. You can buy burgers there."

The superintendent said the seminars and conferences budget covers all expenses related to training or staff development. It often includes meals, workshop registrations, learning materials, taxis, parking and much more. The budget does not cover the purchase of alcohol.

"It's critically important to keep people up to speed on current issues in education, transportation and food safety," Fredericksen said.

He said most staff development occurs in-town or in locations, such as Cambridge or Baltimore. When Fredericksen travels to meet with the state superintendent once a month to discuss education issues, the expense is paid for through the seminars and conferences budget.

"We've frozen all national travel. The only thing (authorized out-of-state) is if it's an absolute requirement for an employee to keep a certification," Fredericksen said.

During the past several years, school employees have booked a number of hotel stays at the Hyatt and Hilton. Fredericksen said the upscale hotels are used in cases where a conference is held there and the school system receives a sizable discount.

"When you look at the bottom line, it's cheaper to stay right at the conference hotel," Fredericksen said.

In the business world, professional development is both a perk to the employee and an investment by the business, said Memo Diriker, director of Salisbury University's Business Economic and Community Outreach Network.

"(Not doing it) will end up costing a company more than it costs to do the training," Diriker said.

The Salisbury Area Chamber of Commerce spends about 1 percent of its total budget on professional advancement activities, said Executive Director Brad Bellacicco.

He said the Chamber, among the various activities, sends its employees to grant-writing training and computer classes at Wor-Wic Community College.

"Depending on the type of business, it could be much, much more. For example, computer technicians must attend seminars on new software. For that business, it might take up 10-15 percent of the overall budget," Bellacicco said.

Fredericksen said the school system has 2,800 employees and its total expense budget was \$173 million this year. All expenses related to professional development comprised about .28 percent of the total budget, he said.

"It's very much in line. It's below what a typical school system would spend," Fredericksen said.

The school system is preparing draft budgets for next year that plan for, at minimum, a \$5 million reduction. The school system is considering eliminating its adult education program as a way to save money. It is in light of such economic hardships that Holloway said he is seeking more information about the transactions in the seminars and conferences budget.

"Wicomico County is furloughing employees, teachers are buying classroom materials out of their own pockets. ... I have some real questions and would like some answers," Holloway said.

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