



JOSH MANDEL

STATE TREASURER OF OHIO

Marion Star
By James Miller
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MORRAL — Ridgedale Local Schools is one of only 11 districts statewide that have agreed to submit spending data to the Office of the Ohio Treasurer to participate in OhioCheckbook.com, a government transparency initiative pushed by Josh Mandel and funded by the state legislature.

Ridgedale Superintendent Bob Britton said small, tightly run districts such as his can benefit from the spotlight shining on spending.

"I think a lot of people think we try and hide things from the public. People know we are getting \$8 million a year to educate their children and want to know, 'Where's the money going?'" Britton said after a brief visit Tuesday afternoon by Mandel to highlight the program.

"But we've got nothing to hide. This level of transparency is long overdue."

Much of the spending data is already available from the superintendent's office and on the Ohio Department of Education website, ode.legislature.state.oh.us. But OhioCheckbook.com is designed to permit users to see what services a district or local government is purchasing, who the service or material providers are and how much they are being paid.

Ridgedale Treasurer Stephanie Schee said she's waiting for the go-ahead from state to upload the data, a process Mandel said will not be a burden to local districts because they are using a common, unified data reporting system statewide.

Britton hopes the additional data on spending and services will convince voters the district's money is being carefully managed. The district will be putting a 2-mil permanent improvement levy on the ballot in November, which, if passed, will generate about \$280,000 for big-ticket capital improvement items for the district's aging buildings, buses, computers and heating and cooling systems.

Britton said the district has been using operating funds to keep systems repaired, but that's hurting his ability to cover the cost of day-to-day operations for his students. He said an independent review of buildings and equipment, to be completed by fall, will help him set priorities. None of the permanent improvement money can be used for salaries or benefits, Britton said.

With a 2014 enrollment of 767 students, down from a high of 1,115 in 1996, and \$8.42 million in operating revenue, Ridgedale is the smallest public district in the county. Elgin is the next largest at 1,043, followed by Pleasant at 1,352, River Valley at 2,045 and Marion City at more than 4,000 students.

Voters rejected a permanent improvement levy for Ridgedale in 2011 and again in 2013. A 2-mill bond issue also failed last fall, but Britton said it's only a coincidence that the school board decided to join the OhioCheckbook.com reporting offer now. The board decided last November to go back to voters this fall, Britton said.

Mandel hopes that all 3,962 local governments throughout the state will sign up to the effort by the end of the year. He said his office will absorb the entire cost of posting the data using \$814,000 earmarked from the state budget.

"Our hope is that when constituencies see that Ridgedale schools is sharing this data, they will start asking their mayor, their county commissioners why they aren't posting their spending data," Mandel said. "We'd like to make these spending decisions public. It's the public's money. People need to see how it's being spent."

Britton and Schee said they think voters will benefit from the additional data, and Britton said his district will look frugal compared with other districts of a similar size. Schee said the new method to share data will improve public trust and showcase the good work performed by teachers and staff every day.



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"People might have some questions when they see it all, like why do we pay \$85,000 to Marathon Oil. That's to fuel our buses. But I think anyone with a business background will understand we are a service," Britton said.

"People will have a better understanding of how school systems run and what it costs to operate them."

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