



# JOSH MANDEL

## STATE TREASURER OF OHIO

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By Robert DeFrank  
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MARTINS FERRY &mdash; The finances of the Martins Ferry City School District are now available to the public via an "online checkbook" offered through the state.

The district has joined OhioCheckbook.com, which Ohio Treasurer Josh Mandel launched in 2014 with the goal of setting a new national standard for government transparency.

"The auditor of state contacted us about doing this program," said school district Treasurer Karen Blake. "It shows full transparency."

Blake noted the program should bring advantages in terms of efficiency and relations with the community.

"We just thought it would be good to let everyone know we have nothing to hide and that everything is transparent," she said, adding the program should also alleviate public records requests. "It can create charts. It shows all your expenditures. It has a lot of capabilities."

She and Kelly Ilagan, public affairs officer with the state treasurer's office, noted Union Local School District is the only other Belmont County district to utilize such software so far.

"We thought it would be a good thing to be a leader, to be one of the first ones in the county," Blake said, adding that no upgrades to the district's system were necessary.

She added the ease of navigation was another key factor in the district's decision to use the program.

"It's a very user-friendly program," Blake said, adding the information can be displayed in various graph forms. "A picture says 1,000 words. You're going to be able to grab that data rather than having to go here and there to look for it and create charts yourselves. It's just very user-friendly."

Blake noted the range of uses includes information for negotiations and public outreach.

"If we'd ever have to put a levy on &hellip; everything's out there," Blake said.

Ilagan agreed concerning the software's use in communicating with the public.

"We just see it as a net positive for people to be able to understand government finance, government accounting.



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"It's an educational tool not only for the community but for board members who are interested in pulling up information," she said.

"You run the numbers all the time, but a lot of time you don't see it comparatively," added Blake. "We can create a lot of information from the data."

Records will be updated at the discretion of the district. Blake said the information will likely be updated monthly.

"Then I can monitor my expenditures &mdash; if not monthly, at a minimum, quarterly," she said.

The district went live on the program Thursday. Ilagan demonstrated the features, including a search bar modeled after Google.

Martins Ferry City Schools' online checkbook includes more than 35,000 individual transactions that represent more than \$50 million of total spending during the past three fiscal years. The records begin in 2013 and will continue into the future.

Ilagan said a user could find a year's worth of electrical spending by month. Users can see who is getting paid and out of what fund, and they can search for all spending within any specific time period and narrow the search down to the individual check level.

A user can also determine the top vendors with which the district has worked.

The checkbook also includes frequently asked questions regarding the school district finances.

School board President Joe Lovell said the district was proud to be one of the first districts in the area to use OhioCheckbook.com.

Ilagan added 900 government entities in the state have so far committed to participating in the online checkbook program, with more than 500 live.

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