

School boards differ on spending priorities

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Expenses vary from food, trophies, training

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New York school districts spend tens of millions of dollars on employee salaries, millions on buildings and thousands for soccer jerseys and football helmets. They also might spend \$30 on a cookie platter for a school board meeting, or \$300 for engraved plaques awarded to students.

While school board spending makes up a tiny fraction of overall expenditures on education — less than one-tenth of one percent in most districts, or a dime out of a \$100 bill — it can be a useful indicator of frugality, or the lack thereof, for the seven or nine people who make much larger financial decisions on the public's behalf. That's because these expenses are ones that the boards have direct control over.

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“Boards make every effort to limit the spending on themselves because they want to put the money into the schools and the classrooms,” said David Albert, spokesman for the state School Boards Association.

USA TODAY Network journalists filed Freedom of Information requests with scores of school districts across New York state to ascertain how much school boards are spending and what they're spending it on. The effort was a way to mark the national Sunshine Week initiative, which seeks to make the public more aware of Freedom of Information and Open Meeting laws and how they can be used by everyone. Overall, the results of our survey confirmed data from the state Education Department, that school board expenditures amount to a fraction of one percent of overall spending. But the data also showed a wide variation in what school boards spend and how they spend it. The spending by suburban school boards in 2016-17 ranged from \$18,449 by the Wheatland- Chili board to \$135,117 by the BOCES 1 board. Other USA TODAY Network outlets in the state found a similar range. For example, excluding Yonkers, *The Journal News* in Westchester had results ranging from \$10,000 spent by the White Plains school board to more than \$80,000 spent by the Chappaqua and Pelham boards.

There are a number of reasons for the variation, including how big the board is — Monroe BOCES 1 has a 10-person board while East Rochester has a six-person board, for example — which increases how much BOCES 1 needs for training and conferences. If a board was conducting a superintendent search, as a number downstate were doing, that also added to the board's expenses.

Additionally, there are different accounting and budgeting regulations for school districts and BOCES. For example, school districts are allowed to budget for legal and auditor expenses under specific budget codes,

while BOCES 1 codes those expenses under Board of Education activity. More than \$70,000 of BOCES 1 board expenditures fall under those two categories.

Not all districts complied with the letter or spirit of the FOIL requests they were sent. In many cases, districts sent PDF copies of budget breakdowns that lacked fine detail on what, exactly, the money was used to purchase.

Others, like Greece, provided handwritten notes in the margins showing which expenditures were made for Board of Education conferences, travel, refreshments and supplies.

School board spending falls generally into a few main categories: travel and expenses for conferences or retreats, consultant or legal fees, and food.

The food can range from \$56 in Hilton for the services of Rachael B. Cupcakes and Bake Shoppe; \$180 to Perri's Pizzeria in Brighton; and, for the left-overs, \$184 for a mini-fridge in Greece.

Retreats necessary, but create impression of extravagant spending

The three largest upstate school districts — Buffalo, Rochester and Syracuse — are the only ones in the state to pay their board members. Rochester board members earn \$26,625 each, and the board president gets an additional \$7,500.

Rochester also has dedicated administrative staff for the school board, making up the lion's share of the board's \$558,677 expenditure in 2016-17. It also spent \$1,950 for software to help it conduct superintendent evaluations. By comparison, Yonkers — another of the state's big 5 city school districts — spent \$228,533 in the same year. Since board members don't necessarily have training in education, finance or advocacy, some on-the-job training is needed. Every new school board member is required to take six hours of fiscal training and six hours of governance training. Beyond that, it is up to school boards whether to bring trainers into their districts or to travel to conferences in other parts of the state or country and training budgets can still be subject to trimming.

"We worry sometimes that (professional development) gets cut because they don't feel it's a good perception to be going on (seemingly) luxurious retreats when other things are getting cut from the budget," said Sherry Johnson, president of the Monroe County School Boards Association and a former, longtime board member in Churchville-Chili. "We know that professional development is important and helpful; sometimes you have to convince the board members that it's worth the investment."

When Johnson was on the Churchville-Chili board, it sent just two of its members to the statewide School Boards Association convention each year, and never had anyone attend the national convention.

Webster schools, however, had members attend both the state and national conventions in 2017. Travel costs for the state convention in Buffalo topped \$1,600, while a trip to Denver for the national convention cost a little more than \$2,300, including rooms and airfare.

Part of the spending by school boards goes to the state School Boards Association itself, as well as similar local organizations that provide training and advocacy.

The state association has 677 member boards with average annual dues at about \$8,300, varying according to the size of the district's budget. All Rochester-area school districts also belong to the Monroe County School Boards Association, which also varies its fees based on budget size.

It is a similar balancing act for board retreats, which are usually geared toward helping the board members and administration work together more effectively.

Many school districts hold them on their own properties; others travel, even if it's not far, as in Greece where the 2017 retreat was held at the Airport Marriott on West Ridge Road. Still others, like East Irondequoit, don't

hold retreats at all.

“Board retreats are often times part of the culture of a board or a district,” Phil Oberst, East Irondequoit’s assistant superintendent for human resources, wrote in an email. “That has not been the case here in East Irondequoit for many years. (Instead), our board periodically conducts board workshops for more in-depth focus on topics or subjects of interest that are relative to the work they do as board members.”

“I think for the school districts around here, you’ll find most of our boards of education do in fact look at their (spending) with a fiscally prudent lens,” Sherry Johnson said.

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Findings

|| Spending in various categories varies widely. For instance, East Irondequoit and Greece both spent more than \$9,000 on travel, while Churchville-Chili spent less than \$1,000.

|| Surveys conducted by USA TODAY Network outlets in the Southern Tier and Hudson Valley found similar ranges in school board spending as found in the Rochester area.

|| The Rochester school board has both a budget and a set of responsibilities of a different caliber than suburban school boards.

|| Most board spending goes to professional development, whether in the form of training, conferences or retreats.

|| All of the expenses examined by the *Democrat and Chronicle* appeared reasonable and justified.



USA TODAY Network outlets across New York surveyed school board expenditures in their areas. ARTISTEER, GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

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