

Mackinac Center for Public Policy

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School Board Self-Help

By [John R. LaPlante](#)

It seems that every school board faces the same problem: There's never enough money. Board members regularly appeal to local taxpayers, state legislatures and even Washington, D.C. for more money.

But their message will gain more sympathy if their own house is in order, meaning they must examine local school spending — particularly on themselves. A good place to start is participation in the [Michigan Association of School Boards](#).

The MASB is a trade organization for public school board members. Its stated mission is providing "quality educational leadership services for all Michigan boards of education."

The MASB, like many trade organizations, promises to educate new members about the issues and concerns of the field. So far, so good. The organization conducts or sponsors a number of professional [conferences](#) on topics that include legal issues and "communications and advocacy."

But while the MASB has the potential to help board members "learn the ropes" of their job, participation in MASB activities may hinder, rather than help, the leadership of local members.

School board members are stewards of taxpayer money, after all, and some MASB conferences represent questionable expenditures at posh facilities. MASB Executive Director Justin King told the Flint Journal, "We don't go to the [fanciest places](#) in the world," but the management and customers of some of those "places" might disagree. In July, MASB's summer conference was held at the Grand Traverse Resort and Spa, which bills itself as having "been named among the Top 50 travel destinations by Condé Nast Travel." The resort's Web site describes it as offering "[luxurious accommodations](#)" and "world class spa services and recreation." Other MASB conferences have been held at the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island and at the [Amway Grand Plaza](#), which features the only restaurant in the state to earn the [five diamond](#) award from AAA of Michigan.

To its credit, the MASB "canceled the Mackinac Island conference because it was [too expensive](#)," according to Flint Journal. It does hold some meetings at Holiday Inns, Comfort Inns and local school buildings.

Still, the costs for events at higher-priced locations add up. The Journal found that the July conference at the Grand Traverse Resort, for example, cost Flint-area schools [\\$23,000](#) for rooms that ran up to \$200 per night. Some board members actively sought out more reasonable accommodations, but most did not.

While spending on an MASB membership — even with additional fees for conferences — is a small amount of a district's finances, spending on luxurious conferences sends a bad message. It's one thing to talk about tight finances and then tighten one's belt. It's another thing to talk about tight finances and then head to the spa.

Some school board members have reached the same conclusion. Led by former board member Jeff Steinport, the Grand Rapids school board opted out of MASB membership in the 2002-2003 school year, saving the district [\\$17,000](#) in membership dues, according to the [Michigan Education Report](#). Steinport and several like-minded board members later lost their seats, however, and the board reversed its decision.

Steinport stands by his efforts. While he tells me that local school board members can benefit from training or executive recruitment services, the MASB currently is not the right vehicle. In his experience, MASB conferences served mostly as running advertisements for MASB services, and he feels the meetings can and should be held in less expensive locations.

Steinport concludes that generous spending on conferences is only a symptom of MASB's problems. It seeks to enlist every school board on its membership roster, which generates the problem of meeting the competing needs of its members, who are both urban and rural, rich and poor. The natural solution to this conflict is to try to satisfy every member by helping them ask for more money for their district.

And ask for more it does. MASB's operations include an initiative to gain financial support from [corporations](#). The organization's Web site recently alerted members to "[take action on](#)" a proposed state education spending bill, and it encourages members to lobby Congress for [more federal money](#) in a national "Campaign for Federal Investment in Education."

In light of the MASB's free-spending ways and reliance on the simple solution of "more money," local school boards should reconsider their commitment to the

organization. It's a small step, but it could represent a real leap in "quality educational leadership services."

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