

School audits reveal 'waste'

Local brass: They lack context

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More than 56 percent of West New York schools' spending is not "reasonable," according to recent state audits questioning expenditures in New Jersey's poorest school districts that receive billions of dollars in funding each year.

But supporters of these districts say the audits themselves are unreasonable.

The audits, which also evaluated purchases in Union City, Jersey City, Hoboken and Harrison school districts, labeled spending as "discretionary" or "inconclusive" based on educational value, usefulness and other criteria.

Purchases that lacked sufficient documentation or were determined to be excessive were also flagged, officials said.

The \$10.8 million audit of the state's poorest districts — known as Abbots — follows increased criticism of the court-mandated funding formula that sends nearly half

of the state's school aid dollars to the 31 school districts.

"If it can be proved that 25 cents per dollar are being wasted, we're talking about billions of dollars in New Jersey," said state Sen. Christopher "Kip" Bateman, R-Somerset, who attended the Senate Edu-

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State Senator

cation Committee's hearing on the audits yesterday. "I want to see the dollars get to the classroom, not abused by the administration."

In West New York, the district paid to replace a student's cellphone and spent \$259,915 on clock repairs, according to the audit.

West New York Superintendent Robert Van Zanten did not return calls yesterday.

In Union City, where approximately 32 percent of spending was labeled unreasonable, the district paid for 39 cell phones for bus drivers and guaranteed them six hours of overtime every month to charge their phones.

Union City Superintendent of Schools Stanley Sanger has blasted the audit findings as "way out of line," calling the expenses "educationally sound," arising from transportation needs of special needs students and sports teams.

Jersey City and Harrison school officials did not return calls for comment yesterday.

Hoboken Superintendent of Schools John Raslowsky said in most cases an audit report excludes important context needed to understand a purchase.

"There is a human element to running a school district," Raslowsky said. "An audit paints a black and white

EXPENSES FLAGGED BY AUDIT

West New York

- \$259,915 for clock repairs
- \$372 for a replacement of a student's cell phone
- \$326 for reimbursement to employee for candy and weed whackers



Jersey City

- \$1,172 for decorator hired for FACE OFF event
- \$1,020 for red, white and blue mylar trees
- \$8,682 for six laptops for the athletic department

Union City

- \$10,488 for 39 cell phones for bus drivers
- \$55,018 to a public relations company for helping prepare superintendent's monthly newsletter for August 2004
- \$2,315 for trip to Medieval Times

Harrison

- \$11,207 for general supplies with no backup documentation
- \$15,200 for an alternative activity for students during graduation night
- \$83 for purchase of flowers for funeral of a former board member

Hoboken

- \$4,798 for various T-shirts
- \$6,562 for steel mugs, duffel bags and flowers for teachers
- \$1,089 for employee damage to personal transportation



picture. An audit can make it seem like something nefarious is going on when in reality it's perfectly reasonable."

For instance, Raslowsky said, purchases like an end-of-the-

year barbecue have been flagged by audits, and his district has stopped sending flowers to employees as a sign for thanks for their decades of service.