



Written by [R. Cort Kirkwood](#) on September 2, 2012

## Baltimore School Administrators Party Hearty on Taxpayers' Dime

School administrators in Baltimore, Maryland, have spent \$500,000 in the last year and a half to party hearty on the taxpayers' dime, according to a recent report in the *Baltimore Sun* entitled "[City school credit, procurement cards show culture of spending](#)." They even spread the wealth at such noted educational establishments as [Hooters](#).



Even more surprising, the *Sun* reported, school officials defend most of the spending, which includes expensive gifts, lunches, and dinners for employees. Still, some officials did admit that dropping nearly \$300 in a "breastaurant" didn't look good for the schools.

The [Sun reported](#) that the spending, which violated city rules, comes at a time when the schools are angling for taxpayers to spend almost \$3 billion in renovations to repair schools that are falling apart. And the latest report [follows another](#) that revealed a lavish renovation of city school offices, again, while the city's schools crumble.

### Details

[According to](#) the *Sun*, "school administrators spent roughly \$500,000 during the past year and a half on expenses such as a \$7,300 office retreat at a downtown hotel, \$300-per-night stays at hotels, and a \$1,000 dinner at an exclusive members-only club, credit card statements show."

The retreat for 16 at the [Baltimore Hilton](#), the [Sun reported](#), cost taxpayers \$450 per person. That soiree included a \$500 dinner at a Brazilian steakhouse. School employees also wasted \$264 at a Hooters in Atlanta, Georgia.

The *Sun*, which reviewed school officials' credit card transactions, "found that the bulk of the expenditures — about \$300,000, generated by 16 central office employees — were made under a new procurement-card program that has operated with virtually no controls or oversight since it began in January 2011."

Card statements show that many of the expenditures violated the school system's own protocols and restrictions for use of the cards, such as a prohibition on using them for travel or to buy gifts for employees.

The schools issue credit cards to employees, the [Sun reported](#), because fronting their own money for work-related expenses is too expensive.

Some of the expenses involved travel to expensive hotels, which is necessary, [in the words](#) of the school board president, "because Baltimore now occupies a higher profile for the achievements that we've



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accomplished.”

“School officials typically stay where the conferences are held, which sometimes means costly hotels,” the [Sun reported](#).

For example, one school board member traveled to Memphis, Tenn., last year and stayed at the Peabody Hotel, a favorite of country music stars that starts at \$300 per night. Another board member’s stay at the Westin Copley Place Hotel in Boston totaled \$1,800 for four nights, statements show.

One of the big spenders is the schools’ chief executive officer, [Andrés Alonso](#), the [Sun reported](#). The expenditures on his card [included some shopping](#) on Valentine’s Day at [Victoria’s Secret](#), a charge subsequently “removed.”

Alonso showed he has good taste ... on the taxpayers’ dime, the [Sun said](#). “As the deadline drew near for Alonso to renew his contract to stay in Baltimore for a second four-year term last year, he and the school board ironed out last-minute details over a \$1,000 dinner at the [Center Club](#).” The board also met with Alonso in April and spent \$735 at another restaurant. Alonso has fêted union officials with meals costing \$535 at two other restaurants.

The [Sun reported](#) that Alonso also frequents a variety of bars “to discuss business with community partners, board members, political leaders and visitors.”

And he has occasional — and sometimes costly — meals with members of his Cabinet....

Alonso said he doesn’t have such dinners with his staff frequently, but “when I do, it is because there is an instrumental purpose, and I need to go beyond the normal setting to get what I need from people or for the school system.”

The [Sun noted](#) that school officials refused to “to respond to repeated inquiries from *The Sun* about how the card used by Alonso’s assistant, which noted the only fraudulent charges among the procurement cards, was compromised.”

One employee racked up \$3,500 on a credit card between April and June of last year.

## **Pay Back**

The [Sun reported](#) that the expenses violate the city’s rules: “Many of the transactions did not follow spending rules that are spelled out in guidelines presented to employees when they were issued a card.”

According to the guidelines, the cards are not to be used on travel-related expenses like hotels and airfare. But since the program started, roughly \$67,000 was charged to the cards for travel by central office administrators.

The guidelines also prohibit gifts for employees, but departments, including Alonso’s, spent more than \$600 on items such as fruit baskets, flowers and other gifts.

Employees also avoided spending limits on the cards by “splitting charges into multiple transactions,” the [newspaper reported](#).

One official who landed in hot water was forced to repay the schools \$5,000 after the *Sun*’s inquiries, but the schools would not disclose what he spent the money on, the [Sun reported](#). That same official’s departmental expenses included “about \$4,700 worth of transactions [at] retail stores like Bath & Body



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Works, Ross, Walmart, the Dollar Tree and BJ's Wholesale Club to buy snacks and refreshments, and gifts and decorations for holiday banquets, birthdays and baby shower celebrations, records show." That department was responsible for the 16-man, \$7,300 retreat and the \$500 dinner at the Brazilian steakhouse.

Unsurprisingly, the same official landed in hot water earlier this year for spending \$250,000 to renovate his office. And that expense was only half of what officials spent upgrading their headquarters, the [Sun reported](#). That \$250,000 expense, the [Sun noted](#) in April, "not only included critical maintenance repairs and revamped space necessary for employees and data systems but also amenities not seen anywhere in the system, documents show."

Wood laminate floors, frosted light fixtures, kitchen appliances, a glass-encased conference room, a flat-screen television, and new state-of-the-art technology. The system stopped a \$41,000 order for custom-made furniture after The Sun inquired about the project, and instead brought in furniture from the district's warehouse, [saving](#) \$37,000.

The [story noted](#) that schools need almost \$3 billion in repairs for such things "caving ceilings, leaking pipes, broken toilets, and scarce classroom equipment.

The [city spends](#) \$1.3 billion annually educating about 84,212 students in 194 schools. That's more than \$15,000 per pupil. About 75 percent of that budget pays salaries and benefits for the system's 10,800 employees, which means they earn, on average, about \$120,000 annually.

[According to](#) the federal education department, student achievement in the city falls below that of the rest of the state. But that is hardly surprising. In February, the [Sun reported](#) that 60 percent of the city's teachers are rated unsatisfactory. Those teachers received a performance improvement plan.

Understandably, teachers are nervous about the ratings, given that the city is moving toward performance-based pay increases. Last year, according to the [Sun](#), 63 percent of the city's 6,900 teachers received an evaluation of "proficient."



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