

Former parent group treasurer accused of taking more than \$8,000

The former treasurer of the Cedar Grove-Belgium Parent Teacher Organization was charged Monday in Sheboygan County Circuit Court with embezzling more than \$8,000 from funds intended to benefit students in the school district.

Melinda Cooney, 41, of Cedar Grove, faces one count of identity theft, a felony punishable by a \$10,000 fine and six years in prison.

Cooney is scheduled to appear at 2:30 p.m. Tuesday, Dec. 20, before Judge Timothy Van Akkeren.

Cedar Grove-Belgium School Supt. Steve Shaw said the criminal charges against Cooney did not surprise many people, since news of the investigation was well known.

“In a small community, the word gets out pretty quickly,” Shaw said. “The thing I fear is that people could possibly lose faith in the PTO, and they shouldn’t do that. The PTO is all about kids. It’s a good group running it. They’re going to make changes so this can’t happen again.”

The PTO is independent of the school district, which is not involved with it or any other organization’s finances or fundraising efforts, Shaw said.

According to the complaint, Cooney, who was treasurer from September 2007 until Sept. 20, 2010, when the PTO board asked her to resign, stole money from the organization by using a debit card and writing checks to herself between March 4, 2009, and Sept. 15, 2010.

PTO President Colleen Menzel reported the financial discrepancies to the Sheboygan County Sheriff’s Department on Sept. 30.

As treasurer, Cooney handled all financial records for the organization and was the only person authorized to use a checking account at Wells Fargo Bank in Cedar Grove. The organization had a second account for scholarship funds at National Exchange Bank in Cedar Grove.

The financial discrepancies came to light when the PTO was forced to cancel a fall book fair because the organization had a \$7,000 outstanding balance with Scholastic Books for a book fair held in March, according to the complaint. Menzel also learned the organization owed \$4,900 to Memory Books from a fundraiser held in May.

When Cooney told other PTO officers she had transferred money from National Exchange to Wells Fargo to consolidate the accounts, Menzel told sheriff’s officials she became suspicious.

PTO official charged with embezzling

Written by Carol Pomeday

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According to the complaint, when Menzel added her name to the Wells Fargo account, she was immediately contacted by two bank officials about suspicious activity on the account.

The complaint states Menzel was told Cooney wrote numerous checks on the account to herself. The checks were then cashed at the Port Washington State Bank in Belgium. Because Cooney's name was the only one on the Wells Fargo account, there was no one else to notify about their suspicions, bank representatives said.

According to the complaint, the PTO officers confronted Cooney on Sept. 20, when she allegedly admitted taking the money and said she would pay it back.

When asked how much she had taken, Cooney said she didn't know, the complaint states. She allegedly offered to check herself into a mental health facility, saying the disclosure would destroy her family.

According to the complaint, a teller at Port Washington State Bank told a sheriff's deputy that Cooney frequently cashed checks from the PTO account, then deposited the money in her account. The clerk estimated more than \$10,000 was deposited.

When confronted by detective Mark Mancl of the sheriff's department, Cooney admitted she had misappropriated funds and began writing checks to herself this year, the complaint states.

According to the complaint, Cooney told Mancl she was "under a significant amount of financial pressure and chose to do something that was wrong and wanted to take responsibility for her actions and pay the money back."

Cooney eventually identified 55 transactions, dating from March 4, 2009, through Sept. 15, 2010, totaling \$8,328 that were not authorized by the PTO, the complaint states. She also allegedly told Mancl that she took between \$20 and \$40 in cash from various fundraisers before she deposited the remaining money in PTO accounts, but did not know the total amount of cash she stole.