Written by Carol Pomeday
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Prosecutor says former parent group officer likely took more than first thought but is prepared to pay it back

The former treasurer of the Cedar Grove-Belgium Parent Teacher Organization is believed to have embezzled more than she initially acknowledged, but it appears the parent organization will receive a substantial amount of that back, said Sheboygan County Assistant District Attorney Nathan Haberman, who is prosecuting the case.

Melinda Cooney, 41, of Cedar Grove, who was the PTO treasurer for three years, is scheduled to appear in Sheboygan County Circuit Court at 3:30 p.m. Monday, Dec. 20, on one count of felony identity theft and faces a $10,000 fine and six years in prison. According to the complaint, she acknowledged making 55 unauthorized transactions totaling $8,328.

However, it now appears between $11,000 and $12,000 is missing, Haberman said Tuesday.

“The exact amount is difficult to pinpoint,” he said. “I believe we have reached an agreement and she will make substantial restitution. She’s made funds available to her attorney for the PTO that we expect to be
released soon.”

It can’t be soon enough for Colleen Menzel, president of the parent organization, who discovered the friend and neighbor she trusted had stolen money that was intended to help students in the school district.

The theft shook people’s confidence in the organization, Menzel said, but she’s seeing signs that their faith is being restored.

People will get a chance to ask questions of the organization’s officers when the legal issues are concluded, Menzel said.

“When this is over, we will hold a meeting and answer all questions,” Menzel said. “There are some questions we’re not allowed to answer now. We want to be completely open. We don’t want to just write a letter to
parents. We want to meet them face to face.

“We want people to ask the questions they need to ask so they can feel 100% confident that when they donate it’s going where it’s supposed to go — to programs that help their kids. We want to get their trust back so they go to all the fundraisers and support us. It’s a big bump in the road, but now we have to move on.”

The PTO has held several successful events since then, Menzel said, including a Green Bay Packers tailgate party in

Belgium and a holiday party for children at the high school. The group is currently selling movie

passes, which has been a popular fundraiser in the past.

Menzel said the organization's officers made changes in its accounting procedures, including regular outside audits, and now require at least two people to approve all transactions.

Cooney was the only person who had access to the PTO's checking account at Wells Fargo Bank in Cedar Grove until Menzel added her name in September. Bank officials immediately contacted her to say Cooney was writing checks to herself and depositing the money in her private account at the Port Washington State Bank in Belgium.

"We made changes immediately," Menzel said. "We have checks and double checks. Two people have to approve everything. We're doing what we should have been doing all along, but you trust people."

The organization's four officers meet the first Tuesday of each month. A teacher representative, who changes each month, attends the meetings and everyone is welcome to attend.

"Teachers are very supportive of us. We provide the things that they can't get from the budget," Menzel said. "Teachers submit requests and we decide how much help we can provide.

"People don't realize everything that we do. We've sponsored assemblies, the chess club, spelling bees, book fairs, field trips — whatever they need that isn't in the budget.

"We hope there will be restitution. That will seriously give the PTO a boost and the parents a boost. We must move on."

School Supt. Steve Shaw said the School Board decided long ago that it did not want to be involved in the finances of parent organizations and booster clubs.

The theft of the PTO funds, he said, hurt all those organizations, but he doesn't believe the district should oversee their financial records.

"The people who run the organizations don't want us involved, and our folks in the business office have enough to do now. They don't need to take over finances for a dozen organizations who don't really want our help," Shaw said.

The current PTO leaders, he said, are doing an excellent job, and people should not be hesitant to contribute to the group.

"The leadership that's in place really cares about kids, and they're not going to let anything deter them from helping the kids," Shaw said.

"They need to keep working for our kids, and we'll do what we can by providing space and allowing them to promote their fundraisers and programs."