

Fernandez: \$8,000 missing from middle school

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(Photo: PDN file photo)

About \$8,000, raised by students, parents and teachers at Agueda Johnston Middle School, has been reported missing, according to Superintendent Jon Fernandez.

Fernandez said the matter has been reported to the Guam Police Department and is being investigated internally.

"Approximately \$8,000 is missing in non-appropriated funds, which are funds that are raised by students, teachers and parents for student activities," Fernandez said Monday. "Our internal audit office has given a preliminary report to us, and we're taking it further to investigate whether there was any misconduct or mishandling of these funds so that we can take appropriate action."

He said non-appropriated funds typically are used by schools to pay for off-island travel or end-of-the-year events.

"Because of the potential criminal activity that might be found, we did take the precaution to report what we had learned to the Guam Police Department so that they can ... do their own investigation. And then we'll proceed with our administrative investigation," Fernandez said.

Roundtable meeting

Sen. Joe San Agustin, chairman of the legislative committee on education, said Monday his committee has scheduled a July 20 roundtable meeting to discuss the Guam Department of Education's accounting of non-appropriated funds, among other things.

"This roundtable is not only about what happened at Agueda, but the process of accounting for non-appropriated funds in all 41 public schools. We want to know the process and the accountability procedures. How do schools account for it? Who signs the checks? How often does (the Guam Department of Education) audit these funds?" San Agustin said.

The senator said it's good to know that Guam DOE reported the incident to law enforcement.

The roundtable is set for 8:30 to 10 a.m. July 20 at the Guam Congress Building.

Fernandez said Guam DOE's procedures are in place to ensure accountability of funds, appropriated by the Legislature or raised by the schools' students, their parents and teachers.

"So whether it's \$8,000 or \$500, it's important that we account for all these funds that we know that families worked hard to ensure that their students are able to participate in ... activities, whether it's off-island travel or end-of-the-year events, so we'll be looking into it," he said.

In any given year, Guam DOE's non-appropriated funds amount to some \$2 million, Fernandez said.

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Bounced checks

Fernandez said the initial assessment by Guam DOE's Internal Audit Office investigation was prompted by a bank's call to both Agueda Johnston Middle and Guam DOE's central office at Tiyan about bounced checks.

He said internal auditors, after a preliminary analysis, found that some \$8,000 couldn't be accounted for or was missing at Agueda Johnston Middle.

Fernandez, however, said Guam DOE couldn't say whether any school personnel are involved.

Agueda Johnston Middle's non-appropriated funds have been frozen while the internal investigation is ongoing, Fernandez added.

Under-reporting

The public auditor noted in its latest financial audit of Guam DOE covering fiscal year 2016 that there was under-reporting of \$44,000 in non-appropriated funds at six schools.

"This means that cash collections weren't accurately reported or may not have been remitted to the bank. The bulk of under reporting comes from Simon Sanchez High School, (which) had the highest at \$30,000, followed by F.B.L.G. Middle School at \$8,000, and Chief Brodie Elementary School at \$2,600. While (The Guam Department of Education) has improved in better reporting of (non-appropriated funds), further action is needed to ensure that cash collections for (non-appropriated funds) are properly reported and accounted for," the Office of Public Accountability stated.

Reporter Haidee Eugenio covers Guam's Catholic church issues, education and more. Follow her on Twitter @haidee_eugenio (https://twitter.com/haidee_eugenio). Follow Pacific Daily News on Facebook/GuamPDN (<http://www.facebook.com/guampdn/>) and Instagram @guampdn (<http://instagram.com/GuamPDN>).

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