

Ascension Parish Schools give Skylight A+ in managing debit cards for 1,300 teachers.

Snapshot

- Client:** - Ascension Parish Schools, Donaldsonville, La.
21 schools with 20,000 students and 1,300 teachers.
- Application:** - Debit cards used by teachers to purchase supplies for their classrooms.
- Problems:**
- Needed more responsive partner.
 - Needed partner willing to customize its services for specific needs.
- Solution:** - Retain Skylight Financial to manage the program.
- Benefits:**
- Custom-imprinted card
 - Excellent project planning, service and problem resolution
 - No complaints from teachers

The calm after the storm

Kathy Hebert, business manager of Ascension Parish Schools, will long remember the chaotic start of the 2005 school year. Days after school opened, Hurricane Katrina tore up three states. After the levee systems in Orleans and Jefferson parishes failed, hundreds of thousands of families fled to safety.

Many of them stopped in Ascension Parish, just south of Baton Rouge. When classes resumed a few days later, the school district found itself scrambling to arrange buses, books, teachers and classrooms for a huge influx of evacuees from Orleans, Jefferson, St. Bernard and Plaquemine parishes.

At the same time, another change happened at Ascension Parish Schools without disruption. To better manage its teacher supply cards—a unique application of pre-funded debit cards—the school district switched to Skylight Financial.

Teachers get their allowance on a card

Before each school year starts, teachers in the 21 schools of Ascension Parish each get an allowance of up to \$200 to spend as they see fit for classroom supplies. When the allowance program was first implemented years ago, the teachers would make their purchases. The bills or receipts were sent to the school board for payment. The manual system, school officials quickly learned, was a bookkeeping nightmare.

Searching for a solution, officials had a novel idea: Provide each teacher with a special debit card funded with the allowance. Teachers would be able to use their cards, up to a late November cutoff date, to make purchases at any merchant location.

The teacher supply card program started in August of 2002. Three years of experience revealed that the idea was excellent—but the original vendor's performance was unsatisfactory. In 2005, Hebert decided to switch vendors. The school district's bank, Hibernia, recommended its partner, Skylight Financial, to take over management of the teacher supply card program.

Just ask

“Over the three years we worked with them, the original company went from bad to worse,” Hebert said. “However, it's been a real pleasure dealing with Skylight. They are doing so much more than the other company. Skylight is very flexible. We tell them what we would like to do, and they find a way to do it. Because of our prior experience, we knew what improvements were needed. Skylight was able to come through with everything we asked for.”

Some of the changes involved the use and appearance of the cards. For example, the school district wanted an affinity card with custom imprinting. “The other company could not put ‘Ascension Parish School Board’ on the card,” Hebert said. “This caused a problem of accidental use by some teachers with identical-looking personal credit cards. One teacher's husband cut up the card when it came in the mail, thinking it was another unneeded credit card! Thanks to Skylight, the cards now have our name and logo printed on them.”

Skylight also made account statements available online. The teacher keeps a register of expenditures and attaches store receipts to match items shown on the Skylight statements.

The teacher supply cards have a life span of several months. At a specified date, Skylight deactivates them. Any remaining balances are credited to the school system's account. There are a few year-round cards, such as one for special education and one for home economics.

Overnight service

According to Hebert, issuing the cards was a painless process. “Skylight is very well organized. As we got closer to switching to Skylight, they emailed us status reports after each conference call to highlight who does what, what’s the next step. And they greatly streamlined the process of reissuing the cards annually. It’s so much less work now.”

Hebert is also pleased with Skylight’s responsiveness to problems. When the first batch of cards was distributed to teachers, a few tried to use the cards immediately but their transactions were rejected. Hebert heard about the problem late in the day and called Skylight after 5:00 p.m. By 8:00 a.m. the next day, Skylight had diagnosed what was wrong. The following morning, Hebert received an overnight shipment of replacement cards.

“The Skylight team really worked hard on this project,” Hebert summarized. “They listened to our needs, developed a timeline, and followed it. They have been very professional and easy to work with. It’s obvious that there is a lot of technical expertise and commitment to service behind the scenes at Skylight.”