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Schools are getting learning labs

All Mobile County schools will have them by fall; all state schools by 2009

Thursday, July 10, 2008

By **RENA HAVNER**
Staff Reporter

All Mobile County high schools will have state-sponsored distance-learning labs this fall, and all Alabama schools, including those in Baldwin County, will have them by the fall of 2009, state education officials announced this week.

The distance learning program, known as ACCESS (Alabama Connecting Classrooms, Educators and Students Statewide), allows students at one school to take classes offered at other schools via the Internet. For example, students at a school that does not have Advanced Placement classes or

Mandarin Chinese can use teleconferencing equipment to take those classes live from a teacher across the state.

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Four Mobile County and two Baldwin County schools already have the labs.

The remaining nine public high schools in Mobile County — which already have partial labs — are getting \$50,000 apiece to install equipment to have a full lab this fall, according to state and local officials. That money will pay for some additional teleconferencing equipment and for 30 laptops.

Because they're starting from scratch, the other five Baldwin County schools will get \$85,000 to install full labs by the fall of 2009, said Michael Sibley, spokesman for the Alabama Department of Education.

"We were ahead of the game and we're being rewarded for it," said David K. Akridge, executive manager of technology for the Mobile County Public School System.

"It's good news for the whole state and it's excellent news for us," Akridge added. "It's one of the first times I've seen the state be very forward thinking in technology, really pulling us ahead."

The state education budget has been cut by \$370 million, which includes the loss of some teaching and other positions in Mobile and Baldwin counties. But Sibley said \$11 million in additional funding for ACCESS this year came from a bond issue separate from the state budget.

Select schools, including Bryant High in Irvington, piloted the ACCESS program back in 2006 and the program has expanded every year. Since then, Citronelle, Montgomery and Satsuma high schools in Mobile have added the distance learning labs, as have Daphne and Robertsdale in Baldwin.

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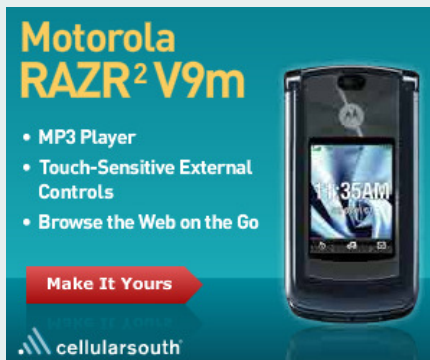
The state appears to be one year ahead of its schedule to have all 371 of its high schools connected to ACCESS by 2011. About 190 schools remain, according to a news release from the Alabama Department of Education.

Akridge said that besides having access to classes offered across the state, Mobile County students will be able to take courses offered across town. For example, several parents have come to school board meetings recently saying students at B.C. Rain High School off Dauphin Island Parkway are not able to take Advanced Placement classes. Now, he said, they'll be able to.

He said all of the 13 high schools will have the same bell schedules so that classes will begin and end at the same times.

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The expansion of ACCESS is particularly timely, Sibley said, as the Alabama Department of Education has just stiffened its graduation requirements. All students are now required to take at least one distance learning class in high school. And students are automatically enrolled in the advanced diploma track, meaning they must take advanced math and some foreign language classes.

Yvonne Matthews, principal of Blount High School in Prichard, said students will begin taking upper-level Spanish and French classes via ACCESS this fall. Blount offers the first two years of those languages, but now students will be able to take up to four years.

"I'm very excited about that," Matthews said. "The more we can get for our students here that is valuable and useful for them, the better."

Kenneth Dinges, principal at Foley High, said he's excited that his school will soon get the ACCESS lab.






Besides the advanced classes, students we'll also be able to take remediation classes to help them graduate.

"One thing we're working so hard on here at Foley is trying to keep kids in school," Dinges said. "This is another way. We're allowing them another avenue."


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Answer:
\$7,200 annually according to
U.S. Census, 2000 Census,
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