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DJJ School System Loses Out On Some Federal Money, But Is Preparing For Dual Accreditation

Written by [Chandra R. Thomas](#) on Sep 3, 2010



By **Chandra R. Thomas**

Department of Juvenile Justice School System leaders are recovering from a major disappointment, but also celebrating other victories while working toward maintaining the system's academic standing.

First the bad news: The school system did not get any of the **Race To The Top** grant money received by 26 other school systems in the state. Last month **Governor Sonny Perdue** announced that Georgia was selected as a winner by the U.S. Department of Education for the second round of the grants.

Georgia is projected to receive \$400 million over four years to implement its plan to create conditions for education innovation and reform. The fund is a \$4 billion grant opportunity provided in the **American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009** to support new approaches to improve schools. "We just didn't get it," Associate Superintendent of Schools for the DJJ Office of Education Jack Catrett told board members during a meeting last week, where **Deputy Commissioner Jeff Minor** announced a proposal for massive budget cuts as mandated by the governor for fiscal year 2011.

Catrett, however, was quick to sing the system's praises during his address.

"Our curriculum is based on mastery of learning," he says. "Our kids have perfect attendance. Forty percent of our kids are special ed. We have a unique curriculum and thorough record-keeping process."

Department of Education Director of Communications **Matt Cardoza** insists that although DJJ schools did not receive the Race money, the funds will ultimately benefit it and other school districts statewide in a number of ways, including:

- effectiveness measures, including value added measures for all teachers, principals, schools districts and teacher/leader preparation programs
- teacher induction certificate (Georgia will revise certification rules to create a three-year non-renewable certificate for those who have completed an initial preparation program or who have been accepted into a GATAPP program)
- common core standards and assessments resources (instructional frameworks, benchmark assessments, formative assessment toolkit, common core standards training for teachers at every school)
- instructional improvement reports and dashboards for all teachers

Cardoza also says that the state will share best Race to the Top practices through:

- annual Race to the Top summits
- summer Leadership Academies for district and school leaders
- online publication of Race to the Top annual reports and case studies related to Race to the Top reforms

On the bright side, however, the DJJ system has learned that it will get \$133,000 in **stimulus teacher**

money.

“This is an excellent school system,” laments Catrett, “Our schools achieve. We’re accredited by the **Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS)**. We’re recognized as one of the best juvenile justice schools in the nation. We’re the best kept secret in the state of Georgia as far as education goes.”

As for accreditation, the system is now in the throes of preparing for district reaccreditation from both SACS and the **Correctional Education Association**. Representatives from SACS are scheduled to meet with school system leaders October 3-6. The visit will include a tour of pre-selected sites and all facilities will have representation at an October 4 interview session at DJJ Central Office Headquarters.

“We have intensified our efforts to make positive educational gains within the department,” explains Rufus Johnson, regional principal of the DJJ Office of Education. “Preparation for this dual accreditation began several years ago by selecting a local chairperson for each facility. There have been many meetings, countless emails and phone calls, cluster meetings and visits, dialogue and collaboration among and between the 28 facilities and their leadership teams.”

The impending SACS visit is part of the system’s relatively recent, but positive relationship with the accrediting body. In 2005 DJJ embarked on an “ambitious” quest to get all of the DJJ sites accredited by SACS. In preparation for the Quality Assessment Review, explains Johnson, the department developed a school improvement plan aimed at increasing the success rate of detained youth.

“Our first goal is to improve academic achievement of the students we serve,” he says. “This goal will be accomplished by utilizing our mastery based Curriculum Activity Packets (CAPs) as a basis for instruction; improve reading and math scores for students performing below grade expectancy; increase the number of students earning high school diplomas and GED certificates; and, facilitate student transitions through accurate record transfer and portfolio development.”

The second goal undertaken, recalls Johnson, dealt with implementing classroom management strategies aimed at improving student behavior. “All of our DJJ schools were successfully accredited in 2005,” he says.

According to Johnson, from 2005 to present day the education division of Georgia’s DJJ has continued to work at addressing and improving student achievement and improving student behavior.

“We have developed learning consortiums in the academic content areas, adopted textbooks that were both challenging and adhere to the Georgia DOE Performance Learning Standards, provided staff development opportunities for both regular education and special education teachers and support staff,” he says. “All of this was accomplished in the midst of a growing budget deficit.”

Got a juvenile justice story idea? Contact JJIE.org staff writer Chandra R. Thomas at cthom141@kennesaw.edu. Thomas, a former Rosalynn Carter Mental Health Journalism Fellow and Kiplinger Public Affairs Journalism Fellow, is an award-winning multimedia journalist who has worked for Atlanta Magazine and Fox 5 News in Atlanta.



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