



Prisons the biggest recipient of Alabama's education stimulus dollars

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Federal stimulus in Alabama

Here's a look at Alabama's 10 biggest recipients of federal stimulus dollars so far from the U.S. Department of Education.

Alabama's biggest recipient of

Recipient	Stimulus dollars
Department of Corrections	\$118,585,536
Mobile County schools	\$76,712,250
Auburn University	\$51,766,816
University of Alabama at Birmingham	\$49,823,042
Montgomery County schools	\$47,032,591
Birmingham schools	\$33,566,596
Jefferson County schools	\$31,643,809
University of Alabama	\$29,398,744
Baldwin County schools	\$23,817,695
Huntsville schools	\$22,140,421

federal education stimulus

dollars thus far is not a local

school system or a college: It's

the Department of Corrections,

Source: edmoney.org, Alabama Department of Education.

Press-Register graphic

according to a Press-Register

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analysis.

The agency has received \$118

million of \$1.1 billion in stimulus funding doled out to the state by the U.S. Department of

Education since 2009. The money covered health care costs for 26,000 inmates, and salaries

and benefits for about 4,200 corrections officers and other employees for three and a half months, officials said.

The spending was legal: Governors were allowed to give up to 18 percent of the funding to areas other than education, such as public safety.

Nonetheless, Alabama spent about \$4,500 in education stimulus dollars per prisoner, about four times the amount per student in kindergarten through 12th grade.

Also, while Alabama claims to have saved or created 5,825 jobs per quarter with stimulus funds for education, according to the U.S. Department of Education, 1,725 of those jobs apparently were nowhere near a classroom.

"If we could've had that \$118 million," Baldwin County schools Superintendent Alan Lee said of school systems in general, "we could've given the prisons less business."

Studies have shown that students who fail classes and drop out are more likely to go to prison than those who do well in school.

Mobile County's school system — the state's largest — received the second-most stimulus

money after prisons, at \$77 million. That was an average of \$1,233 for each of its approximately 62,000 students.

Steve Brown, associate commissioner over administration for the Department of Corrections, said the injection of federal stimulus dollars was vital to the 31 prison facilities across the state.

Without it, he said, his agency might have petitioned the Legislature for permission to release inmates, something that Brown said would not have been well-received. Or, the state would have had to skim money from all of its other departments, including education, to cover a corrections budget that has been ailing for years.

Prisons are overcrowded and the corrections department is staffed only at 80 percent of what it should be, he said.

"We've done 'what if' drills before. We would've had to release 40 percent of our inmates.

That's not a viable option," Brown said.

Brown said that federal auditors examined the corrections department spending and gave their OK.

Schools systems statewide have also been ailing and are expecting more hardship in a down economy. In Mobile and Baldwin counties alone, schools have slashed programs and laid off more than 1,000 teachers and others after two years of state cuts known as proration.

Mobile County schools Superintendent Roy Nichols was surprised when he heard about the findings of the Press-Register's analysis. "But now that I think about it, I understand. The governor wouldn't have looked good if he had let prisoners out," he said.

According to federal regulations, states had to use 82 percent of their stimulus money from the U.S. Department of Education on education. They could spend the remaining 18 percent on education, public safety or other government services.

The Department of Corrections — which received 11 percent of the total — was Alabama's only non-school-system recipient of the money.

Some portions of the money were directed specifically for special education, pre-school, homeless education programs, or for schools serving mostly poor students.

The biggest chunk of the money — known as stabilization money — was meant for schools to

cover the salaries of teachers and other employees who would otherwise be fired due to budget cuts.

Some superintendents, however, wary of keeping teachers on the payroll who might gain tenure and have to be retained into the future, said they spent a lot of that money on supplies, training and programs.

The federal stimulus money runs out next Sept. 30, the end of the present fiscal year.

The Press-Register's analysis of stimulus spending on education did not include money from the recently passed federal jobs bill, dubbed a second stimulus. Alabama schools and colleges are getting \$149 million from the jobs bill.

Altogether, Alabama has received more than \$3 billion in federal stimulus funds for education, public works and other purposes.

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