

Bartow County Schools receives driver's ed. grant

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Students in Bartow County Schools' three high schools next year will have the chance to get behind the wheel of a virtual car before hitting the road in reality.

The school system recently received a \$136,400 grant from the Governor's Office of Highway Safety to revamp its driver's education program. The grant will go toward purchasing driver training simulators and tables on which they will be placed. Local textbook funds will go toward purchasing an updated driver's ed. curriculum.

With the simulator and curriculum purchase, officials plan to return driver's ed. to the regular school curriculum so it can be made available to students at no cost starting in January. The system in previous years offered a summer driver's ed. program at a cost of roughly \$300 per student. Though about 4,500 students in the system have been eligible to participate in the summer program, no more than about 225 of them have completed it.

"When we looked at the actual number of students at the age to take driver's ed., we were reaching 5 percent of our kids with the model we were using -- teaching it during the summer and charging kids several hundred dollars," said John Barge, the system's director of secondary instruction. "When the grants initially became available, I started doing some research for the grant, and the data for Bartow County was pretty alarming as far as where we ranked in the state as far as the number of teenage fatalities in our system, the number of teenage accidents, the number of accidents involving DUI, the number of pedestrians killed.

"We felt like our system was growing enough as far as the number of students we have, we felt like the data was there to support that we need to do something different than what we are doing with our kids to prepare them to drive."

Barge in the grant application cited several pieces of data from the GOHS and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, one of which showed that from 2003 to 2005 Bartow County saw a 90 percent increase in the number of traffic fatalities involving teen drivers.

When the grant money is used, the system's three high schools will receive a number of simulators based on their student populations. Woodland High School, which has the most students, will receive nine simulators, while Cass and Adairsville will receive seven and three, respectively.

The desktop simulators cost an estimated \$6,000 each, and are comprised of three flat-screen monitors to simulate the driver's view, a dashboard and steering wheel and pedals.

"Ideally, we'd like to have some additional simulators, but that will get us started and keep us for a little while," Barge said, adding the ideal situation would have 10 simulators in each driver's ed. lab, with Adairsville and Cass having a lab and Woodland possibly having two. "Ideally, I'd like to have a full lab at each high school that you can have a class of 28 kids in all day, every day, all year."

Barge said he expected between 400 and 500 students to participate in the schools' driver's ed. offerings next semester. He said that though implementing the program mid-year is not ideal, the grant requires the program to be implemented this school year.

"We can make it work," he said. "It's not ideal because kids have already registered for the year. The kids that do want to register for the driver's education, we'll have to go back and change their student schedules.

"It's certainly helpful to the parents and the community because the kids won't have to pay the \$300 for driver's ed. during the summer, though it may be frustrating initially because we won't be able to

accommodate all the students initially, because we're only doing it for half a year."

The need for driver's education in the classroom stems from a state law that took effect last year. That law requires teens applying for a Class D driver's license to complete an approved driver's education course and 40 hours of supervised driving, with six of those hours driven at night. Sixteen-year-olds who do not complete an approved driver's education course must wait until they are 17 to be eligible for the license and must still complete the 40 hours of supervised driving with six of those hours at night.

The teen driving rules come from Senate Bill 226, which was passed by the 2005 Georgia General Assembly. The bill was dubbed "Joshua's Law" after Joshua Brown -- the son of Alan and LuGina Brown -- who was killed in an automobile accident July 9, 2003.

The system's driver's ed. program will help students satisfy part of Joshua's Law. After taking the school program, students can either complete six hours of behind-the-wheel training at an approved driving school along with 40 hours of parent- or guardian-supervised driving, or complete the Georgia Department of Driver Services' 40-hour Parent/Teen Driving Guide. Barge said the system plans on offering the six hours of behind-the-wheel training this summer for a small fee, which will be used to cover instructors' pay.

Barge said Alan Brown was an "integral part" in the system receiving the grant, as he served as a guide in the grant-writing process and wrote a letter of support for the system.

Brown said he was excited to see Bartow County Schools receive the grant and begin establishing a driver's ed. program.

"Cartersville High School has had a 21st-century driver's education program in their school for four years. During this time, they have not lost a child that has taken this course," Brown said via e-mail last week. "I am glad to see Bartow County Schools move forward with its driver's education program, and I plan to attend a school board meeting to thank them personally."

The funds from the GOHS grant are not the only monies aimed at driver's education, as the system's Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax project list calls for \$650,000 to be spent toward driver's education. Officials proposed the project list for the county's third SPLOST for schools in late 2005, and local voters approved the SPLOST in March 2006.

System officials and school board members have not yet set a timetable to spend SPLOST funds for driver's education. School board Chairman Greg Bowen said SPLOST dollars so far have been spent and directed to other priorities, such as new technology and computers, buying land for future schools and building school facilities.

"We have to see where the greatest need is," Bowen said. "You just don't spend it all today just because you have it. We want to be wise and identify specific needs so we can make that money go far."

"We are tickled to death to get some of the things Joshua's Law guided the schools to do. There's a lot of enthusiasm about it and we're looking forward to getting it in the schools."

Supt. John Harper said some SPLOST funds may be used to supplement the GOHS grant before the driver's ed. program begins. "Whatever we need to do to make the program go well, we'll make it happen."