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Tuscaloosa could become 'master site' for initiative

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HUNTSVILLE | "It's not science if you can't touch it."

The yellow sign tacked to the door serves as a sort of motto for the dozen or so people busy at work in the basement of a nondescript building on the edge of campus. With the quiet efficiency of an assembly line, the employees -- many of them students here at the University of Alabama in Huntsville -- fill plastic tubs with Karo syrup, toothpaste, 9-volt batteries and colored yarn.

Perhaps the most visible component of the Alabama Math, Science and Technology Initiative material centers, like this one at UAH, makes sure that K-12 teachers have everything they need to lead students in the math and science activities and experiments that are key to the initiative's philosophy of hands-on learning.

"If you've got a doctor who has surgery tomorrow, you wouldn't expect him to go out and get all his supplies. They're there for him," explained Brenda Terry, education and public outreach specialist for the National Space Science and Technology Center, a supporter of the initiative. "Well, a teacher shouldn't be expected to go to Wal-Mart at 12 o'clock at night to buy [supplies] out of their own pocketbook."

Now in its third year, the initiative, or AMSTI, aims to improve math and science education in Alabama's public schools and, eventually, create a more skilled work force to support economic development. With federal funding set to expire this year, the state Department of Education is asking the Legislature for \$15 million to maintain the three existing AMSTI sites in Huntsville, Florence and Mobile, as well as establish three additional sites in other parts of the state.

These "master sites" include not only the material centers that provide and refurbish modules for the AMSTI schools in their region, but conduct summer training institutes for teachers and serve as a home base for math and science specialists who work with participating schools during the school year.

Charles Nash, vice chancellor of academic affairs for the University of Alabama System and chairman of AMSTI's chief advocacy group, the Alabama

Mathematics, Science and Technology Education Coalition, said he believes Tuscaloosa, specifically the University of Alabama, would be an ideal location for a master site if the Legislature approves funding for an expansion.

Nash said UA is already the central site for one of the state's 11 "in-service" regions designated by the state Department of Education for teacher professional development. He said the fact that UA produces many of the state's K-12 teachers and offers opportunities for continuing education should also contribute to its case for being named a master site.

If that weren't enough, UA also supports science and technology in the region's K-12 schools with its Alabama Science in Motion and Alabama

Technology in Motion programs that have already partner with AMSTI school in other parts of the state.

"It just makes good sense," Nash said. "A master site here could serve not only the immediate area of Tuscaloosa County, but much of the Black Belt."

There are 72 official AMSTI schools in the state, all located near the universities that serve them, UAH, University of North Alabama in Florence and the University of South Alabama in Mobile. But a handful of schools in Tuscaloosa County are already using the AMSTI curriculum, among them Holt and Vance elementary schools in the county system and Eastwood Middle, Westlawn Middle and Paul W. Bryant High in the city system.

Though those schools are not supported by a material center or AMSTI specialists, their teachers have been trained in the initiative's curriculum.

"It's good what those few teachers are able to do. They will positively impact a few children. But the question is, is that good enough?" Nash said.

"Shouldn't we want to positively impact all children to learn math and science? Then the logical answer is we should provide them the resources to do it."

The Legislature has yet to act on the \$15 million needed to sustain and expand AMSTI, but Gov. Bob Riley's budget fully funds the state Department of Education's requests for K-12. If approved, state Superintendent Joe Morton said Tuscaloosa and UA would be eligible for a master site, refuting rumors that they would go to Birmingham and Montgomery.

"No commitments have been made to anyone for any sites anywhere," Morton said. "Tuscaloosa would have an equally outstanding chance to obtain a site."

Morton said he is optimistic that lawmakers will approve funding for AMSTI, particularly with help of lobbyists from higher education which he said will equally

benefit from the initiative that he is convinced is the future of math and science for Alabama schoolchildren.

"We know where the shortcomings are. Now we know what the research says, and we know that it yields results," Morton said. "It's not 'We think it will work.' It's 'We know it will work.' "

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