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Bill to fix imbalance in learning funds dies

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An attempt to create a new, need-based formula to change how more than \$600 million in state money is distributed to the state's early learning coalitions failed to gain support among state lawmakers.

Currently, the Office of Early Learning uses an "unexplained and outdated methodology," according to state auditors, to distribute funding. Each coalition receives the same portion of funding that it did the prior year, regardless of shifting demographics. Manatee County, with a 64-percent increase in the number of poor children since 2005, received roughly the same portion of state funds in 2017 as it did 12 years prior.

Sen. Greg Steube, R-Sarasota, filed legislation that would have required the Office of Early Learning to develop a funding formula based on the need in each county to determine how much money each early learning coalition would receive.

But the bill gained no traction. There is no companion bill in the House, and it has not been considered by any Senate committee.

"The bill is effectively dead," Steube said Thursday. "Basically, the response I got was that this was going to be very controversial."

The state has 30 early learning coalitions that receive state funding to pay for child care for low-income families.

Executives at the OEL told the Herald-Tribune

last October that the funding allocations had been in place since the agency's inception and current leaders do not know what they are based on.

"No one seems to really know," OEL spokeswoman Cynthia Sucher said.

Attempts to create a funding formula have failed several times. A 2012 attempt revealed that the Miami-Dade coalition is overfunded by millions, while the Early Learning Coalition of Southwest Florida - representing Collier, Lee, Hendry and Glades counties - had been shorted more than \$10 million. Sarasota has been consistently underfunded, according to OEL analyses, as its demographics have shifted.

Steube's proposal would have shifted funding from legislatively powerful areas such as Miami-Dade to Sarasota, Osceola and other areas with far less representation.

"I think that the big challenge whenever you are redistributing money is you're taking away money from some stakeholders and giving it to others," said Larry Miller, dean of the school of education at **Florida Southwestern State College**. "It's particularly challenging in a flat funding environment."

Janet Kahn, executive director of the Early Learning Coalition of Sarasota County, has been a vocal supporter of a formula, but most coalition leaders stay out of the fray. Leaders from Manatee and Osceola's early learning coalitions declined to comment.

"None of my colleagues were able to get their representatives to do it," Kahn said. "No one wanted to take on the politics and burn a bridge with Miami, or other large coalitions who could also lose funds."

One executive who spoke on background said coalition leaders must tread lightly, knowing that if they push too hard for a new formula, they will alienate the larger coalitions who have more political power.

Last year, lawmakers allocated \$608 million in school readiness funding. Gov. Rick Scott and the state senate are proposing allocating \$630 million to school readiness funding this year, a 3.6 percent increase from last year. The house is proposing \$618 million, a 1.9 percent increase.

Susan Block, executive director of the Early Learning Coalition of Southwest Florida, said leaders from coalitions

statewide were working to come up with a palatable solution.

"There's always the potential for wins at some coalitions and losses for others," Block said. "Our association has taken up a work group to look across the board at a logical and reasonable plan which we would hope to share with the legislators."

Block said she did not know if that solution would mean a formula for just new funding or all funding.

"Time will tell," she said.

Coalition leaders such as Kahn are hopeful Steube will try again next legislative session. Steube said he still wants a formula to be developed.

"I think it's the right thing to do, and I think there needs to be a fair and equitable way that we fund these early learning coalitions across the state," Steube said. "It's not fair to play politics with our kids."

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