



EDITORIALS

MAY 11, 2017 9:24 PM

Florida's lawmakers stiff Miami Dade College and other public schools with struggling students

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Let's just say that public education is no longer the teacher's pet, at least in the eyes of the Florida Legislature.

Public education took a big funding hit this year, almost all of it crafted behind closed doors and sprung on unsuspecting educators at the very last minute — no transparency, no debate allowed. This is just one more reason for Gov. Rick Scott, whose own priorities got short shrift throughout the entire session, which ended this week, to look askance at the entire budget lawmakers cobbled together.

In K-12 education, House Bill 7069 isn't all bad — it restores recess and cuts back on testing. But the good is far outweighed by the onerous — and that should be a deal killer. It sets aside \$140 million of the education budget for Schools of Hope, a misty-eyed name for for-profit charter schools. Lawmakers allow them to open up in the vicinity of D or F public schools and then siphon off the best of those students. This leaves the challenged schools even more so. The charters are not held to the same academic standards and can develop their own teacher development programs.

In addition, school districts will be required to share with charter schools not only federal Title 1 funds, which go to schools with the neediest students, but also PECO funds — derived from our property taxes for school construction needs.

Charter schools are not necessarily the problem. Rather, it's the state's lack of equity, its obvious favoritism for for-profit education at the expense of public schools. This is not how to create Florida's workforce of the future — at least a workforce prepared for the 21st-century jobs that Scott wants to attract to the state.

In higher education, Miami Dade College faces a substantial hit, the worst funding cut in its history — nearly \$14 million.

These cuts are not necessitated because of a decrease in the overall proposed \$83 billion state budget. In fact, the State University System, made up of the big four-year institutions, received additional allocations in excess of \$290 million. But the Florida College System — the smaller four-year and community colleges — was cut nearly \$30 million. School officials say it will impact our community's most vulnerable who need the greatest support.

And now, the Florida College System would be held to performance standards that can only be attained by the most elite students. So there is the potential loss of an additional \$9 million in performance funding dollars because of unrealistic metrics.

This likely will have a punitive impact on Miami Dade College, its students and the community that MDC has superbly served for decades. The metrics are based on full-time students graduating in two years for an associate degree, and four years for a bachelor degree.

But MDC is significantly made up of minority and low income students who often work full time and are older. They have significant obstacles to overcome — and MDC has been a safe harbor. About 66 percent of MDC students come from low-income families, and 45 percent of those live at or below the poverty level. These students have no choice but to work to support themselves and their families, limiting their ability to complete a degree “on time.”

It's unconscionable that the only thing lawmakers seem committed to doing is privatizing public education, while making struggling students, and schools that serve them, struggle even harder.



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