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## Florida lawmakers opt not to change how after-school programs are funded

*By Kristen M. Clark*  
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TALLAHASSEE - How Florida gives state money to organizations that provide after-school care, such as Big Brothers Big Sisters and the Boys & Girls Clubs, won't change anytime soon.

The 2016-17 budget that Gov. Rick Scott signed Thursday maintains a decades-old funding structure that designates money to a handful of prominent organizations — which means an ambitious, but controversial, reform plan pitched by Republican Senate leaders is on hold for at least another year.

Administrators of affected groups said they are glad lawmakers didn't embrace the Senate's idea to create a competitive grant process this year. The proposed program — introduced midway through the nine-week session — would have included several million dollars more in available aid, but it would've made many more non-profits eligible for a single pot of money.

Traditional programs opposed creating a competitive grant on such short notice, fearing it would have caused their funding to, at best, be interrupted or, at worst, be cut. The taxpayer aid helps pay for homework assistance, mentoring and gang-prevention services for children and teens often living in Florida's most vulnerable and impoverished communities.

"We're absolutely relieved and thrilled that we're able to serve the kids in the program and in the coming year," said Lydia Muniz, CEO of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Greater Miami. "I don't think in principle we're against competition; it's part of the process ... What really threw us was the suddenness of the idea and not having the opportunity of that public debate."

Next year's budget keeps most programs' funding the same as this year, but a couple organizations will see decreases because one-time allocations weren't continued.

The state Boys & Girls Clubs will lose about \$400,000, or 7 percent, of its funding, while Best Buddies — which helps children and young adults who have intellectual disabilities — will lose \$300,000, or 30 percent, of its state allocation.

It's unclear why lawmakers didn't continue the one-time funding. Documents show House leaders sought it during budget negotiations — as well as an extra \$450,000 for the Boys & Girls Clubs — but the money didn't make the cut when the final compromise was reached.

Daniel Lyons, executive director for the Florida Alliance of Boys & Girls Clubs, said the group isn't upset about the lost dollars. He's more overjoyed that their designated line-item is still in place.

"We got \$5.1 million — that's nothing to sneeze at," Lyons said. "We're pleased to have what we have. That's better than starting from square one with a competitive grant process."

Republicans in the Senate supported the competitive grant idea, sponsored by Senate education budget chairman Don Gaetz, R-Niceville, but Gaetz faced reluctance from Democratic senators and House members in both parties.

From the start, House education budget chairman Erik Fresen, R-Miami, said he was intrigued by the concept but wouldn't support such a drastic change this year.

"I'm always in favor of depoliticizing the appropriations process whenever feasible," Fresen said Thursday via text message. "I just thought that turning on a dime from one day to the next was unwise."

Gaetz said there wasn't enough time in budget negotiations to work through the concerns House members had.

"We actually got positive feedback; we just ran out of time in being able to put it in place for next year," Gaetz said.

Senate leaders appeared a bit salty about the defeat but vowed to pursue the funding change again in 2017.

“We had a lot more money available to them if they would take a competitive grant process,” Senate Appropriations Chairman Tom Lee, R-Brandon said, referencing the \$30 million that was in the Senate’s plan. The final approved budget included about \$15.2 million.

“But they’d rather take the devil they know than the devil they don’t, so we’ll fight that battle next year,” Lee said.

Gaetz bemoaned a “fierce lobbying effort” against his idea that he said didn’t help. He previously said that he didn’t like the designated funding because it enabled groups with the best lobbyists to get better funding.

“It’s probably better to take the politics out of great causes like mentoring and after-school care,” Gaetz said. “But the lobbyists saw their rice-bowl being cracked and swung into action.”

Administrators of the affected organizations said they’re open to revisiting the change next year, if lawmakers want to.

“At least then it wouldn’t be a surprise,” Lyons said, whereas this year, “the time frame would’ve been really, really hard. No matter what they say we’d all have been defunded and have had to start from scratch.”

Muniz agreed.

“If that’s a direction they’re saying they want to go next year, than we have a heads up and we’ll work to be part of the process,” she said.