

Message from the Early Learning Coalition

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Fund Florida's Early Learning Programs Fully and Fairly



Photo Credit: Miami Herald File

by: Adrian Alfonso and David Lawrence
<http://www.miamiherald.com/opinion/op-ed/article190429044.html>

This is simply common sense - and wise investment.

If we know - and we do - that 85 percent of brain growth occurs by the age of 3, it follows, logically, that children greatly benefit by being in brain-stimulating early learning programs that help them succeed in school and in life.

In Florida, about \$600 million in state and federal funds is allocated annually to the 30 nonprofit Early Learning Coalitions serving children in all 67 counties. Those dollars are used to provide early education opportunities for children of low-income working parents, children of parents transitioning from welfare to work, children of homeless parents and children who have been abused, neglected or abandoned.

Not a year passes that the need for those services outweighs the dollars available. That's why each Early Learning Coalition continues to advocate for additional money. This year, some of those coalitions are recommending that the funding formula governing how those dollars are allocated - a formula in place since 2008 - needs to be made fairer. They point to an increase in the number of children in some counties' waiting lists vis-à-vis a reduction in Miami-Dade, Monroe and other counties.

No one could, or should, object to fairness. But the fact of the matter is that Miami-Dade has the largest population of children in poverty in the state - about 150,000 children. Yes, the waiting list in Miami-Dade and Monroe has decreased. Yes, it is also true that the Miami-Dade/Monroe coalition spends more on direct services to families than any of the other 29 coalitions - all the while receiving the highest possible marks on independent fiscal audits. Reducing the waiting list was neither an accident nor a sudden loss of low-income families here. Rather, it was achieved with strong accountability measures, new cost-saving technologies and grants received to supplement government funding.

Miami-Dade and Monroe should be rewarded for good performance and fiscal accountability, not penalized.

A bill recently was filed in the state Legislature directing the Office of Early Learning to develop a new funding formula. Fine, but let's make make sure this formula is applied only to new - and much needed - funding. Moving dollars from one already-underfunded part of the state to another part is shortsighted. Rather than solving the problem, it just shifts it.

Rather than punishing a coalition that has realized administrative efficiencies and re-slicing an already inadequate pie, we should work together to "grow the pie" and ensure that everyone gets the right slice. Lawmakers need to adequately fund a successful program that lets families work outside the home while their children are in safe and stimulating early childhood programs.

That would be a wise investment, and fully consistent with helping children succeed in school and as citizens.

The gains we've made for children in Greater Miami build from partnerships - the Early Learning Coalition of Miami-Dade/Monroe, The Children's Trust, The Children's Movement of Florida, United Way of Miami-Dade, and other organizations - all working together on behalf of everyone's child and each child's future.

Adrian Alfonso is board chair of the Early Learning Coalition of Miami-Dade/Monroe. David Lawrence Jr. chairs The Children's Movement of Florida.





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