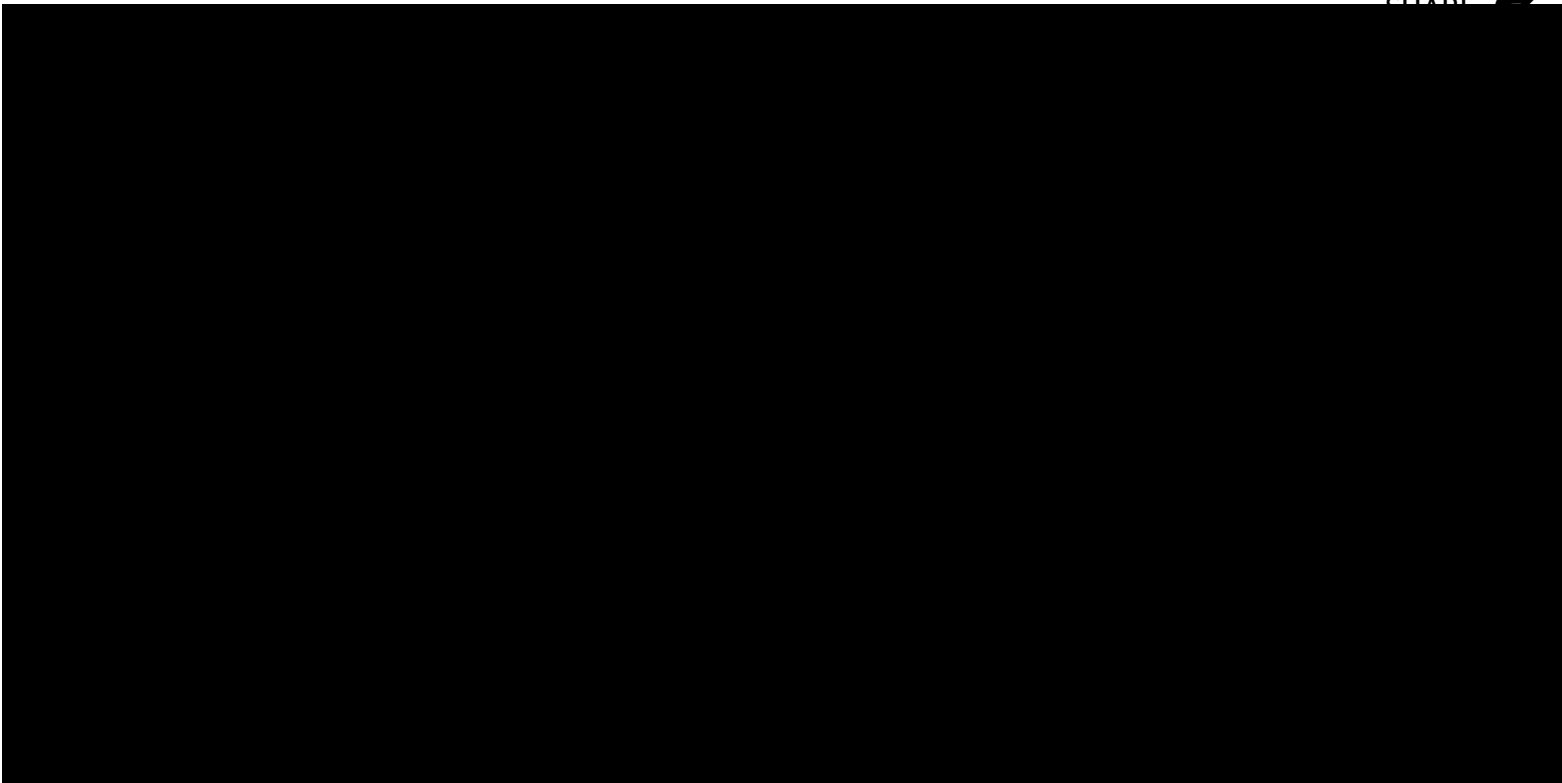




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## Here's how the controversial new schools law will impact South Florida

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School districts in South Florida are bracing for the financial impacts of a controversial \$419 million K-12 public schools bill Gov. Rick Scott signed into law Thursday afternoon.

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The bill, HB 7069, includes a provision that will force districts to share millions of local tax dollars earmarked for school construction with charter schools, which critics say could be devastating to cash-strapped traditional public schools.

“In five years we would in essence be transferring \$250 million — a quarter of a billion dollars — outside of the school system,” said Miami-Dade Schools Superintendent Alberto Carvalho. This will force the school district to delay, cancel or reduce the scope of existing construction projects and impact the district’s ability to pay for school maintenance, Carvalho said.

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The law will also slash construction funding in Broward County, cutting \$100 million over the next five years from the school district’s budget, according to Broward Schools Superintendent Robert Runcie.

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“This is not about whether we’re opposed to charters or not,” Runcie said. “The issue here is that we absolutely don’t believe that we should have our innovative district schools disadvantaged at the expense of charter schools. You’re pitting two types of schools against each other instead of focusing on ensuring that there’s adequate funding.”

But charter school advocates say the bill provides much-needed financial support to help the publicly-funded, privately managed schools pay for their own construction needs. Charter schools have long argued that they aren’t getting a fair share of public funds to support the building and maintenance of school facilities.

“At the end of the day what the bill does for charter schools is it just creates equity in funding,” said Ralph Arza, the head of government relations for the Florida Charter School Alliance. “The more resources a charter school has, the more things it can do with it. You can build a gym, you can build a computer lab.”

Arza added that the Miami-Dade school district has been able to pay for new school construction with \$1.2 billion funded by a bond voters approved in 2012, money charter schools don’t have access to.

Critics say the difference is that when it comes to charter schools, public funds could end up enriching private charter school management companies.

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**IN FIVE YEARS WE WOULD IN ESSENCE BE TRANSFERRING \$250 MILLION — A QUARTER OF A BILLION DOLLARS — OUTSIDE OF THE SCHOOL SYSTEM.**

Miami-Dade Schools Superintendent Alberto Carvalho

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“If and when some of them fail...there’s no provision that either the land or the buildings that were built or the buses that were bought or the computers that were bought with this capital money, none of that reverts back to the school district,” said Sen. Gary Farmer, D-Lighthouse Point.

Construction funds are far from the only controversy.

The massive 274-page bill also includes \$140 million in funding for a program legislators dubbed “Schools of Hope” promoted as a fix for perpetually failing public schools. The program will provide incentives for specialized charter school operators from across the country to come to low-income areas in Florida where existing neighborhood schools are struggling. But in a change from

the original proposal, it will also include a chance for traditional schools to receive state aid to improve their standing and pay for wraparound community services, such as after-school programs.

“We’re the third-largest state in the richest country in the world and we have 195 failure factories,” said House Speaker Richard Corcoran, R-Land O’Lakes, at a press conference in Orlando. “Those are kids who are being robbed of dignity and hope...Now they can get a world-class education.”

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Carvalho said it’s too early to tell which Miami-Dade schools might fall into the “Schools of Hope” program because annual school grades have yet to be released. He said he isn’t opposed to the program, however, since public school districts will be eligible for some of the program funds.

But for teachers, there are no guarantees. Teachers in struggling neighborhood schools won’t be guaranteed a job once the charter school operators move in, and at schools where teachers already face numerous challenges, the program will negatively impact teacher morale, said United Teachers of Dade president Karla Hernández-Mats.

“They are already working with limited resources, and the fact is that some of these achievement gaps are directly tied to poverty levels which teachers have no control over,” Hernández-Mats said. “Our teachers are using their best strategies to try to overcome all of those obstacles already. Add that they will have no job security, you are taking all incentives away from educators wanting to work in an underprivileged community.”

There are a host of other questions about the sweeping bill: Traditional public school advocates worry about changes in the allocation of Title I funding, federal dollars for low-income schools, that could impact district-wide programs like summer school. There’s also a controversial

provision in the bill that makes it possible for universities, churches and several other types of institutions to provide space for charter schools without getting a zoning exception, overriding local control over zoning decisions.

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While those provisions have ignited controversy and fueled campaigns to influence the governor on both sides, there are other provisions that enjoy broader local support. Chief among them: 20 minutes of mandatory daily recess for all kindergarten and elementary school students in traditional public schools.

Miami-Dade parents have been advocating for more play time for years, launching a grassroots campaign and traveling to Tallahassee to lobby legislators.

“This is a huge victory for our students,” said Kate Asturias, a Miami-Dade parent and member of the local Recess for Miami Students group. Florida is “leading in the health and wellness of our students and that is something to be incredibly proud of. I’m very, very happy about that,” she said. Asturias noted that despite advocacy from charter school parents, the provision only applies to traditional public schools, however.

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The bill also allocates \$30 million to expand the Gardiner Scholarship Program, a voucher program that helps kids with disabilities pay for their education needs, and includes roughly \$234 million for teacher bonuses.

Scott said these provisions would guarantee a brighter future for Florida students.

“When I was growing up, I had access to a good quality education, and every Florida child should have the same opportunity,” Scott said before signing the bill at Morning Star Catholic School in Orlando. “Florida’s K-12 education system is so important to the future of our children and our state, and we will never stop looking for ways to improve how our students learn and achieve.”

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Scott's decision to sign the bill sparked outrage on social media, but many critics acknowledge that the final outcome from the Legislature is an improvement over the original education proposals.

The Legislature initially voted to boost per-pupil spending by only \$24 per student, but Scott ordered lawmakers back to Tallahassee in early June for a three-day special session and directed them to come up with a new public schools budget. This resulted in a \$100 per student increase in funding over this school year, bringing the total K-12 budget to \$20.6 billion.

"It is a significantly improved outcome compared to the one that we were facing prior to the special session," Carvalho said. But, he added, it's still not enough to cover rising costs in expenses like health insurance, utilities, and retirement contributions. "Those cost increases put us in a position where there's a disconnect between the financial health of the state and the direct impact on Miami-Dade County Public Schools."

The one thing everyone seems to agree on is that the bill accelerates a growing trend in Florida, where charter schools and other school choice programs have been steadily expanding their reach in recent years.

"At the end of the day instead of complaining about what happens people should be looking to the future and realizing that there's a new educational landscape being created," said Arza from the Florida Charter School Alliance. "If you're fighting for the status quo in today's educational environment, you're going to be in trouble and you're going to be left behind."

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