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Alabama education officials to Congress: Don't take our Medicaid funding

By Mary Sell Montgomery Bureau Jul 16, 2017 Updated Jul 16, 2017



Sisk

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MONTGOMERY — Alabama school systems fear tens of millions of Medicaid dollars they receive each year to help pay for federally mandated services for children with special needs, including speech or occupational therapy and special equipment, are at risk.

Some schools also use the money for health screenings and the salaries of school nurses.



Sentance

Mickey Welsh

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Now, education leaders are afraid the federal reimbursements will go away as Congress considers a health care bill that curbs Medicaid spending, leaving the state and systems to make up the potential difference, or make cuts.

Limestone County Schools Superintendent Tom Sisk was on Capitol Hill last week, one of about 200 superintendents from around the nation, meeting with this state's and others' members of Congress about a variety of education issues. Medicaid was chief among them.



Maples

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If Medicaid spending is capped, and states are given more control over how the money is spent, Sisk sees a scenario where school children are competing with nursing home residents and hospitals for limited dollars. It's a fight they may not win.

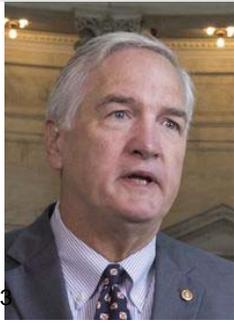
"The proposal would directly shift the cost to our state budgets," Sisk said Thursday. "We can't afford it right now."



Shelby

According to the Alabama Association of School Boards, Alabama's school systems have recouped \$331.4 million through a federal reimbursement program. In 2016 alone, Alabama schools received \$43.3 million in federal funding for the services provided, though that was just a fraction of schools' total costs.

The association has monitored the various versions of the health care reform bill, saying losing the Medicaid funding "would have a devastating impact on Alabama's school systems and leave some of the state's most vulnerable students at risk."



A senator's and senate hopefuls' reactions to school Medicaid concerns

“The federal government requires school systems to provide critical school-based services such as audiology, speech-language pathology and physical and occupational therapy to students,” association Executive Director Sally Smith said last week. “School systems are reimbursed for providing this necessary care to students who are low income and receiving special education services.

“If these cuts to Medicaid take place, Alabama’s already cash-strapped school systems will not only be forced to divert millions of dollars from the classroom to cover the hole, but also could be forced to lay off crucial school personnel such as nurses and social workers.”

Schools have been mandated for decades to provide services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. But Smith said the federal funding only covers about 20 percent of the total cost. The rest comes from the state and local funding.

The New York Times reported in May that nationwide, systems receive about \$4 billion in Medicaid reimbursements annually.

State Superintendent Michael Sentance mentioned Medicaid funding at last week’s state board of education meeting.

“We want to make sure everyone understands what that means for our public schools because it is a significant issue,” he told board members. Later, he said those federal dollars “are not easily replaced.”

Decatur City Schools most recently received \$320,000 in Medicaid reimbursements. That’s the equivalent to four teachers, Chief Financial Officer Melanie Maples said.

The Better Care Reconciliation Act, unveiled Thursday in the Senate, does not specifically mention school reimbursements. U.S. Sen. Richard Shelby’s office last week said the newest health care bill has exemptions for disabled children from per capita spending caps.

“While I continue to closely examine the Senate’s proposal, I support repealing and replacing the Affordable Care Act, which has led to skyrocketing costs and collapsing insurance markets,” Shelby said in a statement. “The Senate’s draft would help stabilize markets, free Americans from onerous mandates, and improve affordability of care. Additionally, the Senate draft gives states more flexibility related to Medicaid to ensure that those who depend on the program are able to use it while also putting the program on a more sustainable financial path.”

The latest version of the bill, which repeals much of former President Barack Obama's health care overhaul, hovered near failure as Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell strained to keep more Republicans from deserting, The Associated Press reported Friday. Complicating the effort, Ohio GOP Gov. John Kasich called the revised measure "still unacceptable," largely because of its cuts to Medicaid, the same concern that's been voiced by holdout Ohio Republican Sen. Rob Portman.

The Medicaid money Limestone receives benefits all children in the form of vision and hearing screens and school nurses, Sisk said.

The state gives his system \$35,000 to \$50,000 a year for nurses. That hires one nurse, but he needs more. He has 17 schools, all of which have diabetic children who need regular insulin shots. Some students have catheters or are on medications only a medical professional can administer.

Sisk said the system also has used the money to provide needy students with eyeglasses or send them to the dentist. Some might say that's not a school's responsibility, Sisk said. But a child who can't see or has a painful toothache isn't going to learn well.

"I have to take care of the whole child before I can educate him," Sisk said.

He also said that while children are a large part of the Medicaid population, they're less expensive than most other enrollees.

"Medicaid provides a service because there is a need," he said.

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