



SMITH HILL REPORT

A publication of the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals

2021 Edition



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WELCOME to the 2021 edition of the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals Annual Smith Hill Report. Throughout the legislative session, typically from January to July, our lobbyist Jim Parisi creates a weekly digital update to keep our members informed of the issues being considered by our General Assembly. Those reports can be accessed at <https://rifthp.org>. This special edition is a summary of the issues we were working on which were important to our members and our constituents.

Let me first begin by expressing my heartfelt appreciation for all of your efforts for the past eighteen months. In our schools, healthcare facilities, offices, and all of our various work sites, facing unique and complex challenges, you excelled. The response to the pandemic by our members in every sector was nothing short of heroic. On behalf of the Executive Councils of the American Federation of Teachers and the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals, thank you for your dedication, compassion, and professionalism. Your service and commitment are what makes us a strong union.

The 2021 session was unlike any we have previously experienced. The pandemic created numerous logistical challenges which forced us to find new and unique ways to interact with legislators on issues which were important to us, our members, and the communities we serve. Through innovative uses of technology and persistence we were able to achieve considerable success on a host of legislative initiatives.

By working together with our leaders, labor colleagues, and community partners Jim Parisi and I were actively engaged with our elected officials.

During this session we were successful in advocating for the passage of numerous bills introduced on our behalf. While we had much success, there is still unfinished business which we are working on. Particularly, our top priority issue from this year was the Charter School Expansion Moratorium. Which started out with great support from our friends in the Senate but met considerable resistance in the House and Governor's office. This edition of the Smith Hill Report will highlight that fight as well as many of the other issues we worked on this session. We will also recognize some of the elected officials who were instrumental in our success.

We hope you find this useful and informative. Thank you for your continued support and we look forward to even greater success in what we hope is a "post-pandemic" year ahead. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns, please feel free to email me at fflynn@rifthp.org.



Frank Flynn
President, RIFTHP

Charter School Moratorium Bill Stalls

THE TOP PRIORITY of the R. I. Federation of Teachers for this legislative session was our bill to create a moratorium on the creation or expansion of charter schools until a fair funding formula could be determined. With Senate Bill S13 sponsored by Senate Whip Maryellen Goodwin and the House companion bill H5193 sponsored by Representative Bill O'Brien we were hoping to get an early passage of this legislation prior to the final approval of six proposals being considered by the K-12 Council of the R. I. Board of Education. The vast majority of these new charter seats would be in Providence.



Lead Bill Sponsors Senator Maryellen Goodwin and Representative Bill O'Brien

Thanks to the Leadership of Senate Whip Goodwin with the support of Senate President Ruggiero and Majority Leader McCaffrey our bill had an early hearing before the Senate Education Committee Chaired by Senator Sandra Cano. Chair Cano did an outstanding job moderating the hearing as over two hundred people signed up to testify on the bill, the majority of whom identified as employees or board members of charter schools.



Senate President Dominic Ruggiero, Majority Leader Mike McCaffrey and Senator Sandra Cano

President Frank Flynn testified that passage of this bill is about saving educational opportunities for the over twenty thousand public school students from Providence, Central

Falls, and North Providence who will have their schools' resources slashed to fund the creation and expansion of these charters. It is estimated that when these expansions are fully implemented the Providence Public Schools will have to cut between \$80-100 million dollars. This will result in building closures, program and staff elimination, and the reduction of educational supports and activities for traditional public-school students. Neither Mayor Elorza nor anyone from RIDE were able to identify how that loss in funds would be offset or what the cities' plan to proceed without this much needed revenue would be.

After the lengthy hearing the Senate Education Committee voted 8 to 1 in support of the bill. The bill was then forwarded to the Senate floor where it passed by a vote of 30 to 6. In an unusual move the House version, H 5193 sponsored by Representative O'Brien, was assigned to the House Finance Committee as opposed to HEW where charter bills were traditionally assigned. On March 25th the bill was heard in Committee on a Zoom meet. Similar to the Senate Hearing the testimony was packed with charter school employees who were bashing traditional public schools. The House Finance Committee voted to hold the bill for further study.

We were certainly disappointed in the results this year but will be more resolved to getting this issue favorably resolved next year (which happens to be an election year).

Over the rest of the legislative session both Jim and Frank had conversations with numerous members of the House leadership including a meeting with Speaker Shekarchi, Majority Leader Blazejewski, and Representative Amore. There was clearly a reluctance to pass a moratorium during this session and the bill was never voted out of committee. We were disappointed that the bill never came to a vote even though there was a high likelihood that Governor McKee would have vetoed it. The Speaker has indicated that he would be willing to consider the issue of the disparity in charter school funding and support legislation that addressed the issue in the next session. Among the possible issues which will be discussed is creating a cap on the number of charter seats each district can have similar to what is done in Massachusetts.

RIDE Proposal to Divert Funds from Visually Impaired Students Mobilizes RIFTHP Members

The Rhode Island Vision Education Services Program (RIVESP) has provided quality services to visually impaired students throughout our state for over fifteen years. They are a state supported agency housed at the Sherlock Center for Disabilities at Rhode Island College. RIVESP is staffed by 10 teachers certified to provide services to students with visual impairments (TVI's) and three who are certified to provide orientation and mobilization services (O+M's).


In February of this year, after a fifteen-year relationship, RIDE informed the Sherlock Center, and by extension Rhode Island College, that they were no longer going to allocate a \$650,000 IDEA grant to the Sherlock Center which represents the only state funds used to service this agency. Instead, they indicated that they were going to reallocate those funds for a professional development program and that they were going to eliminate the single source contract currently in effect and issue a request for proposal for a Master Price Agreement. Unfortunately, due to these actions by RIDE the RIC administration found itself in a position which forced them to issue layoff notices to all thirteen RIVESP employees and potentially dismantle their program.

This heartless action, sprung upon the families and service providers of these students with little or no public discussion, created a major backlash. RIFTHP Local 1171, and its President Cheryl Glowacki, who represents the Teachers of Visually Impaired (TVI's) along with the parents, teachers, community members, and many other allies jumped into action.

The groups' outreach included contacting multiple media outlets who were all willing to air the story and expose how RIDE's arbitrary decision could have a devastating impact on this vulnerable population. In addition, Cheryl, and her members along with RIFTHP President Frank Flynn reached out to numerous members of the General Assembly seeking their support. Senate President Domenic Ruggiero along with Senator Val Lawson were strong advocates as well as Speaker Joseph Shekarchi and Representatives, Julie Casimiro, Tom Noret, Bill O'Brien, and Ray Hull. It was a concerted effort by many advocates which also included Governor Dan McKee.

Additionally, Local 1171 filed a motion in Superior Court seeking a temporary restraining order against Commissioner Green and RIDE to prevent the unnecessary layoffs of these dedicated professionals and longtime state employees.

After numerous meetings, calls, and Zoom conferences a favorable solution was reached. The Governor, Speaker, Senate President and RIC President Frank Sanchez held a press conference at the Sherlock Center on the Rhode Island College Campus. They announced the restoration of \$670K IDEA funds from RIDE, a one-year extension of the agreement to house RIVESP at Sherlock, and the creation of a legislative study commission to evaluate our service delivery model for visually impaired students to ensure that RIVESP is properly funded in the future.

Overall, it was an outstanding effort in support of our students, their teachers, and the families involved. We are grateful for the efforts of all our supporters. Thanks to everyone involved, justice was served. 


Successful Higher Education Initiatives

The RIC AFT faculty union spearheaded a legislative campaign to **increase state funding of Rhode Island College**. RIC, along with other public higher education institutions in Rhode Island and around the country have had years of shrinking state appropriations. The College administration requested a budget increase, but the Governor's proposed budget submitted in March essentially level-funded the College.

The RIC AFT sprung into action, working together with RIC administrators, alumni leaders and other staff to implement a legislative campaign to increase state funding by the requested \$5.9 million. RIC AFT members made rounds of phone calls to legislators in support of increased RIC funding. RIC AFT leaders met with a series of legislative leaders to emphasize the importance of supporting RIC. Fact sheets were distributed and testimony offered at hearings. Ultimately, the budget bill adopted by the Assembly increased Rhode Island College funding by the full \$5.9 million requested.

Another higher education issue was the proposed extension of the **Rhode Island Promise program** at CCRI. The original plan was enacted for three years, and was set to expire without a legislative extension. Bills were introduced by Senate President Dominick Ruggiero (S 79A) and Speaker of the House Joseph Shekarchi (H 5224A) to make the pilot RI Promise Program permanent. The RIFTHP supported the bills while arguing that a similar program needs to be created for students at Rhode Island College. The Assembly passed the bills and the governor signed the legislation making the CCRI RI Promise Program permanent.

For the past decade, there has been a regulation in our State that Rhode Island high school graduates who meet certain eligibility guidelines would be considered Rhode Islanders for the purpose of determining tuition regardless of their immigration status. Rather than being charged more expensive out-of-state tuition, these Rhode Island high school graduates would be charged in-state tuition at public higher education institutions as long as they were in RI schools for at least three years.


Legislation was introduced by Representative Grace Diaz (H 5238) and Senator Sandra Cano (S 990) to put this policy into state law. The RIFTHP has testified in support of this initiative in the Rhode Island statehouse consistently for years. The AFT has supported similar national legislation (known as the DREAM Act) on the federal level. This year, the legislation passed and has signed into law. 

Direct Support Professionals Garner Significant Pay Hike

The RIFTHP represents Direct Support Professionals (DSP) at the J. Arthur Trudeau Memorial Center. The RIFTHP has actively engaged in numerous legislative efforts to increase pay for this group of workers. DSPs provide support for those with intellectual and developmental disabilities in residential settings and in the community.

The state of Rhode Island has been under judicial review for a period of time based on its failure to meet the needs of adults with developmental disabilities. Former Governor Lincoln Chaffee signed a consent decree committing to improve services. One necessary step to improve services is to increase the pay of DSPs because of the constant turnover in staff and loss of experienced staff directly impacts the quality of services.


In response to the significant problems in staffing at agencies that support individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, the judicial officers encouraged a significant wage increase this year. Governor McKee proposed a \$39.7 budget increase to support a DSP pay raise of approximately \$2.53 per hour. The RIFTHP supported the budget change. The Assembly adopted the funding proposal and DSP pay raises will be implemented this year.

As a result of the increased state funding, DSPs at the Trudeau Center realized a \$2.57/hour pay raise in July and were also able to get their additional 4% raise six months earlier than scheduled. 

Certified School Nurse Teacher Bills Enacted Into Law

Two important bills related to Certified School Nurse Teachers were enacted into law this year. Both bills, supported by the Certified School Nurse Teacher Association and the RIFTHP, address student safety by enhancing staffing standards in our schools.

Several years ago, the Board of Education adopted new certification regulations that allowed public schools to hire RNs who have not obtained specialized training to be a certified school nurse teacher. In response to the diminishment of staffing standards, legislation was introduced by Representative Arthur Corvese and Senator Frank Ciccone to require school nurse hires to meet the certification standards that had been in existence for decades. The bill was opposed by school superintendents and RIDE. The legislation passed and became law without the Governor's signature.


Another bill supported by the RIFTHP and school nurses was legislation to regulate school health clinics. Providence Teachers Union President Maribeth Calabro and several Providence School Nurse Teachers also testified in support of the bill. The legislation introduced by Senator Maryellen Goodwin would require the Department of Health to adopt school clinic regulations by January 2022. One of the requirements of the law is that school health clinics be staffed with Certified School Nurse Teachers. Other regulations to be considered include family communication, patient referral processes and care coordination. Representative Karen Alzate introduced a House companion bill that also passed into law. Both school health clinic regulation bills were signed by Governor McKee. 

Additional School Legislative Highlights

The RIFTHP testified in support of several education initiatives that became law this year. Some of the key education initiatives enacted this session are:

Career and Technical Education Program Approval (Shanley and Gallo) – The bills allow students to attend out-of-district CTE programs that are Career and Technical Education (CTE) Board approved provided that the host district does not offer a “substantially similar” program. The bills also require the Board to annually issue a report to RIDE on CTE program quality, funding and other issues.

Safe Schools Act (Ruggerio and Kazarian) – These bills includes those with a permit to carry a concealed firearm to the prohibition of possession of firearms in schools. The bills exclude police officers from the prohibition.

Streamlined ELL Certification (Biah and Quezada) – These bills direct RIDE to provide a streamlined certification to teach English Language Learners and provides reciprocity for those holding the Massachusetts Sheltered English immersion (SEI) endorsement. The bills also directs the regulations to provide classes for teachers at the school level. 

Education Curriculum Bill Highlights

Two years ago, the General Assembly enacted major education curriculum legislation that focused on state curriculum and curricular materials on core subject areas. The Rhode Island Department of education is working to put that curriculum initiative into action. This session, a host of other areas were addressed as the General Assembly passed a series of other education curriculum legislation. Bills passed by the Assembly and signed by the Governor include:


Civics Education (Gallo and Newberry) – These bills require a half-credit or half-course in civics for secondary school students. Districts must also provide at least one student-led civics project to students.

African-American History (Williams and Mack) – These bills require RIDE collect and disseminate curricular materials and resources on African Heritage History. Each school district shall include a unit of instruction in African Heritage History commencing in the 2022-2023 school year.

Anti-Littering and Recycling Education (Felag and Messier) – These bills require RIDE, in collaboration with RI Resource Recovery, to create presentations on litter prevention and recycling awareness for all grade levels.

Holocaust and Genocide Education (Kislak and Goldin) – These bills create a permanent thirteen-member Commission that includes the Presidents of the RIFTHP and the NEA/RI. The Commission shall gather and disseminate Holocaust and Genocide education information, inventory existing education programs, plan activities and work to promote education programs related to the Holocaust and genocide.

Consumer Education (Ackerman and Cano) – These bills require RIDE to develop high school statewide academic standards in consumer education no later than December 31, 2021. The bills require each high school to offer a course in consumer education commencing in the 2022-2023 school year.

Suicide Prevention Training (Seveney and Cortvriend) – These bills require annual training on suicide awareness and prevention for all school staff, including contract employees. The bills also require RIDE to develop a list of acceptable training materials. The bills further require that all districts adopt a student suicide prevention policy. 



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