

March 25, 2024

### **State Employee Longevity Restoration**

On Tuesday, March 19, 2024, the RIFTHP provided verbal and written testimony in support of legislation to restore longevity pay for Rhode Island state employees. [S 2310](#) by Senator Ciccone was heard in the Senate Finance Committee. RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi wrote a [letter](#) and spoke in support of the effort to overturn a 2011 General Assembly action to freeze longevity pay for those currently receiving it and preventing unions from negotiating longevity pay in future contracts. He described the move as a 20% reduction of state employee compensation over time, a major contributing factor to problems in recruiting and retaining state workers. He criticized the Assembly action to limit the scope of collective bargaining, noting that some State Agency Human Resources Managers understand that the lack of longevity pay contributes to difficulty in filling vacancies and are disadvantaged because the law restricts bargaining. Several AFSCME Council 94 leaders and the NEA/RI also testified in support of the bill, which was held for further study.

### **Education Budget Cuts**

The Senate Finance Committee and the Senate Education Committee held a joint hearing on March 19, 2024 to review the Rhode Island Department of Education budget and [Article 8](#) of the State budget. RIFTHP Lobbyist James Parisi lauded two components of Article 8 and offered sharp criticism of the proposed \$26 million education aid cut. He supported the provisions of Article 8 that increased education funding for multilingual learners by \$14 million and the other provision that added \$800,000 to subsidize meals for those eligible for reduced-price lunch. His criticism was directed at the McKee proposal to limit the cost index increase used in the education funding formula that resulted in a \$26 million reduction in school funding this year. The cut will also reduce education aid to school districts in future years. By using a 5-year average of costs, McKee's proposal guarantees a loss of education funding whenever inflation rises.

The RIFTHP encourages members to voice opposition to the education aid reduction proposed by Governor McKee and question the skewed priorities of a budget which proposes a paltry \$14 million increase for public school districts while earmarking \$20 million more for charter school expansion.

### **State Funding for Teacher Professional Development**

Senator Melissa Murray has renewed her efforts to get the State of Rhode Island to invest money into teacher professional development. She has submitted legislation [S 2365](#), which would require the state to provide \$200 per student to each school district. This would provide approximately \$27 million per year for school districts to provide professional development programs for teachers and staff. Her legislation

preserves the district committee in existing state law comprised of three teacher representatives and two Superintendent representatives to make expenditure decisions to ensure the money is spent on programs valued by teachers.

RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi testified in support of the bill that was heard in the Senate Finance Committee on March 19, 2024. He reminded the Committee that the state used to set aside money each year for teacher professional development. That funding, known as Article 31 money, was eliminated from the state budget during the 2009 recession and was never restored. Parisi supported having spending decisions made by practitioners instead of by those who do not spend time in the classroom. He also noted the myriad of General Assembly curriculum mandates (such as Right to Read) that had no state money to support training. The Committee held the bill for further study.

### **Captive Audience Meetings**

RIFTHP President Frank Flynn submitted a [letter](#) in support of legislation by Senator LaMountain meant to prohibit employers from requiring workers to attend meetings to discuss unionization, politics, or religion. [S 2785](#) was heard in the Senate Labor Committee on March 20, 2024. In his letter, Flynn argued that some employers require workers to attend meetings supporting a specific political ideology or to listen to anti-union rhetoric. Captive audience meetings are often used by employers to coerce workers into opposing unionization efforts. The RI AFL-CIO and other unions supported the bill. The Senate Labor Committee voted to hold the bill for further study.

### **School Vouchers**

Two school voucher bills using different terminology were heard in the Senate Finance Committee hearing on March 19, 2024. The RIFTHP provided verbal and written testimony against both measures. [S 2053](#) by Senator de la Cruz and [S 2340](#) by Senator Morgan would siphon off tens of millions of dollars from public education to subsidize private and parochial schools in Rhode Island. RIFTHP Lobbyist James Parisi argued that public schools are currently underfunded, and if there were available state dollars to spend on education, then the money should be spent on public education. Other than the bill sponsors, no one testified in support of the legislation. The NEA/RI joined the RIFTHP in opposing the bills.

### **Occupational Licenses**

Legislation by Senator Paolino would require the State to recognize out-of-state licenses and teaching certificates but who would not help those holding Rhode Island licenses work in other states. [S 2690](#) was considered in the Senate Labor Committee on March 20, 2024. RIFTHP Lobbyist James Parisi [submitted](#) a short [letter](#) opposing the bill, similar to a letter sent two weeks ago when the House version of the legislation was considered. Parisi objected to legislation that includes the title “reciprocity” but does not legislate reciprocity to the detriment of Rhode Islanders holding professional and occupational licenses.

### **Public Librarian Affirmative Defense**

Following a widely publicized case in Westerly, legislation was introduced to protect public library employees from being charged under Rhode Island's obscenity statute while performing their role curating books and other material. [H 7575](#), sponsored by Representative Morales was heard in the House Judiciary Committee on Thursday, March 21, 2024. RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi submitted written testimony in support of the bill. In his [letter](#), Parisi wrote "Rhode Island is one of a handful of states that does not specifically protect librarians and other employees from charges under state obscenity laws. Forty-four states have some type of protection from prosecution for certain professions or types of workplaces. Thirty-one of those states specifically protect librarians from prosecution when working under the scope of their professional responsibilities. Rhode Island is not among the forty-four states that provide some protection from prosecution". The Committee voted to hold the bill for further study.

### **Innovation Schools**

During a hearing of the Providence Public Schools Senate Study Commission, witnesses discussed the concept of Innovation Schools, where a school could apply to operate independently of the school district in an effort to promote experimentation. Senator de la Cruz introduced a bill to create Innovation Schools in the Senate and Representative Sherry Roberts introduced a House version. [H 7723](#) was heard in the House Education Committee on March 20, 2024. James Parisi testified against the bill. He informed the Committee that a similar provision was enacted in Rhode Island in 2016 called Empowerment Schools promoted by former Commissioner Ken Wagner. He argued that the bill duplicates existing law and is not needed. When asked how Employment Schools are doing, Parisi admitted he could not answer the question because no schools have been created since the law's passage eight years ago.

### **Student Discipline Code Revisions**

Representative David Morales submitted comprehensive legislation to re-write the state student discipline code statute. [H 7869](#) would require school districts to provide alternatives to out-of-school suspension. The bill was crafted by students and was supported by the organization Young Voices. The ACLU, Rhode Island Kids Count, and PLEE (Parents Leading for Educational Equity) also testified in support of the bill. The RIFTHP supported some aspects of the bill but criticized others. James Parisi told the Committee that the RIFTHP fully supports alternative education programs for students who would otherwise be out of class for disciplinary reasons. He asked the Committee to ensure that districts were allocated the financial resources necessary to fund these mandates for such programs. He criticized the portion of the bill that would make it more difficult to suspend disruptive students. He also objected to the portion of the bill that would require additional teacher training without providing time during the normal workday. The Committee held the bill for further study.

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## Bill Introductions

### **Student Success Factor Rate Increase**

([S 2357](#), Murray, Senate Finance)

([H 7909](#), Casey, House Finance)

These bills would provide that in local educational agencies when over forty-five percent (45%) of the children have a family income that is at or below one hundred eighty-five percent (185%) of federal poverty guidelines then the student success factor will be fifty percent (50%) by the core instruction per-pupil amount.

### **Early Intervention Rate Increase**

([S 2359](#), Valverde, Senate Finance)

([H 7334](#), Cotter, House Finance)

These bills would direct the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) to increase Medicaid rates for the early intervention programs allowing for payment of competitive wages for qualified professionals. These bills would further change the title of the section from early intervention program for developmentally disabled infants to early intervention program for infants and toddlers with developmental delays and/or disabilities and update the basic program requirements and name of the state agency responsible for the program to be the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) which has been overseeing the early intervention program under Part C of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Act.

### **Student Success Factor - RIDE Review**

([S 2364](#), Murray, Senate Finance)

([H 7908](#), Casey, House Finance)

These bills would require a review by the department of elementary and secondary education of the formula components used to compute the aid needed to support high need students.

### **State Funded Teacher Professional Development**

([S 2365](#), Murray, Senate Finance)

This bill would restructure the professional development investment fund to assume duties of dissemination of curriculum materials aligned with curriculum frameworks, state assessments, and implement district Professional Development plans with an allocation of two hundred dollars (\$200) per student for fiscal year 2025.

### **Higher Education Post Retirement Employment Eligibility**

([S 2367](#), Sosnowski, Senate Finance)

This bill would expand the post-retirement positions that any retired member in the state retirement system could have at a state college or university, to include positions outside of teaching, but would maintain the same cap on the amount of money that person could be paid for part-time work.

### **Registration Of Home Care Nursing Assistants**

([S 2381](#), Felag, Senate Health & Human Services)

This bill would establish the position of home care nursing assistants, who are paraprofessionals licensed by the department of health to work exclusively in home care and would require training specific to home-based care for vulnerable homebound patients.

### **BHDDH Employee Crime Registry**

([S 2383](#), Burke, Senate Health & Human Services)

([H 7643](#), Noret, House Judiciary)

These bills would require the director of the Department of Behavioral Healthcare, Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals (BHDDH) to establish and maintain a registry of employees found to be in violation of and disciplined for any felony offense, any misdemeanor crime of dishonesty or offense involving the use of any illegal substance. The registry would be publicly accessible online and updated regularly and the director would promulgate guidelines and procedures to implement its provisions.

### **Parents Bill of Rights Act**

([S 2424](#), Morgan, Senate Judiciary)

([H 7781](#), Morgan, House Education)

These bills would provide for a parents' bill of rights preventing the state or any governmental entity from infringing on the fundamental rights of parents in the upbringing of their children. These bills would spell out the rights of parents with respect to the health, education, and welfare of their minor children. Violations of the bills would result in civil, criminal and/or administrative penalties.

### **Teacher Contract Negotiations - Open Meetings**

([S 2464](#), de la Cruz, Senate Labor)

This bill would provide for those public meetings involving Collective Bargaining Agreements of schoolteachers to be open to the public.

### **Student Asthma Data Collection**

([S 2515](#), Cano, Senate Education)

([H 7195](#), McNamara, House Education)

These bills would authorize a one-year pilot program during the 2024-2025 school year. This program would involve the Department of Health, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, the state office of Medicaid, and the RI Data Hub. The program would provide outreach and tracking at two (2) public high schools and two (2) public middle schools to address issues of asthma and attendance among students. The pilot program team would report findings and recommendations to the governor and the general assembly by November 7, 2025.

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