

The

SMITH HILL REPORT



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Disclosure of Education Materials

On Wednesday, March 27, the House Education Committee held a hearing on [H 7873](#) by Representative Sherry Roberts. The bill would require school districts to post on-line all education materials used in public schools by teachers and give parents an opportunity to opt out of specific lessons. The material would have to be posted at least seven days prior to its use. Charter schools would be provided with a less rigorous requirement under the Roberts legislation.

RIFTHP President Frank Flynn penned a [letter](#) opposing the legislation. In his letter, he described the bill as onerous, unnecessary, and demeaning. He wrote: *“Our teachers and administrators have dedicated their professional careers to supporting their students, often under extremely difficult conditions. Wasting an enormous amount of time, energy, and resources to upload volumes of data which would not do anything to improve educational outcomes in our schools would be a travesty.”*

“Parent teacher communication is vitally important for student success. This bill would not do anything to improve that dialogue. This would merely force administrators and teachers to spend valuable time, which could be spent improving instructional practices, on a meaningless task.”

Also offering written testimony against the bill was Secretary of State Gregg Amore, PFLAG, Thundermist, and Planned Parenthood. The House Education Committee voted to hold the bill for further study.

Education Budget Cuts

The Rhode Island Department of Education budget hearing was held on Wednesday, March 27 in the House Finance Committee hearing room. The hearing was conducted by the Education Subcommittee, chaired by Representative Scott Slater of Providence. The hearing was held to discuss the proposed education aid formula and specific budget changes impacting the Department of Education programs and staff.

RIFTHP President Frank Flynn testified at the hearing. He repeated RIFTHP’s objection to the education funding change Governor McKee proposed in Article 8 that would reduce aid for school districts by a whopping \$26 million this year and similar amounts in future years. President Flynn voiced support for the proposal that funded literacy and math coaches despite there not being a plan for how the money will be spent. This is a one-time allocation using unspent ESSER funds and will not likely be sustained. He reminded the Committee that the State has not provided money for teacher professional development for fifteen years despite a number of unfunded legislative mandates requiring extensive training.

Frank Flynn also testified in support of the Governor’s plan to increase education funding for multilanguage learners. He supported the measure to increase funding for student meals by \$800,000 while repeating RIFTHP’s support for universal free school breakfast and lunch. Finally, he criticized the budget proposal that provided a \$14 million increase for our traditional public-school districts that educate 90% of Rhode Island students compared to a \$20 million increase for charter school expansion.

Student Discipline

On Wednesday, March 27, the Senate Education Committee took testimony on two bills impacting school district discipline policy. [S 2143](#) by Senator Quezada would add restrictions to school districts considering the suspension of elementary school students. The bill would require school psychologists or other mental health professionals determine that student behavior “*presents a threat to the physical safety or health of others which cannot be reduced or eliminated through intervention and supports*” before a suspension is issued. RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi testified in opposition to the bill. He opposed efforts to prevent school administrators from enforcing reasonable and necessary behavioral standards of students. Classroom teachers believe we need stronger enforcement of behavioral standards, not less. Testifying in support of the bill was the American Civil Liberties Union.

The Senate Education Committee also heard testimony on [S 2525](#) by Senator Mack. The bill mirrors a bill by Representative Morales that was heard in the House Education Committee two weeks ago. The bill requires school districts to offer education programs as an alternative to out-of-school suspensions and requires the program to be run by certified staff. The bill creates a set of steps that must be taken before a school suspension is issued. James Parisi testified on the bill, supporting some aspects of the bill and opposing others. He supported provisions related to requiring alternative education programs as an option instead of out-of-school suspensions. Parisi opposed portions of the bill that would impede student suspension. He asked that the Assembly provide resources should they want to mandate alternative education programs. Finally, he opposed the portion of the bill mandating additional training of teachers. The bill was supported by the ACLU, PLEE, Young Voices, ARISE and Kids Count.

Providence Public Schools Study Commission

There have been thirteen meetings of Senator Zurier’s legislative study commission on Providence Public Schools. Providence Teachers Union President, Maribeth Calabro and RIFTHP Organizer Jeremy Sencer serve on the Commission. On March 18, 2024, the Commission held a discussion of the second draft of the [report](#). Both President Calabro and Jeremy Sencer voiced vigorous opposition to the legislative proposals and other aspects of the report by the Commission. President Calabro’s [written testimony](#) and Jeremy Sencer’s [written testimony](#) are included here.

The report reflects invited public testimony on collaborative labor relations between school administration and teacher unions. The draft report contains many aspirational findings and recommendations. Unfortunately, the specific legislative recommendations drafted by Senator Zurier target teacher rights and ignore continued administrative authoritarian malfunction. Among the objectionable legislative recommendations included in the draft report are proposals to:

- Reduce seniority rights in case of teacher layoffs.
- Change the tenure law to ease a district’s ability to terminate teachers.
- Change statutory provisions for a teacher pay scale based on seniority.

The ideas behind the report were spearheaded by an Op Ed piece written by former Providence Superintendent Susan Lusi and former Providence Teachers Union President Steve Smith, both of whom served as nonvoting members of the Commission. The Commission is expected to reconvene and adopt a final report later in late April.

Bill Introductions

Training School Age of Admission

([H 7642](#), Stewart, House Judiciary)

([S 2775](#), Acosta, Senate Judiciary)

These bills would prohibit the family court from detaining any juvenile or committing any juvenile, under the age of fourteen (14) years, to the training school, for any offense other than murder, first degree sexual assault, or an attempt to commit such offenses, and the court determines that there is no other reasonable placement to ensure the safety of the juvenile and the general public.

Parent Consent - IEP Process

([H 7721](#), Kislak, House Education)

([S 2526](#), DiMario, Senate Education)

These bills would outline the requirements and process for local education agencies to get written parental consent before conducting an evaluation, reevaluation, making an initial placement or changes in placement or the individual education program of a student in a special education program of services. Section 16-24-1.1(l) would take effect upon passage. The remainder of these bills would take effect on July 1, 2025.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion Education Curriculum

([H 7722](#), Vella-Wilkinson, House Education)

This bill would promote the integration of diversity, equity, and inclusion principles and direct the department of elementary and secondary education to develop curricular programs and materials on how schools can best incorporate instruction on and principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion, into a school's curriculum. The department would consider recommendations from the Rhode Island teacher's advisory council. This council would also provide the department with recommendations on how to ensure principles of DEI are included and incorporated into the hiring process for teachers, teacher assistants, and other school education staff.

Innovation Schools

([H 7723](#), Roberts, House Education)

([S 2284](#), de la Cruz, Senate Education)

These bills would allow for the establishment of innovative schools for the purpose of improving school performance and student achievement through increased autonomy and flexibility.

Discrimination in Schools – Hairstyles

([H 7724](#), Henries, House Education)

([S 2195](#), Mack, Senate Judiciary)

These bills would prohibit discrimination based on race by expanding the definition of race to include traits historically associated with race, including, but not limited to, hair texture and protective hairstyles.

Emergency Teaching Certificate Duration

([H 7725](#), O'Brien, House Education)

([S 2846](#), Bissaillon, Senate Education)

These bills would allow emergency preliminary certificates for teaching to be issued for up to a total of five (5) years.

School Closure Procedure

([H 7726](#), Morales, House Education)

This bill would require specific actions and procedures that a public school district and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education would follow as a part of their proposal to phase out, merge or close a public school.

Student Athletes - Gender Definitions

([H 7727](#), Morgan, House Education)

([S 2660](#), Morgan, Senate Judiciary)

These bills would categorize women by their biological identity at birth rather than their gender identity for purpose of organized sports. A team would be categorized as males, men, or boys; females, women, or girls; or co-ed or mixed. If there is a dispute, a student would establish sex by presenting a signed physician's statement that shall indicate the student's sex. Additionally, this bill would create a cause of action for any student who is deprived of an athletic opportunity or subject to retaliation as a result of violations of this chapter.

\$30,000,000 For School Safety and Security Improvements

([H 7772](#), Rea, House Finance)

([S 2011](#), Rogers, Senate Finance)

These resolutions would authorize the appropriation of the sum of \$100,000 to each public school in Rhode Island for school safety and security improvements.

Council On Postsecondary Education - Additional Duties

([H 7779](#), Giraldo, House Education)

([S 2521](#), Acosta, Senate Education)

These bills would assign additional duties to the commissioner of postsecondary education, including, but not limited to, preparing a strategic plan for public higher education which is aligned with the goals of the board of education's strategic plan, and which would provide for equitable distribution of public funds. These bills would also provide that any policies and goals adopted would have an outcomes-based model emphasizing outcomes across a range of variables.

Questions

RIFTHP members with questions about the Smith Hill Report or our legislative agenda may reach out to RIFTHP Lobbyist James Parisi at (401) 273-9800 or at jparisi@rifthp.org.

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