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# SMITH HILL REPORT



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## **Threats Against School Employees**

On Thursday, April 4, the Senate Judiciary Committee held a hearing on a number of bills, including [S 2683](#) by Senator Tikoian. S 2683 would amend that existing statute that determines that threats against certain public officials is considered a felony. The bill would specifically add the phrase, “a school superintendent, central office official, school principal, and all other school employees,” to the definition of a public official protected by the law. The RIFTHP submitted a [letter](#) in support of the legislation. In that letter, RIFTHP President Frank Flynn informed the committee of the schools have growing incidents of abhorrent behavior in schools and at school meetings, necessitating passage of the bill. Threats against school employees should be dealt with in a firm manner, and the RIFTHP supports passage of the bill. The Superintendents Association initiated the legislation. The ACLU testified against the bill along with the other felony threat bills. The Senate Judiciary Committee voted to hold the bill for further study.

## **Scope of Bargaining – Naming a Medical Insurer**

In 2008, the Rhode Island General Assembly passed a law that prohibited public sector Collective Bargaining Agreements over the objections of the RIFTHP and other public sector unions. Since that time, Collective Bargaining Agreements have included a summary of benefits and insurance plan designs, but not the name of the insurance company. H 7107 introduced by Representative Anthony DeSimone would reverse the 2008 law and permit unions and employers to name medical insurance plans. [HB 7107](#) was heard in the House Labor Committee, on Wednesday, April 3, 2024.

RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi testified in support of the bill. He acknowledged that since 2008, contracts have added plan designs to many contracts, often as an appendix. He described medical insurance being both an issue of plan design as well as networks, and that whenever a change in insurer is contemplated, union members’ first questions is whether or not their doctor is part of the network of the new provider.

Naming a medical insurer is a means of picking a provider network, which is just as important as the plan design of an insurance policy. Parisi testified that a health plan with great benefits is not worth much if many doctors or hospitals in Rhode Island are not in the plan. Also supporting the bill was the AFL-CIO and AFSCME Council 94. Opposition to the bill was registered by the School Committees Association, the League of Cities and Towns, and the State Department of Administration. The Committee held the bill for further study.

### **Right to an Adequate Education**

On Wednesday, April 3, the Senate Education Committee took testimony on [S 2147](#) by Senator Roger Picard. The bill would put a question on the ballot for voters to decide if the Rhode Island Constitution should provide for the right to an adequate education. The RIFTHP submitted a [letter](#) of support for the bill. In that letter, James Parisi urged passage of the bill. He noted that Rhode Island's education funding trajectory would have been more like Massachusetts had our constitution contained the same right.

The bill passed the Senate in past years but had not received support from the House of Representatives. Senator Picard introduced the bill and Tim Duffy of the RI Association of School Committees testified in support of the bill. The ACLU and Kids Count also offered their support for the legislation. The Senate Education Committee voted to hold the bill for further study.

### **Municipal Employee Binding Arbitration**

On Wednesday, April 3, the House Labor Committee heard legislation to create a system of binding arbitration for the process of negotiating collective bargaining agreements. [H 7200](#) would amend the existing binding arbitration law to include all issues, including wages. Municipal employee bargaining law currently permits binding arbitration if the parties cannot reach agreement, but arbitration awards are not binding on matters involving the expenditure of money. The bill also adds a new section of law to create standards which an arbitrator would use in issuing an arbitration award.

RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi submitted [written testimony](#) in support of the bill. The RIFTHP represents school staff who bargain under the Municipal Employee Bargaining Law in Woonsocket, Coventry, Cranston, and North Providence. He stated his belief that binding arbitration on all matters would encourage both parties to reach agreement in order to avoid an arbitrator imposing an award on the parties. He also raised concern about mayors who have sued after passage of a contract continuation law enacted in 2019. Should the mayors be successful, employees will have no protection or recourse if management refuses to come to the table and reach agreement. Supporters of the bill included AFSCME Council 94, AFL-CIO, NAGE and the Teamsters. The Association of School Committees opposed the bill. The Committee voted to hold the bill for further study.

### **Bilingual Certification Funding**

At the end of a lengthy Senate Education Committee hearing on April 3, the Senate Education Committee heard legislation that would create an Education Scholarship Program for those interested in obtaining a Bilingual Dual Language or World Language teaching certificate. [S 2845](#) would create a scholarship fund for undergraduate students pursuing a degree that permits acquisition of a bilingual dual language certificate or a world language certificate. The initial funding would be \$2 million for the upcoming fiscal year. The legislation creates certain program standards such as requiring students to maintain a minimum 2.5 grade point average and requiring that scholarship recipients teach in an urban or urban ring district for a year for every year the person received scholarship funding. S 2845 also creates a scholarship fund for teachers who wish to add a dual language or world language certificate.

RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi provided [written testimony](#) and testified at the hearing in support of the bill. He praised efforts to provide funding to encourage undergraduates to pursue an education degree and obtain this valuable certificate. He also praised efforts to provide funding for teachers who wish to

continue their studies and obtain an additional certificate. He noted that there is no state funding for teacher professional development and school districts rarely provide tuition assistance for teachers wishing to continue their education. The committee recommended S 2845 be held for further study.

### **K-2 Class Size Reduction**

On April 3, the Senate Education Committee heard Senator Hanna Gallo's bill [S 2148](#) to limit the class size of grades Kindergarten 1<sup>st</sup> grade and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade to 20 students. In prior sessions, similar legislation has passed the Senate but failed to garner support in the House of Representatives. RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi submitted [written testimony](#) in support of the bill. In his letter, Parisi supported the legislation as a means to improve educational outcomes. The testimony from the RIFTHP included a chart that contains class size maximums that exist in teacher Collective Bargaining Agreements. The number of students in each class will vary either below the cap or, the information on the contracts was provided to offer some guidance on the potential improvements offered by the legislation. The NEARI and RI Kids Count both were in support of the bill and no one testified against the legislation. The Committee held the bill for further study.

### **Workplace Readiness Week**

On April 3, the Senate Education Committee heard testimony by first-year Senator Bissaillon to designate one week in April of every year as Workplace Readiness Week. During Workplace Readiness Week, public schools would provide information to students on such workplace issues as: child labor laws, workers compensation, worker safety, unemployment insurance, and the right to organize a union. The bill would have schools provide students with information about state-approved apprenticeship programs. Superintendent would annually share information to teachers on how to access materials related to implementing the initiative.

RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi submitted a [letter](#) in support of [S 2282](#) and testified at the hearing. He promoted the idea of Workplace Readiness Week as a great program, expressing regret that he had not come up with the idea himself. He supported the notion that students need real life knowledge about the workplace before they enter the workforce. He also praised the portion of the bill exposing students to information about apprenticeship programs. The Workforce Alliance, the AFL-CIO and NEARI also supported the bill, which was held for further study.

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## **Bill Introductions**

### **Low Test Score School Choice Act**

([S 2517](#), Paolino, Senate Education)

([H 7914](#), Chippendale, House Finance)

These bills would establish the Failing School Choice Act, to permit students at failing schools to enroll in any public school. These bills would also establish the Rhode Island education revitalization fund to provide funding to the school choice program.

### **State Academic Standard Abolishment**

([S 2518](#), Morgan, Senate Education)

This bill would repeal in their entirety sections 16-22-30, 16-22-31, 16-22-32 and 16-22-33, all of which relate to the establishment of statewide academic standards in mathematics, English language arts, science and technology, history, social studies, world languages and the arts and their implementation into the curriculum of all public schools.

### **The School Libraries Act**

([S 2520](#), Mack, Senate Education)

([H 7888](#), Kislak, House Municipal Government)

These bills would require every public school in Rhode Island to have a school library or library media center in a permanent and dedicated space available to students in grades K-12 with a librarian available to permit access to the library for students before, during and after school hours.

### **Education - Religious Discriminations**

([S 2522](#), Morgan, Senate Education)

This bill would create the "Rights of Students Act" to provide protections for students and parents against discrimination on the basis of a religious viewpoint or religious expression. This bill would also allow students to pray or engage in religious activities before, during or after school as well as to wear clothing, jewelry or accessories that display religious messages or symbols. Additionally, the bill would create a complaint process for a student or parent seeking to file legal action to enforce this bill.

### **Definition of School Year**

([S 2524](#), Pearson, Senate Education)

([H 8103](#), Cotter, House Education)

This act would allow a school district to establish a school year that is the equivalent of one hundred eighty (180) days through the use of longer school days or a combination of longer school days and shorter days in which school is in session to provide a minimum of one thousand eighty (1,080) school hours in a single school year.

### **Student Discipline Code Revisions**

([S 2525](#), Mack, Senate Education)

([H 7869](#), Morales, House Education)

These bills would mandate that school districts provide culturally competent, de-escalation, and trauma-informed methods to minimize classroom disruptions and improve student learning. This involves implementing alternative programs, classroom strategies, and community service or assignments that are age and developmentally appropriate, with the aim of reducing out-of-school suspensions. Students who pose a threat to their peers, teachers, administrators, support staff, or

themselves will be placed in an alternative educational setting within the school, supervised by a RIDE certified teacher.

**Student Attendance Pilot Program**

([S 2527](#), Cano, Senate Education)

([H 7289](#), McNamara, House Education)

These bills would direct the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to establish a two (2) year pilot outreach and tracking program at two (2) public high schools to address issues of attendance and chronic absenteeism among students.

**Board of Education - Teacher of the Year - Voting**

([S 2528](#), DiMario, Senate Education)

This bill would add the Rhode Island Teacher of the Year as a voting member on the Rhode Island Board of Education.

**Professional Development Release Days**

([S 2532](#), Gallo, Senate Education)

This bill would permit school districts to use release days for professional development; provided that, instruction time meets the yearly requirement of one thousand eighty (1080) instructional minutes.

**Attendance Support Teams**

([S 2533](#), Cano, Senate Education)

([H 7290](#), McNamara, House Education)

These bills would direct each local education agency to adopt a program to monitor absenteeism data to identify students in their schools who are at risk for chronic absenteeism before it becomes a chronic situation. These bills would also direct school districts experiencing high rates of student absenteeism to establish attendance support teams to address this absenteeism. These bills would also direct the council on elementary and secondary education to establish a chronic absenteeism prevention and intervention plan by January 1, 2025. These bills would also direct the council on elementary and secondary education to include each school district's absenteeism rate within the report on school discipline presented annually to the general assembly, and to include the school or district's absenteeism rate in any report card or evaluation of the effectiveness of a school or district.

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**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](mailto:jparisi@rifthp.org).

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