
The

SMITH HILL REPORT



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Final Average Salary

On Tuesday, May 7, the House Finance Committee heard testimony on [H 8149](#) by Representative Jay Edwards. The bill would restore the use of the highest consecutive 3-year average to calculate a public employee pension instead of the highest 5-year average. The bill was inadvertently drafted to only include state workers and municipal workers, but the bill sponsor introduced the bill stating he wanted an amended version of the bill to include teachers, as that was his intent. The bill is the top legislative priority for the RIFTHP. The bill would increase pension payments for teachers, state workers and municipal workers once they retire.

RIFTHP President Frank Flynn testified in support of the bill and provided a [letter](#) of support. In his testimony, Flynn stressed the need to improve pension benefits to recruit and retain public sector workers. He cited numerous years of pension cuts that preceded the misnamed Retirement Security Act of 2011 as a law that reduced retirement security of our members. Flynn asked the Committee to take this first step to improve pension benefits. He asked for an amended version of the bill to be drafted to include teachers and also sought clarification that the bill would benefit those teachers retiring at the end of this school year.

In his testimony submitted on Teacher Appreciation Day, Flynn asked the committee to show they appreciated teachers by passing the bill. He wrote “This bill will help all future retirees by restoring much deserved and desperately needed pension improvements for all active public employees. Please support this bill to demonstrate that the services provided by teachers, and state and municipal are valued. “

Also testifying in support of the bill were leaders and members of the AFL-CIO, NEA/RI, AFSCME Council 94, and SEIU 580. The bill to enhance the final average salary calculation for teachers, state workers and municipal workers would cost the state and municipalities a combined \$12.1 million per year.

Pension Improvement Campaign

The RIFTHP has created a link to permit RIFTHP members to send an email to their Senator and Representative in support of bills to improve pension benefits for public sector workers. To access the link, [click here](#). As of this morning, **2483**

emails have already been sent by RIFTHP members to urge the Assembly to improve pension benefits for all.

Hope Scholarship Extension

Last session, an important RIFTHP priority passed to create a scholarship program at Rhode Island College. The Hope Scholarship Pilot Program at RIC was established for a four-year period of time. The RIFTHP represents professional staff, faculty, and adjunct faculty at RIC, who supported the program. Legislation was introduced this year to add two years to the pilot program so that it expires in 2030 instead of 2028. Proposals to extend the program for two years was introduced as a [Governor's Budget Amendment #7](#) and in bill form as [H 8108](#) by Representative McNamara.

The RIFTHP testified and provided [written support](#) for the extension. RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi offered strong support for the extension, reminding the Committee of the reasons why the Hope Scholarship pilot program was initiated in the first place. Because the program began with the RIC students who were Juniors and Seniors in 2023, there will only be two classes of freshmen recruited under the Hope Scholarship Program. In order to get better data on the value of the program on RIC recruitment and retention, a two-year extension is warranted.

Retiree COLA

Representative Patricia Serpa introduced two bills to improve pension benefits for retirees. [H 8193](#) would provide a 3% COLA this year and increase retiree benefits by the consumer price index in future years. [H 8194](#) would increase retiree benefits \$2000 per year. Both bills were heard in the House Finance Committee on Tuesday May 7.

RIFTHP President Frank Flynn testified briefly in support of the measures as a means to increase benefits for retirees whose pensions have not been adjusted since 2012. Also testifying in support of the bill was RIAFT/R President Roger Boudreau. He cited statistics

indicating that two small pension improvements totaling about 2% have occurred since 2012 while inflation has risen more than 30% in that time. He noted that there were several different proposals to improve retiree pensions giving the Assembly options to consider. He asked the Committee to request pension impact notes for the two proposals as the Pension Advisory Working Group had not considered the 3% plus future CPI or the \$2000/year proposals when performing actuarial studies prior to issuing its report.

Universal School Breakfast and Lunch

The Assembly held another legislative hearing in support of universal school breakfast and lunch. [H 7337](#) by Representative Sanchez is the companion bill to legislation sponsored by Senator Acosta. The RIFTHP has previously testified in support of the idea in the House Finance Committee and the Senate Finance Committee. RIFTHP President Frank Flynn provided [written testimony](#) in support of the bill at the May 7 House Finance Committee hearing. That testimony repeated union support for providing all Rhode Island students with a school breakfast and lunch free of charge. The NEA/RI also signaled support for the measure.

PPSD Study Commission Report Falls Short

On Monday, May 6, The Senate study commission reviewing labor-management relations at Providence Public Schools met to discuss and vote on the [draft report](#). Senator Sam Zurier convened the commission after reading this [opinion piece](#), written by former PTU President Steve Smith and former PPSD Superintendent Susan Lusi. Throughout the eight-month process, current PTU President Maribeth Calabro and RIFTHP Organizer Jeremy Sencer testified about the need for teachers to be respected by administration and treated as partners. They called out the toxic conditions created by the state takeover and pointed out the seven hundred teacher resignations as evidence that the state-controlled management team is not committed to collaboration with teachers.

Calabro and Sencer opposed earlier drafts of the report due to recommendations to:

- Amend state law to eliminate seniority rights for layoffs.
- Change state law requiring a step system for pay increases and institute merit pay.
- Weaken due process.
- Strengthen the Crowley Act to give the state more control over local districts.

President Calabro submitted this [testimony](#) opposing the report. Sencer spoke against the report saying, *“This report states that the solution for problems created by unchecked management control is greater management control. During Teacher Appreciation Week, you are recommending that we weaken teacher rights.”*

The report was adopted with support from Senator Zurier, Senator De La Cruz, RIDE, PPSD, Mayor Smiley, Providence City Council President Rachel Miller, Providence City Councilor Justin Roias, and Providence School Board President Erlin Rogel.

Flynn Speaks at Press Event

The Revenue for Rhode Islanders campaign held a press conference on Tuesday, May 7 in support of bills to increase taxes on income over one million dollars. Representative Karen Alzate and Senator Melissa Murray spoke at the event in support of their legislation. RIFTHP President Frank Flynn spoke at the press conference lauding the revenue-raising proposal.

He said “As the influx of federal dollars dries up, and local municipalities struggle to keep up with budget demands, it is imperative that the state seeks additional sources of revenue. By increasing the tax rate on income over one million dollars Rhode Island will generate over one hundred million much needed dollars to support many important priorities such as education, childcare, and infrastructure.”

Also speaking at the event were Nina Harrison and Alan Krinsky from the Economic Progress Institute, Nicole O’Loughlin from the Save RIPTA campaign, Kristina Contreras Fox from the RI Black Business Association and Kahadija Lewis Kahn from the Beautiful Beginnings Childcare Center.

Bills on the Move

The following bill has passed the full Senate. Bills must pass both chambers in concurrence (in identical form) before being sent to the Governor for signature.

Student Access to Transcripts

[S 2289](#), which was introduced by Senator Cano, passed the Senate on 5/9/2024, with a vote of 37 yeas, 0 nays, and 0 members not voting.

This bill would prohibit colleges and universities from withholding a student’s transcript due to the student failing to pay any expenses owed to the college or university. The college or university may withhold a student’s academic credits and grades as well as diploma or degree for failure to pay.

Bill Introductions

Office Of the Special Education Ombud

([S 2844](#), Murray, Senate Education)

This bill would establish the office of the Rhode Island ombud for special education, which would serve independent of the department of elementary and secondary education, to ensure school districts throughout the state meet the minimum standards required to comply with the individualized education programs for students with disabilities. This bill would also require that families be provided with a method of evaluation for collecting

feedback about the level of satisfaction with the special education services and dispute resolution processes available to them.

Bilingual, Dual Language and World Language Teachers Investment Act

([S 2845](#), Cano, Senate Education)

([H 7594](#), Morales, House Finance)

These bills would authorize the office of Postsecondary Commissioner to establish a program to expand the issuance of teaching certificates to bilingual, dual language, and world language teachers in urban and urban ring schools; would establish two scholarship programs to promote and increase the number of bilingual dual language and world language teachers in urban and urban ring schools; and would establish the scholarship eligibility requirements and preferences.

Teacher and State Employee Retiree 3% Stipend

([S 2851](#), Gallo, Senate Finance)

([H 7342](#), Serpa, House Finance)

These bills would provide all retired teachers and all retired state employees a one-time stipend in the amount of three percent (3%) of the lesser of either the member's retirement allowance or forty thousand dollars (\$40,000) of the member's retirement allowance.

Maintenance of Effort Reduction - State-Controlled Schools

([S 2860](#), Bissaillon, Senate Finance)

([H 7401](#), Slater, House Finance)

These bills would permit a school district to reduce its maintenance effort and to deduct any nonrecurring expenditure from its maintenance effort if under state control.

Maintenance of Effort Enforcement - State-Controlled School

([S 2861](#), Bissaillon, Senate Finance)

([H 7402](#), Slater, House Finance)

These bills would exempt schools or school districts subject to an intervention for failing schools from the withholding of aid provisions for infractions related to nonpayment of tuition owed by one community to another. These bills would take effect upon passage and would apply retroactively to any and all orders issued under § 16-5-30 on or after January 1, 2021, as well as to any and all pending orders or proceedings under § 16-5-30 as of the passage of this bill.

Pension Benefit Improvement - 5 Year Amortization

([S 2865](#), Raptakis, Senate Finance)

This bill would require any benefit enhancements afforded under the employees' retirement system of Rhode Island or the municipal employees' retirement system to be amortized over individual five (5) year closed periods.

Categorical Education Aid - Mental and Behavioral Health

([S 2866](#), Cano, Senate Finance)

([H 7397](#), Alzate, House Finance)

These bills would provide that the permanent foundation educational aid program would provide state funding for school-based mental health services pursuant to specified conditions.

Support And Access to Bilingual Education Act

([S 2917](#), Cano, Senate Education)

([H 7514](#), Felix, House Education)

These bills would create a new chapter for the support and access to bilingual education. It would create a dual language program fund to be administered by the Department of Education. Local education agencies would be eligible to apply to the Department for Funding.

Retirement Benefit - 3 Year Final Average Salary

([S 2979](#), Felag, Senate Finance)

This bill would reduce the number of years from five (5) to three (3), when calculating for retirement purposes, the average of the highest consecutive years of compensation, for teachers, and state and municipal employees.

School Enrollment -- Student Success Act

([S 2983](#), Ciccone, Senate Education)

This bill would reduce the time, from three (3) years to one year, required for a nonimmigrant foreign national student, who has resided in Rhode Island, to be eligible to pay the same in-state tuition as any other Rhode Island student.

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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