

*The*

# SMITH HILL REPORT



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## **Pension Advisory Working Group Report**

The final report of the General Treasurer's Pension Advisory Working Group was adopted at a meeting of the Group on Monday, February 26, 2024. The 63-page report can be viewed [here](#). The report summarizes witness testimony and contains a cost analysis of numerous pension improvement ideas. The report will be delivered to the leadership of the House and Senate. The Senate has promised to hold a public hearing on the Report.

## **Arming Campus Police**

On Tuesday, February 27, 2024 the House Judiciary Committee heard legislation by Representative O'Brien that would establish an armed police force at Rhode Island College and the Community College of Rhode Island. Currently, the police force at both institutions are not armed. The decision to arm the police rests with the Postsecondary Council of the RI State Board of Education. [H 7308](#) would remove the decision from the Postsecondary Council and require armed police at both institutions.

RIFTHP President Frank Flynn submitted a [letter](#) opposing the bill. Also providing [testimony](#) against the bill was RIC AFT leader Dr. Mikaila Mariel Lemonik Arthur. RIC unions have historically opposed efforts which force RIC to arm its police officers, citing opposition from faculty, students, and staff. There was a significant amount of written testimony in opposition to the bill. There was a significant amount of written testimony in opposition of the bill. There was no public testimony in support of the legislation, which was held for further study.

## **State Archives**

On Tuesday, February 27, 2024 the House Finance Committee heard testimony on the Governor's proposal to put a \$60 million bond before the voters to build a State Archives building. The project has the full support of the RI Secretary of State Gregg Amore. [Article 5](#) is one of several bonds the Governor has proposed to be placed on the November ballot.

RIFTHP President Frank Flynn submitted a letter of support for the building. In his [letter](#), he wrote "*Creating a building with the dual purpose of preserving these items, but also creating the capacity to display these artifacts, will allow thousands of Rhode Island's students and citizens to have a place to learn and appreciate our rich history. It will also create an attraction to bring tourists from throughout our country and the world to visit our great state and bring an added economic benefit.*"

*As we approach the semiquincentennial of our nation's founding it is fitting that we, as a state, pass this bond to preserve the past for all current and future Rhode Islanders. We urge you to support Article 5 and begin the process of creating a State Archive that we can all be proud of."*

### **Bilingual Education Support**

On Wednesday, February 28, 2024, the House Education Committee heard testimony on Representative Felix' legislation to promote bilingual and dual language education. The legislation, [H 7514](#) would create policy and a \$300,000 funding stream to expand bilingual and dual language programs. The bill creates a statewide bilingual policy in order to promote the expansion of such programs.

The RIFTHP registered its support of the bill. Also supporting the bill were Rhode Island Kids Count, RIC Professor Dr. Erin Papa, the NEARI, the United Way of RI, the Workforce Alliance, and the Coalition for a Multilingual Rhode Island.

### **Threats Against School Employees**

On Tuesday, February 27, 2024 the House Judiciary testimony heard legislation by Representative Noret that would make a threat against any school administrator or school staff member a felony. The existing state law lists numerous public officials against whom a threat would constitute a felony. [H 7303](#) adds school administrators and school employees to that list of public officials protected by the law.

Tim Ryan, Executive Director of the Rhode Island School Superintendents Association spoke in support of the bill. RIFTHP President Frank Flynn submitted written testimony to the bill. In his [letter](#), Flynn cited the current super-charged highly toxic culture towards public servants both elected and non-elected. Flynn thanked Rep. Noret for his consideration and his effort to protect public school employees from threatening behavior.

### **Freedom to Read**

On Thursday, February 29, 2024 the House Judiciary held a hearing on numerous bills, including legislation by Representative Stewart titled "Freedom to Read". The bill was submitted to protect public libraries from partisan attempts to limit the acquisition of books and other material. [H 7386](#) adds to the existing state library policy to "support the right of free people to read freely".

There was considerable written testimony in support of the bill, including a [letter](#) from RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi. In his letter, he wrote that the legislation "implicitly recognizes librarians as professionals entrusted to make decisions in public libraries without interference from external partisans when making decisions regarding the acquisition of reading content", as a reason to support the legislation. Miriam Reuman President of URI/AAUP ([letter](#)) and Erik Christiansen, President of RIC AFT ([letter](#)) submitted letters of support.

## Bill Introductions

### **Higher Education Opportunities For Students With Disabilities**

([S 2290](#), DiMario, Senate Education)

([H 7253](#), Cortvriend, House Finance)

These bills would establish the Higher Education Opportunities for Students with Disabilities Act. These bills would enable students with disabilities who are ages eighteen (18) through twenty one (21) years, and in some cases to age twenty-two (22) years, to audit and otherwise attend state colleges and universities using the student's foundation education aid.

### **School Policy - Student or Staff Death**

([S 2291](#), DiMario, Senate Education)

([H 7196](#), Casimiro, House Education)

These bills would provide that in the event of the death of an educator or a student, a local educational agency would be given up to five (5) days after the death to implement a flexible school schedule for teachers and students. These bills would also amend the title of chapter 16-21.7 to "The Nathan Bruno, Jason Flatt, and Alicia Biros Bereavement Act."

### **State Employee Longevity Restoration**

([S 2310](#), Ciccone, Senate Finance)

([H 7249](#), Corvese, House Finance)

These bills would restore longevity payments of five percent (5%) of base salary for employees after ten (10) years of service and increase to ten percent (10%) of base salary after twenty (20) years of service, beginning July 1, 2024.

### **State Pension Contribution - Contract Employees**

([S 2312](#), Ciccone, Senate Finance)

This bill would provide that vacancies in excess of three percent (3%) for full-time equivalent state employees which are substituted with contract employees shall require an appropriation to the pension fund equal to the average annual employer contribution for each vacant position.

### **Civics Education Categorical Funding**

([S 2321](#), Cano, Senate Finance)

([H 7036](#), Speakman, House Finance)

These bills would establish a new categorical funding category for civics education. A new fund would be created and dedicated to civics education. These funds would be approved and implemented by the commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education pursuant to a request for proposal process.

### **Postsecondary Tuition Assistance For Shortage Teaching Fields**

([S 2334](#), Acosta, Senate Finance)

This bill would create Postsecondary Tuition Assistance for shortage teaching fields which are defined as subject areas or teacher certifications that are experiencing a critical lack of educators in the state such as any sciences grades seven (7) through twelve (12) and any mathematics grades seven (7) through twelve (12). Recipients of tuition assistance would have to be enrolled, or accepted for enrollment at a Rhode Island Postsecondary Institution in a program to become a teacher in a shortage field and complete at least three (3) years of full-time teaching in a shortage teaching field in this state.

### **Education Savings Account**

([S 2340](#), Morgan, Senate Finance)

This bill would establish a new program where the per pupil funding, calculated annually by the Department of Education (RIDE), may be transferred into a newly created educational funding account (EFA) administered by the children's scholarship fund if a student qualifies, to pay for certain educational expenses such as, tuition and fees at a private school, tutoring, textbooks, computers, among other items.

### **Reading and Math Specialist Categorical Funding**

([S 2346](#), Cano, Senate Finance)

This bill would provide local education agencies (LEAs) hiring site-based specialists for reading and math to receive state reimbursement based on enrollment and specific guidelines.

### **Office of Inspector General**

([S 2348](#), Raptakis, Senate Finance)

This bill would establish an office of inspector general as an Independent Administrative Agency charged with preventing and detecting fraud, waste and abuse, and mismanagement in the expenditure of public funds, regardless of whether funds are from the state, federal or local governments. The inspector general would oversee all state programs and operations as well as the procurement of supplies by state agencies.

### **Climate Change Education And Workforce Development Act**

([S 2356](#), Lawson, Senate Finance)

([H 7496](#), Boylan, House Finance)

These bills would establish the Rhode Island Climate Change and Ocean Protection Youth Education and Workforce Development Act. For the fiscal year beginning July 1, 2024, there would be appropriated two hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$250,000) to implement a grant program Administered by the Department of labor and Training to promote climate change and ocean protection educational opportunities for youth ages five (5) through eighteen (18). Additional annual appropriations would be authorized by the General Assembly.

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