

The

SMITH HILL REPORT



PUBLISHED BY THE RHODE ISLAND FEDERATION OF TEACHERS & HEALTH PROFESSIONALS/AFT, AFL-CIO

June 20, 2023

State Budget Signed Into Law

The State Budget was approved by the Rhode Island Senate on June 15 and was signed by Governor McKee on June 16. The budget contains several important items impacting RIFTHP members. Among the budget highlights are:

- **Hope Scholarship Program** at RIC for eligible Juniors and Seniors, a priority for the RIFTHP and the three local unions at RIC
- **Increased Education Funding** over the Governor's original request
- **Education Funding Formula Revisions** that benefit districts, particularly those with a large number of students in poverty
- **Direct Support Professional Wages** \$70 million to support significant wage increases for Direct Support Professionals
- **RIVESP Funding** \$1.8 million to Rhode Island College's Sherlock Center to support the Rhode Island Vision Education and Services Program.
- **Scholarship Tax Credit** a \$100,000 increase in tax credits available to businesses that contribute to private and religious schools. The RIFTHP testified against this increase.
- **Retirement Counselor** one additional full-time equivalent (FTE) employee at ERSRI to work as a retirement counselor for public employees
- **Wavemaker Fellowship** to extend the Wavemaker Scholarship program to teachers, providing tax relief for those with student loan debt
- **Fractional COLA will** provide $\frac{1}{4}$ of a pension adjustment every year instead of one adjustment every four years
- **Pension Funding Support** with a requirement that 50% of a state surplus, after payments into the rainy day fund, be sent to the ERSRI

RIFTHP Priorities

The RIFTHP had four legislative priorities this year. We sought to improve teacher and state worker pension benefits by lowering the age of eligibility through a **Rule of 90**. Unfortunately, that legislation did not pass. We appreciate the thousands of RIFTHP members who reached out to their senators and representatives to support the legislation. The RIFTHP appreciates the efforts of our bill sponsors; Representative Deborah

Fellela and Senator Frank Ciccone. We will focus our legislative efforts next session on pension improvements for active teachers and public employees.

The RIFTHP sought to help RIC students and stabilize RIC enrollment through the creation of a **HOPE Scholarship Program**. The RIFTHP worked with the RIC AFT faculty union, the RIC Adjunct union, PSA @ RIC, RIC administrators and alumni to get the program approved. The HOPE Scholarship passed as part of the state budget and in separate legislation [S 0077-aa](#) by Senator Pearson and [H 5099-aa](#) by Representative McNamara.

The RIFTHP was also successful in getting our **School Employee Assault** bill through the Assembly this year. The RIFTHP initiative to protect teacher assistants and others who work directly with students when assaulted on the job. [S 381 as amended](#) by Senator Frank Lombardi and [H 5564 A as amended](#) by Representative Robert Craven passed both chambers. The next step is for the bills to be submitted to the Governor.

Unfortunately, our efforts to get **Adjunct Faculty Medical Insurance** fell short this year. [S 211](#) by Senator Miller and [H 5043](#) by Representative Ray Hull were not enacted. A watered-down version of Rep. Hull's bill did emerge from the House Finance Committee, but it would not have helped adjunct faculty to get insured and died at the close of session.

RIFTHP President Flynn had this to say at the close of the session. "The RIFTHP appreciates the efforts of all of our sponsors in trying to pass our four legislative priorities. After a number of failed attempts this past decade we were finally able to get the Teacher Assistant Assault Bill passed. This bill will provide a much-deserved measure of respect and equity to our hard-working non-certified employees.

We are also extremely thankful that the pilot Hope Scholarship for juniors and seniors at R. I. College was passed and funded. This will be a tremendous benefit to the students, faculty, and staff by helping to stabilize and expand enrollment and provide additional resources to the college.

We were disappointed that at the very end of the session our efforts to provide access to state provided health insurance for our adjunct faculty at all three public institutions were quashed. This bill would have guaranteed that our highly qualified adjunct professors have access to the affordable healthcare other half-time state employees receive.

The members of the RIFTHP were most disappointed that our highest priority bill for this session, the Rule of Ninety Bill, did not pass. This bill would have been a minor concession to the thousands of active teachers, municipal and state workers whose pensions were dramatically reduced by the onerous 2012 Retirement Security Act. The projected \$12 million cost would be a minimal percentage of the \$14 billion dollar adopted state budget. Our plan is to continue to focus our efforts fighting for pension enhancements for all of our members in the next legislative session."

In Concurrence

The following bills have passed the House and Senate in identical form and will become law if signed by the Governor or if allowed to become law without his signature:

Rhode Island Hope Scholarship Pilot Program Act

[H 5099-aa](#), which was introduced by Representative McNamara, passed the House on 6/16/2023, with a vote of 58 yeas, 3 nays 17 members not voting and passed the Senate on 6/16/2023, with a vote of 27 yeas, 4 nays and 7 members not voting.

[S 0077-aa](#), which was introduced by Senator Pearson, passed the Senate on 6/15/2023, with a vote of 29 yeas, 5 nays, and 4 members not voting and passed the House on 6/16/2023, with a vote of 55 yeas, 4 nays and 16 members not voting.

These bills would establish the Rhode Island Hope Scholarship Pilot Program Act. The purpose would be to increase the number of students enrolling in and obtaining degrees in a timely fashion from Rhode Island College, and to promote more graduates in high-need fields and trades. The hope scholarship would provide the cost of two (2) years of tuition and mandatory fees for eligible students during their junior and senior years. These bills would include detailed eligibility requirements for students, and reporting and disbursement requirements for Rhode Island College. In addition the bills would permit charitable donations to the scholarship program as well as an annual appropriation by the General Assembly.

Providence CBA Ratification

[H 5773](#), which was introduced by Representative Kislak, passed the House on 5/30/2023, with a vote of 69 yeas, 0 nays and 6 members not voting and passed the Senate on 6/13/2023, with a vote of 37 yeas, 0 nays and 1 member not voting.

[S 0190](#), which was introduced by Senator Zurier, passed the Senate on 6/8/2023, with a vote of 37 yeas, 0 nays and 2 members not voting and passed the House on 6/12/2023, with a vote of 67 yeas, 0 nays and 8 members not voting.

These bills would mandate, that during the remainder of the reconstitution and control period for the Providence School District, the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education ratify any Collective Bargaining Agreement entered into on behalf of the Providence Public School District at a public hearing held at least than seven (7) days after the terms of a tentative agreement ratified by the union are made public.

State Deferred Compensation Plans - Roth Contributions

[S 0714](#), which was introduced by Senator Britto, passed the Senate on 6/14/2023, was a vote of 36 yeas, 0 nays and 2 members not voting and passed the House on 6/15/2023, with a vote of 72 yeas, 0 nays and 3 members not voting.

[H 5519](#), which was introduced by Representative Casimiro, passed the House on 6/12/2023, with a vote of 65 yeas, 0 nays and 10 members not voting and passed the Senate on 6/15/2023, with a vote of 37 yeas, 0 nays and 1 members not voting.

These bills would allow state employees the ability to make an after tax contribution to a qualified Roth contribution program as a part of a deferred compensation plan.

American Rescue Plan School Funding Report

[H 6128-A](#), which was introduced by Representative Edwards, passed the Senate on 6/15/2023, was a vote of 36 yeas, 0 nays and 2 members not voting and passed the House on 6/16/2023, with a vote of 60 yeas, 1 nays and 14 members not voting.

[S 0767-A](#), which was introduced by Senator Zurier, passed the Senate on 6/14/2023, with a vote of 35 yeas, 1 nays and 2 members not voting and passed the House on 6/15/2023, with a vote of 70 yeas, 1 nays and 4 members not voting.

These bills would require every School District, Local Education Agency, City and Town to report each fiscal year relating to funding, Administrative and program information from the American Rescue plan, Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief, and State and Local Recovery Funds. The School District reports would be published on the Department of Education website and City and Town reports on the division of municipal finance website.

Special Education Advisory Committees

[H 5668](#), which was introduced by Representative Cortvriend, passed the House on 4/27/2023, was a vote of 74 yeas, 0 nays and 1 member not voting and passed the Senate on 6/16/2023, with a vote of 35 yeas, 1 nays and 2 members not voting.

[S 0489](#), which was introduced by Senator DiMario, passed the Senate on 6/15/2023, with a vote of 37 yeas, 0 nays and 1 member not voting and passed the House on 6/15/2023, with a vote of 68 yeas, 0 nays and 7 members not voting.

These bills would require public school districts to take certain actions to promote notice and disseminate information regarding the district's special education local advisory committee.

Public Employee Identity Theft

[H 5684-Aaa](#), which was introduced by Representative Cortvriend, passed the House on 6/13/2023, was a vote of 67 yeas, 0 nays and 8 members not voting and passed the Senate on 6/15/2023, with a vote of 36 yeas, 0 nays and 2 members not voting.

This bill would provide identity theft protections by requiring reporting of breaches by certain municipal and state agencies, and would require notice to collective bargaining agents where required and requires an explanation of remediation services. Cybersecurity incidents would be reported to the Rhode Island state police.

School Social Worker and Psychologist Medicaid Reimbursement

[H 5010-aa](#), which was introduced by Representative McNamara, passed the House on 4/18/2023, was a vote of 66 yeas, 2 nays and 7 members not voting and passed the Senate on 6/15/2023, with a vote of 34 yeas, 1 nay and 3 members not voting.

[S 0869-A](#), which was introduced by Senator Cano, passed the Senate on 6/14/2023, with a vote of 33 yeas, 2 nays and 2 members not voting and passed the House on 6/15/2023, with a vote of 72 yeas, 0 nays and 3 members not voting.

These bills would require that services provided by school social workers and certified school psychologists be included as health care related services eligible for federal Medicaid reimbursement.

Council On Elementary And Secondary Education - Teacher of the Year

[H 6052-A](#), which was introduced by Representative Cortvried, passed the House on 5/4/2023, was a vote of 67 yeas, 0 nays and 8 members not voting and passed the Senate on 6/16/2023, with a vote of 35 yeas, 1 nay and 2 members not voting.

[S 0182-A](#), which was introduced by Senator DiMario, passed the Senate on 6/15/2023, with a vote of 37 yeas, 0 nays and 1 member not voting and passed the House on 6/16/2023, with a vote of 58 yeas, 0 nays and 17 members not voting.

These bills would add the Rhode Island Teacher of the Year as an additional ex officio member of the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education as well as the Board of Education. These bills would also provide that where the current Rhode Island Teacher of the Year is unable or unwilling to serve on the Board of Education a former Rhode Island Teacher of the Year could be selected to serve on the board by the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education, as long as the individual is still teaching in Rhode Island Public Schools.

Taxation of Education Institutions and Hospitals

[H 5782-A](#), which was introduced by Representative Biah, passed the House on 5/25/2023 with a vote of 66 yeas, 2 nays, and 7 members not voting.

This bill would subject to taxation, real property owned by nonprofit institutions of higher education and nonprofit hospitals, but leased or occupied by for-profit persons and entities. This bill would also amend charters issued by the General Assembly to such nonprofit institutions and hospitals, and would take effect prospectively only, effective January 1, 2024

FOLLOW US

The RIFTHP has a twitter account for legislative issues. If you are on twitter, follow us @[RIFTHPL](#)

SIGN UP
NOW!



Register to receive the Smith Hill Report directly, [click here](#).