
The SMITH HILL REPORT



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Education Budget Article 8

On Wednesday, March 1st, RIFTHP President Frank Flynn testified to the House Finance Committee that was considering Budget Article 8. [Article 8](#) contains several statutory changes related to Governor McKee's proposed FY 2024 education budget. Among the statutory changes in the Article is an increase in the Student Success Factor from 40% to 42%. This 2% increase would increase school funding by \$9.9 million. The Student Success Factor is part of the state education aid formula that provides additional resources to students in poverty. Article 8 also creates two years of supplemental funding for districts that lose students to charter expansion. The value of that new program is \$7.8 million.

RIFTHP President Frank Flynn provided [written testimony](#) and testified at the Committee hearing. He supported the intent of increasing the state share of education through these statutory changes but asked the Committee to do more. He called on the Committee to consider adding multi-language learners and high-cost special education services to the education aid formula to provide additional resources to meet those students' needs. Flynn cited data indicating the cost of quality multilanguage learner programs require additional resources. Rhode Island has separate funds, known as categorical funding, to support MLL and high-cost special education instruction. Those categorical amounts are stagnant and underfunded, whereas including those students in the funding formula would provide for increased support as those populations and expenses grow.

He also voiced concern that the charter school funding needs to last more than two years to offset the significant loss of resources caused by charter school expansion, especially in places like Providence (over 28%) and Central Falls (over 40%) where a significant number of students attend charter schools. He compared those numbers to the cap on charter enrollment in Massachusetts, which caps individual district enrollment at 9%, or 18% for districts in intervention status.

Said President Flynn, "We are grateful to Governor McKee for proposing a \$9.9 million dollar increase to the student success factor of the funding formula to mitigate some of the challenges faced by students who live in poverty. We also appreciate the inclusion of additional funding for our MLL and high-cost special education programs. We urge the assembly to consider including these two factors into the calculation of the core instructional aide rather than as a categorical line item. This would automatically adjust the annual amounts based on an increase in the populations. We also appreciate the temporary inclusion of additional resources to districts who have seen a substantial loss of students to charter schools. We are hopeful that the Assembly will impose a cap on the percentage of students from each district who are able to attend charter schools. It is unwise and imprudent to allow a level of growth which creates parallel school districts in each municipality. "

Tax Fairness Proposal

On Tuesday, February 28th, the Senate Finance Committee met and heard testimony on [S 0232](#) by Representative Murray. Her proposal would increase taxes on income over \$557,000, yielding \$169 million in state revenue annually. The tax fairness proposal has been an RIFTHP priority for years and the union is a leader in the coalition formed to promote the proposal.

RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi testified at the hearing and provided a letter of support ([click here](#)) for the legislation. He noted that the bill raises revenue and restricts the use of the new money for education, roads and bridges, public transportation, and childcare. The Massachusetts ballot question which passed last fall increased taxes on the wealthy and had a similar restriction on the use of the new funds. Parisi testified about the need for additional resources and how the proposal provides for a fairer tax system.

The Economic Progress Institute, Kids Count, SEIU and the Interfaith Coalition all supported the legislation. The Senate Finance Committee voted to hold the bill for further study.

Municipal Employee Binding Arbitration

On Wednesday, March 1st, the RIFTHP offered support for legislation to enact a binding arbitration process for municipal employee negotiations. The bill, [H 5180](#) by Representative Bennett, was heard in the House Labor Committee. The RIFTHP represents five groups of school paraprofessionals and support staff who bargain under the Municipal Employee Arbitration statute.

RIFTHP Lobbyist James Parisi testified in support of the bill and provided written testimony ([click here](#)). He was joined by representatives of AFSCME Council 94, NAGE and the AFL-CIO in support of the bill. The League of Cities and Towns testified against the bill, complaining that unelected arbitrators would have control over municipal budgets.

Parisi cited the need for a statutory conclusion to negotiations should the parties not be able to reach agreement on the bill. In 2019, the law was changed for municipal employees and teachers to continue the contract while the parties work towards a new agreement. That statute is being challenged in court by a group of mayors, highlighting the need to protect employee rights through the binding arbitration process. The Committee voted to hold the bill for further study.

Wavemaker Loan Forgiveness Program

On Thursday, March 2nd, the RIFTHP offered written testimony in support of a budget proposal by Governor McKee to implement a student loan forgiveness program for teachers. Rhode Island has a loan forgiveness program for select science, technology and other professional occupations called the Wavemaker Fellowship. The Governor has proposed to include teachers in the list of eligible professions starting the next tax year in [Article 7, Section 7](#) of the Budget.

RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi provided a [letter](#) in support of the Wavemaker Fellowship program expansion. He also supported the \$800,000 budget allocation to support the loan forgiveness program.

In his letter, Parisi highlighted the teacher shortage that could be addressed, in part, by providing state support for a student loan forgiveness program. In prior budgets, there had been unsuccessful efforts to add STEM teachers to the Wavemaker Fellowship program. The RIFTHP voiced support for the inclusion of all teachers in the loan forgiveness program.

Bill Introductions

K-2 Class Size Reduction

[\(S 0177\)](#), Gallo, Senate Education)

[\(H 5085\)](#), Craven, House Education)

These bills would mandate that public-school classroom size be limited to twenty (20) students for kindergarten through grade two (2) on or before October 1 of each school year. Exceptions would be made for emergencies, for temporary situations not to exceed three (3) days and for mid-year enrollments when it would be impractical to assign the student to any class except for an existing class of maximum size.

Apprenticeship Pathways To Earning A Bachelor's Degree

[\(S 0178\)](#), Gallo, Senate Education)

This bill would create the Apprenticeship Pathways to Earning a Bachelor's Degree Act, to enable an individual to earn a bachelor's degree at public higher education institutions throughout the state by earning credits through apprenticeships.

Parental Review - Curricular Materials

[\(S 0179\)](#), de la Cruz, Senate Education)

This bill would enable parents and guardians to review public school learning materials in advance and object if they decide that the material is harmful. The act would provide that a parent or guardian may then withdraw his or her student from the activity or class, where the material is used and request an alternative assignment. This bill would also require, that in order to ensure the parent's or guardian's rights, every school committee or charter school governing body must disclose on their website a list of the learning materials and activities used for instruction organized by subject area and grade level.

Special Education Parental Consent

[\(S 0180\)](#), DiMario, Senate Education)

[\(H 5772\)](#), Kislak, House Education)

These bills would require parental consent prior to conducting an initial evaluation or making an initial placement of a student in a special education program, as well as prior to changes being made to any IEP services or placement. If a parent refuses consent and the school district determines that the refusal to consent will result in a denial of a free appropriate public education to the student, then the school district shall seek resolution through mediation or a hearing. These bills would further extend a student's right to receive special education services from the student's twenty-first birthday to the student's twenty-second birthday. Lastly, this act would repeal any reference to 8 children with disabilities as "retarded children".

Teacher ` Student Flexible Schedule

([S 0181](#), DiMario, Senate Education)

([H 5222](#), 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 4 Nathan Bruno, Jason Flatt, and Alicia Biros Bereavement Act."

Council On Elementary And Secondary Education - Teacher of the Year

([S 0182](#), DiMario, Senate Education)

This bill 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. This bill 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 would 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.

Student Rights - Religion

([S 0186](#), Morgan, Senate Education)

These bills 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. These bills 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, these bills would create a complaint process for a student or parent seeking to file legal action to enforce these bills.

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