

April 3, 2023

School Employee Assault

On Tuesday, March 28, the RIFTHP testified in the Senate Judiciary Committee in support of its bill related to school employees assaulted on the job. [S 381](#) by Senator Frank Lombardi would ensure that teacher assistants and other staff directly working with students would be held harmless for any financial loss or required use of leave when out of work due to the assault. Teachers, supervisors and administrators are all held harmless when absent from work due to an assault, but not paraprofessionals working directly with students.

RIFTHP President Frank Flynn provided [written testimony](#) and RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi offered verbal testimony in support of Senator Lombardi's bill. Parisi explained that school districts try to retain special needs students in-district instead of utilizing out-of-district private placements. Some of these students have significant behavioral needs that require the hiring of paraprofessionals to support the student's education. It is imperative that these service providers have the same protections as teachers and administrators if absent from work because of the injury. Parisi also informed the committee that when these employees are placed on long term leave and receiving workers compensation they not only have a reduced salary, they also have to purchase pension credit at their own expense. The Senate Judiciary Committee took testimony on the bill and held it for further study.

DSP Pay Increase

The Senate Finance Committee heard testimony on Tuesday, March 28th in support of the Department of Behavioral Health, Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals (BHDDH). As was done the prior week, RIFTHP Lobbyist James Parisi and Center Employee Union Vice-President Anna Landolfi testified at the hearing in support of Governor McKee's proposed \$31 funding for a \$2/hour rate increase for Direct Support Professionals. Landolfi, who has worked for J. Arthur Trudeau Center for decades, described the continued difficulty in retaining staff despite several rounds of state funding increases. Caring staff are still leaving, she argued, and additional state funding for pay raises is necessary to maintain services for those the DSPs support.

State Employee Contract Continuation

On Wednesday, March 29, the House La. Committee held a lengthy hearing, including a hearing on [H 5934](#) by Rep Camille Vella Wilkinson. The bill would provide that wages of state workers would continue while the parties completed the negotiations, mediation and conciliation (arbitration) processes. The bill mirrors the legislation Rep. Vella-Wilkinson championed for teachers and state workers that was enacted in 2019.

The RIFTHP provided a [letter](#) in support of the bill and provided testimony at the hearing. RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi testified in support of the bill and thanked Rep Vella Wilkinson, for her persistence in advocating for this issue. When asked at the hearing about the status of the lawsuit certain mayors filed against the teacher and municipal worker contract continuation law Parisi informed the Committee that the case is still in the discovery stage and towns and cities have paid considerable money for legal fees.

Teacher Professional Autonomy

While Rep. Patricia Morgan labeled her legislative package as parental rights, the bills are more about restricting teacher autonomy and would entangle public school teachers in fights over information requests and challenges to the use of instructional material. The RIFTHP testified in opposition to and [H 5688](#) and [H 5739](#) at the House Education Committee hearing on Wednesday, March 28th. RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi testified that many of the enumerated parental rights were non-controversial, but the bills would hamper a teacher's ability to deliver classroom instruction.

Parisi argued that balancing political and bureaucratic interference undermines true teacher autonomy and prevents teachers from concentrating on instruction. Parisi objected to putting teachers in the position of spending time and effort to comply with unlimited information requests parents could make pursuant to the Morgan legislative package. Finally, the RIFTHP voiced objection to the overly subjective and restrictive provisions of H 5739 that limit instruction. The bill would criminalize teacher decisions on selecting materials and lessons. Social Studies teachers would be most at risk. Parisi argued that we do not need the Attorney General to oversee curriculum decisions. The House Education Committee voted to hold the bills for further study and many Committee members penned a letter opposing the package.

School Vouchers

The RIFTHP objected to two bills filed by House Minority Leader Michael Chippendale that would encourage the growth of public school choice programs and create private and parochial school vouchers. [H 5774](#) and [H 5858](#) that targeted students in so-called "failing schools" were heard in the House Education Committee on March 26th. Failing schools were defined as schools with the lowest 15% in standardized test scores.

RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi began his testimony objecting to the term "failing school, " as if schools that educate the students with the most challenges and have low test scores are failing. He suggested that one reason that college students are not entering the teaching profession or seeking employment in urban schools is the false narrative of failing schools.

Parisi argued that the bills would destabilize urban schools that teach students with the most need as parents are encouraged to send their children elsewhere. The bills would result in urban schools losing significant funding. He also objected to the private and parochial school voucher provisions of H 5858 that would siphon hundreds of millions of dollars from public schools at a time when more resources are needed to meet educational needs.

Bill Introductions

Rhode Island Promise Scholarship - RIC

([S 242](#), Lawson, Senate Finance)

This bill would expand the Rhode Island promise scholarship program to include students at Rhode Island College as well as students with medical, personal leave, military obligations or disabilities.

State Education Funding - Maintenance of Effort

([S 252](#), Raptakis, Senate Finance)

This bill would provide that in determining local school aid, the state would annually provide each community no less than an amount equal to the aid given in the preceding fiscal year.

Funding for School Security

([S 260](#), Rogers, Senate Finance)

([H 5817](#), Rea, House Finance)

This resolution would authorize the appropriation of the sum of \$100,000 to each public school in Rhode Island for school safety and security improvements.

Education Voucher Program

([S 261](#), 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.

Tax Credits Scholarships - \$5,000,000

([S 267](#), Paolino, Senate Finance)

([H 5804](#), Rea, House Finance)

These bills would increase the total aggregate amount of tax credits for contributions to scholarship organizations by a business entity meeting the requisite criteria to five million dollars (\$5,000,000) in fiscal year 2024. These bills would also include a new definition for an "eligible 4 business entity".

Retirement Board Composition

([S 268](#), Lombardi, Senate Finance)

This bill would add two (2) members to the retirement board; one active firefighter of the retirement system or official from its union, to be elected by active firefighters, and an active police officer of the retirement system or official from their union, to be elected by active police offices.

Feminine Hygiene Products - Higher Education Institutions

([S 270](#), Mack, Senate Finance)

This bill would require feminine hygiene products be provided in all universities and colleges at no cost to students.

Rhode Island Promise Scholarship - Public and Private Institutions

([S 274](#), Acosta, Senate Finance)

([H 5791](#), Giraldo, House Finance)

These bills would expand the promise scholarship program to allow a student who is eligible to receive funds under the Rhode Island Promise Scholarship to use the same funds at most public or private institutions of post-secondary education in Rhode Island.

School Committee Agenda - Discussion Items

([S 323](#), Felag, Senate Judiciary)

([H 5022](#), Edwards, House State Government & Elections)

These bills would allow school committees to add item(s) not appearing in the published notice to their agendas for the purposes of discussion only if the revised agenda is filed with the secretary of state and posted on the district website at least forty-eight (48) hours in advance of the meeting.

Commissioners of Education - Advice and Consent

([S 378](#), Gallo, Senate Judiciary)

This bill would require that the Secretary of the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS), the Secretary of Commerce of the Commerce Corporation and the Commissioners of Elementary and Secondary Education and Postsecondary Education, and the Secretary of Housing be appointed by the Governor subject to the approval of the senate. Senate approval would also be required for most temporary appointments to these positions.

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