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*The*

# SMITH HILL REPORT



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## **Education Funding Proposals Heard in House Finance Committee**

Before the Assembly took the school vacation week off, the House Finance Committee received testimony on several education funding issues. On February 17, the House Finance Committee held hearings on state budget articles related to education aid and school construction. Budget Article 10 would prevent school districts from losing state aid to education because of student enrollment decline over the past year. Due to COVID and other factors, student attendance throughout Rhode Island is down about 5,000 students compared to last year. Since the education aid formula is driven by student enrollment, school districts would lose millions of dollars in state aid should there not be a “hold harmless” provision preventing education cuts due to low enrollment. The RIFTHP testified in support of the hold harmless provisions in the state budget.

RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi also testified in support of two school construction measures, the proposed \$250 million school construction bond in the state budget by Governor McKee and the \$300 million bond legislation ([H 7125](#) by Representative Potter) backed by General Treasurer Magaziner. The RIFTHP testified that there are billions of dollars of necessary school repair and school construction in Rhode Island, and that the state should provide more resources through bonding to fix some of the problems. Parisi also voiced support of the extra state funding for school construction projects utilizing energy efficiency, renewable energy upgrades, and those that meet the standard of net zero energy that are contained in H 7125.

At the Finance Committee hearing, Parisi also voiced objection to Governor McKee’s proposal to use \$15 million in federal Rescue Plan money to fund Municipal Learning Centers. Parisi supported using state funding for quality after school programs, summer programs, and programs that involve the community. He objected to a funding structure that allowed mayors to control these programs separate and apart from local school districts. As an alternative, he suggested the committee take a close look at the Community Schools programs running in three Pawtucket schools.

## **Providence School Takeover Update**

On Monday February 28, 2022 the Senate Government Oversight Committee held a five hour hearing to get an update on the status of the Providence Schools state takeover. Education Commissioner Angelica Infante-Green was sworn in and testified at the hearing. She declared that the goals established in the Providence Turnaround Plan to be met in the 2024-2025 school year be extended an additional two years to 2026-2027 due to the pandemic. The new goals now have annual benchmarks instead of goals established for the fifth year of state control. Invited to testify were leaders of Parents Leading for Educational Equity (PLEE) and the Parent Advisory Council. Student leaders from the Providence Student Union and ARISE (Alliance of Rhode Island Southeast Asians for Education) also spoke at the hearing.

There were just over forty witnesses signed up to speak, a group mainly consisting of parents and teachers. Providence Teachers Union President Maribeth Calabro spoke about a recent problem with school administration failing to support teacher professional development to meet the requirements of the Right to Read Act. She, along with PTU Vice-President Jeremy Spenser, were critical of the state takeover and called for it to end because of multiple failures in how RIDE has run the district.

Senator Lou DiPalma, Chair of the Senate Government Oversight committee, has promised quarterly hearings so that the Assembly can get information on the status of the state-run school district.

## **Commissioners of Education – Advice and Consent**

On Tuesday March 1, the RIFTHP offered written testimony in support of legislation that would require future Commissioners of Education to get the advice and consent of the Senate before taking the position. The RIFTHP has supported similar legislation in past years, which has passed the Senate but failed to get traction in the House of Representatives. [S 2402](#) by Senator Hanna Gallo was heard in the Senate Judiciary Committee. In his letter ([click here](#)), RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi noted the lack of public participation in the appointment of past commissioners and of the value of having at least some public input through the Senate Advice and Consent process.

## **Bill Introductions**

### **Adjunct Faculty Medical Insurance**

[\(S 2199\)](#), *Miller, Senate Health and Human Services*)

This act would enable adjunct faculty members at any state college or university, who teach at least fifty percent (50%) of the hours regularly worked by full-time faculty in an academic semester, to be eligible for the same medical insurance, hospital care and surgical-medical service benefit as other state employees.

### **Human Services Rate Review**

[\(S 2200\)](#), *DiPalma, Senate Finance*)

[\(H 7180\)](#), *Casimiro, House Finance*)

These acts would require the executive office of health and human services (EOHHS) with the assistance of a twenty-four (24) person advisory committee to provide expert review and recommendations for the process for rate setting and ongoing review of rate setting for all medical and clinical service programs contracted by, or with or licensed by the state or any department of the state as well as Medicaid.

### **BHDDH Employee Criminal Records Check**

[\(S 2221\)](#), *Miller, Senate Judiciary*)

This act would require nationwide criminal records checks for all applicants for employment with the department of behavioral healthcare, developmental disabilities and hospitals (BHDDH) or any facility or program operated by the department involving routine contact with patients, residents or clients without the presence of other employees or organizations employing two hundred fifty (250) or more employees with follow up checks every five (5) years thereafter of continuous employment.

### **Rhode Island Early Educator Investment Act**

[\(S 2235\)](#), *Cano, Senate Labor*)

[\(H 7283\)](#), *Casimiro, House Finance*)

These acts would require the children's cabinet, to develop and implement a strategic plan to retain early childhood educators by creating a cross-departmental target wage scale of early educators and that of a similarly qualified public school teaching staff or individuals with similar credentials. The children's cabinet would be required to consider matters such as scholarships in early childhood education, wage supplements or stipends, apprenticeships. The children's cabinet would report findings to the governor and the general assembly by December 1, 2022. It would also require the department of human services to create and maintain a childcare and early educator registry.

## **State Employee Cultural Competency Training**

([S 2236](#), *Cano, Senate Labor*)

This act would require the office of diversity, equity and opportunity (ODEO) to create and for all state and municipal employees to receive annual training in cultural competency. It would define "cultural competency" as an understanding of how institutions and individuals can respectfully respond to people from all different backgrounds such as race, language, economic, gender, veterans and disabilities.

## **Hazard Pay**

([S 2237](#), *Calkin, Senate Labor*)

This act would require employers employing fifty (50) or more employees to pay "hazard pay" to employees involved in providing essential services, during a declared public health emergency. The hazard pay would be at a rate of one and one-third ( $1\frac{1}{3}$ ) times the regular rate of pay. Additionally employers would be prohibited from taking adverse employment action against an employee who refuses to work during a public health emergency.

## **Municipal Employees' Binding Arbitration**

([S 2244](#), *Lawson, Senate Labor*)

This act would establish new factors for the interest contract arbitration board for municipal employee unions to consider in rendering a binding decision on the contract, would grant the board power to render an award over all negotiated matters, including the expenditure of money and would provide for a review of the arbitration panel's decision, by writ of certiorari to the supreme court.

## **Revenue for Rhode Island**

([S 2264](#), *Murray, Senate Finance*)

([H 7440](#), *Alzate, House Finance*)

These acts would add one new income tax bracket for purposes of Rhode Island state income taxation. The new bracket would be a rate of eight and ninety-nine percent (8.99%) on taxable income over four hundred three thousand five hundred dollars (\$403,500) (in 2011 dollars).

Adjusted for inflation, the new tax bracket would apply to taxable income over approximately five hundred thousand dollars (\$500,000) (in 2022 dollars), impacting only the top one percent (1%) of taxpayers.

## **Education Savings Account**

*([S 2278](#), de la Cruz, Senate Education)*

This act would provide parents of kindergarten through twelve (K-12) students in Rhode Island with an opportunity to enroll their child in an educational program of their choosing, either via open enrollment in a traditional public school in their own district or any other public school district, or by receiving a scholarship, with designated public monies to follow the student to a participating private school or private curriculum program selected by the parent. The program combines aspects of what are sometimes referred to as "school choice" and "school voucher" programs. The program would begin August 1, 2022.

## **Student Attendance Data Monitoring**

*([S 2281](#), McCaffrey, Senate Education)*

This act would provide that the public schools shall be responsible for attendance data monitoring and detection of emergent truant behavior.

## **K-2 Class Size Reduction**

*([S 2282](#), Gallo, Senate Education)*

This act would mandate that public school classroom size be limited to twenty (20) students for kindergarten through grade two (2). Exceptions are made for emergencies and temporary situations not to exceed three (3) days and for mid-year enrollments when it would be impractical to assign the student any class but an existing class of maximum size.

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