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SMITH HILL REPORT



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Tax Equity Redux

The RIFTHP repeated its support of tax reform to raise necessary revenue by increasing taxes on the wealthy. Two related bills were heard in the House Finance Committee on April 2, 2014. [H7471](#) by Rep. Maria Cimini would increase income taxes for those earning more than \$250,000 by 2%. [H7552](#) by Rep. Valencia would increase taxes on the wealthy by twice that amount.

RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi testified in support of both bills. He noted that the RIFTHP has supported tax equity for years, and that we need to identify sources of revenue to stop the overreliance on local property taxes to fund our schools and municipal services. Parisi reminded the Committee that the tax breaks to the wealthy for the past decade have not created jobs and prosperity. To the contrary, catering to the wealthy has led to Rhode Island having the country's highest unemployment rate.

The Cimini bill would net about \$70 million in additional revenue and the Valencia bill would yield about \$170 million. Parisi and other supporters noted that money could be used to reduce property taxes by increasing aid to cities, town and schools. Other uses could be to rebuild Rhode Island's infrastructure and holding the line on higher education tuition.

Rep Cimini noted that a goal of assembly leadership is business development, and that additional revenue can be used to grow business. Rep Valencia showed a chart describing the lower tax rate for the wealthy since 1996 and the increased unemployment rates in recent years.

Other supporters of the tax equity legislation include Jim Cenerini of AFSCME Council 94, Linda Katz of the Economic Progress Institute, and Jonathan Jacobs of SEIU 401. Opponents to the bills were Chamber of Commerce lobbyist Kelly Sheridan and John Simmons of the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council.

Teacher Tax Credit

On Wednesday, April 2, the RIFTHP testified in support of a Republican tax bill. The legislation, [H7424](#) by Representative Morgan, would provide a tax credit of up to \$250 for educators who spend their own money on supplies and equipment. The bill is modeled after a federal tax credit that began over a decade ago that allows educators to deduct up to \$250 from federal taxes for purchases of supplies. The Morgan bill only applies to state income taxes.

April 7, 2014

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RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi testified that teachers spend more than \$250 per year in supplies and equipment, and that the bill would be tangible recognition for these expenditure. Parisi also told the Committee that the federal tax break included school support staff including teacher assistants, not just teachers themselves.



High Stakes Testing Round Two

On April 2, the House Health, Education and Welfare Committee once again heard testimony on a bill regarding the use of high stakes tests as a requirement for high-school graduation. As reported in a previous Smith Hill Report, HEW heard testimony until late into the night on February 26 from a roomful of advocates including teachers and parents, representatives from labor and business, education administrators and RIDE, as well as dozens of high school students. At that hearing testimony was on four bills that deal with testing and the consequences for students – [H7095](#) (Amore), [H7146](#) (Dickinson), [H7256](#) (Cimini) and [H7327](#) (Naughton).

At the April 2 hearing, the committee heard from a smaller group of advocates speaking on [H7672](#) (Naughton). This bill would ensure that no state assessment or standardized testing would be used to determine a student's eligibility to graduate from high school. Instead, the bill says the assessments shall be used to promote school and district accountability and improvement and to target early and intensive remediation to students. Naughton's bill also provides that any student identified as significantly below proficient on any state assessment would be given intervention assistance. It also requires that the parent or guardian of the student be provided with notifications from the school regarding his or her proficiency in the native language of the parent or guardian.

In the absence of the bill sponsor who would normally open testimony on the bill, the RIFTHP President Frank Flynn was called upon by HEW Chairman McNamara as the major proponent of the bill. Flynn began his comments stating that the RIFTHP is in full support of high standards and fair accountability practices. He then thanked the committee for giving him this opportunity to talk about the use of the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) tests and the how they are being used inappropriately. Flynn stated that, despite the testimony you have heard at previous hearings and will hear again tonight, the NECAP was never intended or designed to use as a graduation requirement. He submitted copies of The New England Common Assessment Program's Guide to Using the 2012 NECAP Report to the committee members. Flynn directed the committee to the section in the guide that states "NECAP is only one indicator of student performance and the results of a single NECAP test administration should not be used for referring students to special education or for making promotion and/or graduation decisions".

Flynn cautioned the committee about the current focus on the use of statewide assessments as a graduation requirement that does nothing to raise the bar or ensure that students will become more proficient; in fact, it narrows the focus of students' academic preparation, especially in Math, to "test prep". He went on to say these tests, whether taken once, twice or three times, create a set of "hoops" for students to jump through rather than create opportunities to learn.

Flynn talked about the devastating effects the use of the NECAP tests can have on students, much of which the committee has heard about from students at previous hearings. Flynn stated that in his 34 years of

Legislative Issues,
hosted by James Parisi,
with Paula Hodges of
Planned Parenthood, SE
New England,
discussing the RI
Constitutional
Convention

AFL-CIO Convention
part 4

AFL-CIO Convention
part 3

LaborVision is seen on Cox
Ch. 14 and FioS Ch. 33

Tuesdays @ 7PM

Thursday @ 8PM

Saturday @ 5PM

teaching he has seen students lose hope and disengage when they think they are not going to be able to move forward. He noted that it is just around this time of the year, April vacation that some students get overwhelmed with a feeling of hopelessness and students drop out of school. He reminded the committee that it is the poor and minority students, special education and English language learners who are most at risk and are being most adversely affected. Flynn ended by telling the committee "You are their only hope. Last year's General Assembly Advisory Resolution has been basically ignored by RIDE and the RI Board of Education".

Several others, including teachers, parents and representatives of various groups spoke in support of the bill. Rick Harris, Executive Director of the National Association of Social Workers – RI, talked about his 40 years working as a social worker and educator and how he knows there are so many students who don't fit into a "mold" and can be easily discouraged. He was adamant in his testimony that a high stakes testing system was just the type of thing that would push out a kid, especially one who is already at risk of dropping out.

RI ACLU's Steve Brown, a high-profile critic of the NECAP, stated that at this point "the NECAP testing is a pretense at education". He pointed out that in one re-take scenario a kid who gets a low score the first time around but shows so-called "significant improvement" may be better off in the end than another kid who fails with a higher score on his first try but then who doesn't meet the threshold on his second try. The NECAP test is not a gauge of a student's readiness "no matter how many times it is given".

Retired RIDE Director of School Reform Ken Fish pleaded with the committee to "return to common sense". He talked about how it makes no sense if you want to retain students until they graduate to have fewer electives, fewer arts programs, fewer guidance counselors, and now, despite loud protestations from students, parents, teachers and advocates, the NECAP tests are still in place. He said "Once you get to the waiver part of the process, you have come full circle and must look holistically to judge if the student has adequate skills to graduate".

Speaking against the bill were a representatives from RIDE and RI Kids Count. Tim Ryan testified that the RI Association of School Superintendents thought there were some technical issues with language in the bill that might cause unintended consequences such as not being able to use a GED test to graduate a student. The bill was held for further study.

Bill Introductions

If you would like to read the full text of a bill, just click on the bill number.

Just Cause/Right to Rent

[\(H7449\)](#) *Edwards, House Judiciary*

The RIFTHP supports this bill which would create a new process for the eviction of residential tenants in mortgage foreclosed property which requires the existence of just cause.

Charter and State School Funding - Attendance

[\(H7811\)](#) *Valencia, House Finance*

The RIFTHP supports this bill which would extend relief to the local district from paying the second, third, and fourth quarterly payment to state and charter schools if the student does not attend the first quarter or does

not return in the second quarter.

Private School Textbooks

([H7832](#) *Tanzi, House Health, Education and Welfare*)

The RIFTHP supports this bill which would require private schools to purchase and pay for books directly, and to seek reimbursement from the school committee in an amount up to fifty dollars (\$50.00) per pupil.

Standardized Test Result Reporting

([H7835](#) *Tanzi, House Health, Education and Welfare*)

The RIFTHP supports this bill which would establish mandatory reporting requirements for students k-12 for any assessments of student's performance administered, along with specifics.

Pension Funding - Maintenance of Effort

([H7885](#) *Handy, House Finance*)

The RIFTHP supports this bill which would require the yearly state contribution to the pension system not be reduced until the fund ratio meets or exceeds eighty percent (80%).

Coming Up

On Tuesday, April 8, at the rise, the [House Finance Committee](#) will hear testimony on [H7122](#) (Locally-Administered Pensions - ARC Requirement, Shekarchi). The Senate version of the bill ([S2049](#), Pearson) will also be heard on April 8 before the [Senate Finance Committee](#) at 3:00PM. On Wednesday, April 9 at the rise, the [House Health, Education and Welfare Committee](#) will hear testimony on [H7887](#) (Teacher Evaluation - Student Achievement, O'Grady). Also on April 9 at the rise, the [Senate Education Committee](#) will hear testimony on [S2184](#) (Teacher Evaluation - Student Achievement, Satchell) [S2428](#) (Substitute Teachers - Two Years of College, Pichardo) and the [Senate Labor Committee](#) will hear testimony on [S2014](#) (Teacher Layoff and Termination Notice - June 1, DiPalma) and [S2416](#) (Layoff Notification Date - Definition of Seniority, Ciccone).

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