

“What happens at the State House can drastically affect what happens in our workplaces. That’s why we’re here every day fighting for educators, students, nurses and public employees.”

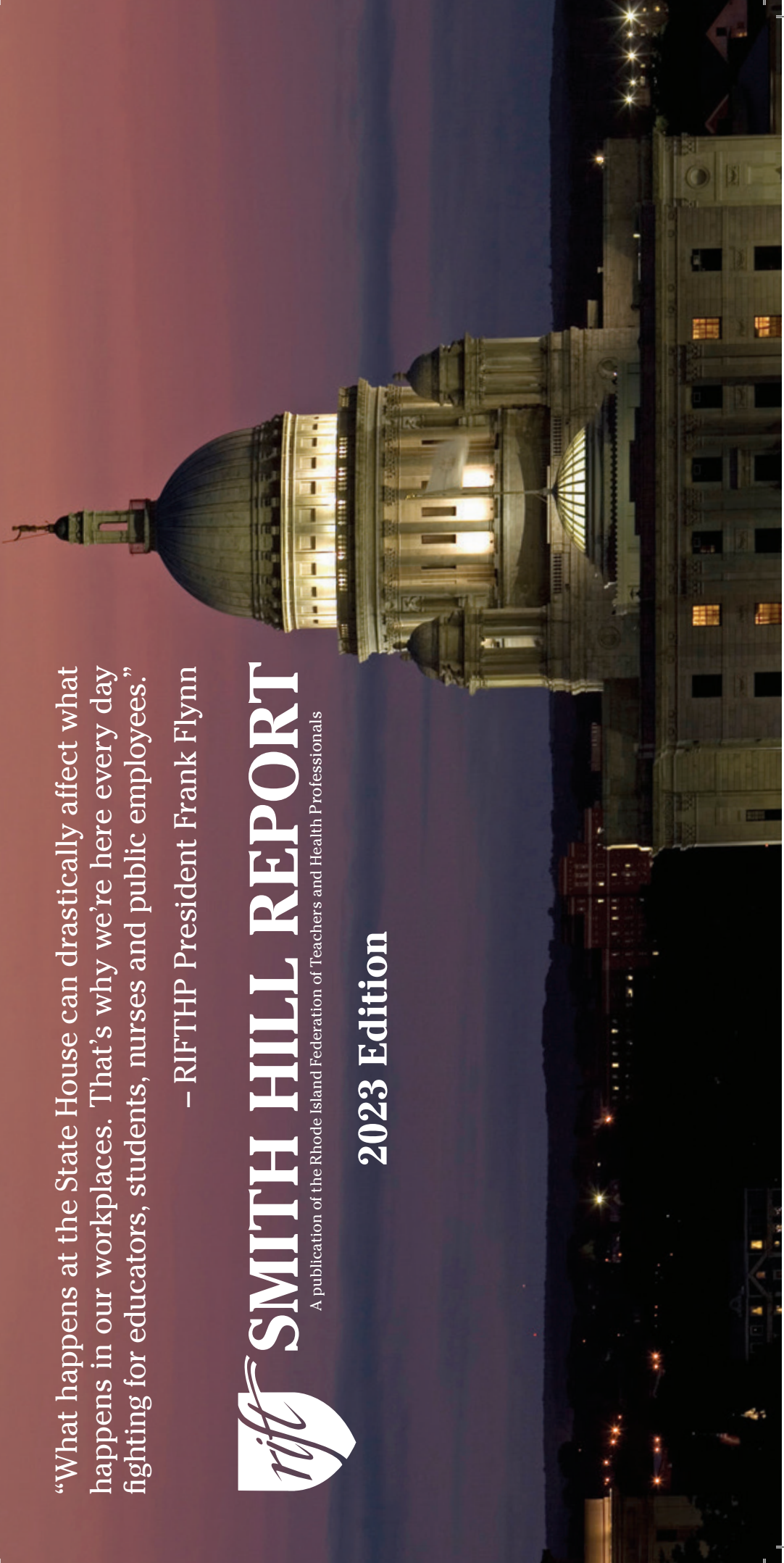
– RIFTHP President Frank Flynn



SMITH HILL REPORT

A publication of the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals

2023 Edition



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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Greetings from Smith Hill, home of the State House, R.I. General Assembly, State Officers, the R.I. AFL CIO, and of course the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals. It is my pleasure to send you our new expanded Annual Smith Hill Report. For the past 25 years RIFTHP Lobbyist Jim Parisi along with our dedicated staff have been producing our weekly legislative update from January to July on the important bills which are working their way through the R.I. General Assembly (or not!) The report is in a digital format and for those who have not yet signed up go to rifthp.org and register on the website to receive it weekly by email.

In addition to bringing you a summary of this season's legislative session, our organization has decided to use this platform to expand our outreach and communication to our members by including an additional section highlighting news regarding the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and its locals. We hope you will find this both informative and interesting.

Our membership currently stands at over 11,000 members including our two newest affiliates the Graduate Labor Organization (GLO) at Brown University and the University of Rhode Island/AFT a new affiliation between AAUP and AFT. They are both active, vibrant locals and we are proud to have them on board.

As we continue to move to a "post covid" world we all agree that our work life has dramatically changed. I continue to be amazed by the resilience, dedication, and passion our leaders and members display every day in spite of the numerous challenges you face. I could not be more proud of the professionalism and skill our members, in every sector of the workforce, display on a daily basis. On behalf of the officers and staff of the RIFTHP please accept my sincere appreciation and admiration for all you do for your clients, your profession, and your union.

As you will read, the 2023 session of the R.I. General Assembly was both productive and disappointing. We had some success in supporting our funding priorities for both Pre-K to 12 and Higher Education constituencies, and our School Support Assault bill which we have worked on for over a decade to correct a historical oversight finally passed. Despite our strong efforts we were unable to get legislation to provide pension improvements for both our active or retired members. I can assure you we will double our efforts next session.

This expanded edition of the Smith Hill Report highlights many of the important issues we worked on this year and recognizes the

legislative leaders who supported our efforts. In addition we will be highlighting some noteworthy information and news involving our organization.

Thank you for your support. We look forward to even greater success in the upcoming year. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns please feel free to email me at fflynn@rifthp.org.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Frank Flynn". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Frank Flynn
President, RIFTHP

State Budget Funds Schools, Supports Workers

The State Budget bill was adopted early this year and was signed into law by Governor McKee on June 16, two weeks before the start of the fiscal year. The state budget contains numerous funding and programmatic changes of great importance to the RIFTHP. Among the issues the RIFTHP worked on this year contained in the approved budget include:

Increased Education Funding

Governor McKee proposed a small increase of \$19.8 million for public school districts this coming year, while charter schools garnered a significant \$21.2 million. The General Assembly changed the education funding formula to the benefit of regular public-school districts, increasing district funding by \$24.5 million over the Governor's request. The Charter school funding increase dropped \$4 million from the Governor's proposal based on education funding formula revisions.

The Assembly budget made several revisions to the existing education funding formula. The budget increases funding for multi-language learners (MLL) by increasing state funding from 10% of cost per MLL student to 15% of cost per student. The formula now reimburses school districts for high-cost special needs students as defined by costs over 4 times per pupil costs instead of the previous definition of 5 times per pupil costs. The revised formula provides two years of increased education funding for districts experiencing enrollment decline and extra funding for districts losing money because of changes in the funding formula. The formula also changes how students in poverty are calculated and revises the formula used to calculate the state share ratio to help poorer communities.



Center Employees Union Executive Board, Trudeau Center

Wavemaker Fellowship

The state has had a tax relief program for graduates in certain professions who make student loan repayments while working in Rhode Island, known as the Wavemaker Fellowship. The Governor proposed, and the Assembly agreed, to extend the Wavemaker program to teachers. The Assembly appropriated \$800,000 in this year's budget to support the program that provides tax credits to offset student loan repayments. Information on the existing program can be found at wavemaker.commerceri.com.

Special Education IEP Facilitation

The budget creates three new positions in the Rhode Island Department of Education to facilitate individualized education plans and 504 services. The positions are supported by \$400,000 in additional state funding.



Anna Landolfi, worker at the Trudeau Center, takes action at the State House

Direct Support Professional Wages

The State Budget invests an additional \$70 million to revise the rate model for developmental disability services and provides a significant wage increase for Direct Support Professionals. The RIFTHP represents DSPs at the Trudeau Center. The funding increase will raise average wages at least \$2 per hour. The funding increase is in response to program advocacy and the federal consent decree related to supporting students with disabilities.

Legislative Highlights

Hope Scholarship Program

A top priority of the RIFTHP this session was the creation of the Hope Scholarship pilot program at Rhode Island College. The RIC faculty union and other RIC unions worked diligently with RIC administrators and RIC alumni to advocate for this program to benefit RIC students and the Institution. The program, based on the RI Promise at CCRI, is a two-year earned scholarship for RIC Juniors and Seniors. Legislation sponsored by **Senate Majority Leader Ryan Pearson** (S 77 as amended) and **House Education Chair Joseph McNamara** (H 5099 as amended) passed the Assembly and was signed into law by Governor McKee. The Assembly budgeted \$4 million for FY 2024 as part of the state budget adopted this year to support the first year of the pilot program.



Senator Ryan Pearson



Representative Joe McNamara

School Employee Assault Bill Passes

One of the bright spots of the 2023 legislative session was the passage of H 5564 and S 2525 which we refer to as the School Employee Assault Bill. We are extremely grateful to our sponsors, **Rep. Robert Craven** in the House, and **Sen. Frank Lombardi** in the Senate, for their leadership and advocacy on behalf of our non-certified employees who would be the beneficiaries of this legislation.



Representative Robert Craven



Senator Frank Lombardi

Prior to the passage of this bill, RIGL§ 9-1-31 guaranteed full salary and benefits to any administrator, teacher, or other certified staff member who was assaulted on the job and was forced to miss work

while recuperating. The injured teacher or administrator would not be required to use any accrued sick, vacation, or personal leave to receive full pay or benefits. Non-certified employees whose roles require them to work directly with students were not offered the same protections.

We believe it was a grave inequity for the authors of the original legislation to exclude a significant number of frontline employees, who work directly with students, from receiving the benefits which are afforded to their certified colleagues. The passage of this bill makes our non-certified employees whole for salary, benefits and pension credits in the unlikely event that they are assaulted on the job.

In addition to President Frank Flynn providing testimony to the committee, Tammie Anderson from the Coventry Teachers Alliance and Kathleen Prudencio from the Northern R.I. Collaborative, who are both school support professionals, gave compelling examples of members who have been assaulted on the job and were subject to lost wages and benefits.

We thank the sponsors, leadership, and members of the General Assembly for adding the phrase “employees whose position directly involves working with students” which gives respect and recognition to those employees who serve a vital role in our schools and were not previously covered by this statute.



President Frank Flynn



Tammie Anderson, Coventry Teachers Alliance

RIVESP Funding

The State Budget bill appropriates \$1.8 million to Rhode Island College's Sherlock Center to support the Rhode Island Vision Education and Services Program. RIVESP teachers are employed by the State and are in our union. The RIFTHP testified in support of a state appropriation to support vision education. The funding provides stability to the RIVESP program which supports blind and visually impaired students throughout Rhode Island.



Cybersecurity Center

The Budget includes \$2.4 million to establish the Institute for Cybersecurity and Emerging Technologies at Rhode Island College. Funding includes \$2.0 million from federal State Fiscal Recovery funds and \$0.4 million from other funds in the College's budget to reflect its investment in the new center which is expected to bring in resources for long-term support. The Institute will provide baccalaureate, and masters' level courses with a focus on research and development for highly skilled cybersecurity professionals.

Adjunct Medical Insurance

Legislation was filed by **Representative Ray Hull** and **Senator Josh Miller** to provide medical insurance to public higher education faculty who teach at least 50% of the load that regular full-time faculty carry.



Senator Joshua Miller



Representative Raymond Hull

The RIFTHP has worked on this issue for several years. Last year, the Senate passed the bill but it died in the House of Representatives. A watered-down version of the bill, which was not supported by the RIFTHP, emerged from the House Finance Committee but it merely confirmed the existing right adjunct faculty unions currently have to negotiate the benefit. Ultimately, the Assembly failed to extend medical insurance benefits to its adjunct faculty members working at RIC, URI, and CCRI.

Cranston

Several of our local unions have held elections of officers this year. In Cranston, Liz Larkin and her slate John Thompson, Jessica Palumbo, and Kathy Torregrossa, were elected to a new two-year term. Liz has served as president of the Cranston Teachers Alliance since November of 2010. She is a strong, passionate leader who has continuously worked hard on behalf of her membership, negotiating fair contracts for her teachers and staff. She has also been an outspoken opponent of the expansion of network charter schools who have attempted to infiltrate Cranston and drain much needed resources.



Liz Larkin

Under her leadership the CTA has been instrumental in electing school committee and city council candidates who support public education. Liz also serves as an RIFTHP Vice President supporting the State Federation in many of our initiatives.

Providence

Maribeth Calabro has been reelected as President of the Providence Teachers Union. Maribeth has served since 2012. Maribeth is an effective leader who has shown tremendous skill and grit while navigating the current Providence School Takeover by the R.I. Dept. of Education. Maribeth is actively engaged in working to expand the union's outreach by creating partnerships with a diverse group of civic and community groups. She also plays an active role in engaging with local elected leaders.



Maribeth Calabro

During the past three years under the takeover Maribeth has shown much creativity when negotiating contracts which provide flexibility while still maintaining the rights of her members. Maribeth also serves as an RIFTHP Vice President and a member of the Providence Central Federated Labor Committee.

Many Pension Bills, Little Action

There was a plethora of pension bills introduced in both chambers of the R. I. General Assembly this session. Unfortunately, there was very little action taken and very little substantive relief for the tens of thousands of active teachers, state workers, and municipal workers or the thousands of retirees whose retirement security was significantly impacted by the misnamed R. I. Retirement Security Act of 2011.

The “Rule of Ninety” bill which was a legislative priority for the active members of the RIFTHP was stalled at the leadership level in both chambers. This bill, sponsored by **Rep. Deb Fellela** in the House and **Sen. Frank Ciccone** in the Senate, would have allowed any employee who was at least sixty years old with at least thirty years of service to retire without penalty. The fiscal impact of this would not have been significant when compared to the \$14 billion state approved budget. It was extremely disappointing that we were not successful in getting this bill passed. We want to thank all of our leaders and the 2,000 members who reached out to their Representatives and Senators asking for their support.

There were approximately ten bills which proposed some relief for our retirees whose cost-of-living increases have been virtually frozen for the past ten years. While inflation has increased by over thirty percent during that period their COLA's have increased by less than two percent. The range of pension related bills submitted varied from full restoration of the previous 3% compounded COLA annually to several bills which would have given all retirees a one time \$500 stipend from the general fund with various iterations in between.

The State Budget requires General Treasurer James Diossa to convene a study to review the 2011 pension reform act and its impact on retired and active workers. We will be closely monitoring this committee and will create opportunities for you to be actively involved in the process.



Senator Frank Ciccone and Representative Deborah Fellela

In Memoriam: Senator Maryellen Goodwin

On April 15th we lost our dear friend and colleague Sen. Maryellen Goodwin. For over thirty-five years Sen. Goodwin represented the people in Senate District 1 in Providence. She was a steadfast advocate for children, workers, and the elderly. Over her long and distinguished tenure in the R.I. Senate, Maryellen was instrumental in the passage of numerous pieces of legislation which supported teachers, healthcare workers, and other public employees.

She had a wonderful outgoing personality, a warm infectious smile, and a great sense of humor. Maryellen will be missed by all who knew her.



Departures

Northern Rhode Island Collaborative Education Union, Local 4940

The RIFTHP is profoundly disappointed that we will be losing long-time Local 4940 The Northern Rhode Island Collaborative Educational Union and its amazing President Kim Souza. “The Collaborative” has been in existence for over thirty-five years and provided phenomenal special educational services to thousands of Rhode Island’s neediest students. The dedicated teachers and staff of NRIC and their students have been abandoned by the local school boards, administrators, and state bureaucrats who have decided to close the program rather than work with the stakeholders to find a solution.



Kim Souza

On behalf of the RIFTHP I would like to thank President Kim Souza for her many years of dedicated service to the students, their families, her members, and our union. Her tireless efforts over the past half year on behalf of her students and members to try to prevent this travesty from occurring have been nothing short of heroic. It is our fervent hope that all of the teachers and staff are able to land in a spot that is fulfilling and appreciates their service.

Rhode Island Department of Education, Local 2012

The RIFTHP would like to thank President Rachel Peterson for her services as the leader of Local 2012 the professional staff at the Rhode Island Department of Education. As vice president, Rachel assumed the Presidency of the local when former president Joe DaSilva resigned. She managed the local through the Covid 19 pandemic. She was a fierce advocate for her members, navigating through one of the most difficult periods in the local’s existence. She fearlessly stood up to management when she felt that her member’s voices were being ignored regarding health and safety concerns during the pandemic.



Rachel Peterson

Rachel serves on the AFT Public Policy Council for Public Employees. She also spearheaded a multi-segment union rights and education series of professional development.

On behalf of the RIFTHP I want to thank both Kim and Rachel for their outstanding service to their members and our local.

RIFTHP Welcomes Jeremy Sencer

The RIFTHP is pleased to welcome Jeremy Sencer as our new Field Representative for Organizing and Communications. Jeremy has worked for the past two years as an internal organizer for the Providence Teachers Union primarily focused on supporting the PTU through the state takeover. Prior to that he was an elementary teacher and math interventionist in the Providence Public Schools. In addition to his professional responsibilities Jeremy was the Vice President of the PTU where he was instrumental in developing and supporting numerous activities to promote member engagement and involvement.

In his new role Jeremy will be supporting our locals by improving internal organizing while creating structures to improve growth and retention. He will also focus on assisting with planning and conducting campaigns around issues, legislation, and initiatives with our local leaders as well as data mining and strategic research. Additionally, he will assist the organization with organizing, communicating, and developing relationships with outside organizations, groups, and individuals.

Jeremy will also play a key role in improving our communication strategies particularly in the areas of social media, digital, print, and other platforms. We are pleased to have Jeremy on board and are certain that he will be a valuable asset for the success of the RIFTHP.





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SMITH HILL REPORT SIGN-UP

This is a special edition of the Smith Hill Report that is being mailed to all RIFTHP members. It is published weekly during the legislative session (January – June) and is sent electronically to local union leaders. If you want to receive the Smith Hill Report, go to rifthp.org.

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