

The

SMITH HILL REPORT



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State Budget Passes House of Representatives

On Friday June 9, the House of Representatives passed the state budget bill [H 5200](#) on a 68 to 4 vote with 3 not voting. The budget bill will be considered by the Senate this week. It 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:

Hope Scholarship Program

A top priority of the RIFTHP this session, the budget includes the Hope Scholarship Pilot Program at Rhode Island College. The RIC AFT local and other RIC unions worked diligently to create 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. [Article 8](#) of the Budget contains the details of the program. The Assembly budgeted \$4 million for FY 2024 (our fiscal year which begins July 1, 2023 and ends June 30, 2024).

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 increase to public school districts represents about a 2.1% increase. 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.

To view a chart showing state education aid per district, [click here](#).

Education Funding Formula Revisions

The Assembly budget made several revisions to the existing education funding formula. The budget increases funding for multi-language learners 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. The RIFTHP had testified in support of revisions to the education formula to consider MLL students and special needs students.

Direct Support Professional Wages

The state budget invests an additional \$70 million to revise the rate calculation model for programs supporting people with developmental disabilities and provide a significant wage increase for Direct Support Professionals. The RIFTHP represents DSPs at the Trudeau Center. The goal of the funding increase is to raise average wages by \$3 per hour. The RIFTHP had testified in support of this appropriation.

RIVESP Funding

The 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.

Scholarship Tax Credit

The budget bill increased the amount of state tax credits available to businesses that contribute to private and religious schools from \$1.5 million to \$1.6 million per year. The RIFTHP had testified against any increase in state support to private education.

Retirement Counselor

The budget includes funding for one additional full-time equivalent (FTE) employee at ERSRI to work as a retirement counselor for public employees.

Education Advocate

The budget increases funding and revises a position in the Office of Child Advocate to be an Education Advocate for children in state care.

Special Education IEP Facilitation

The budget creates three FTEs in the RI Department of Education to facilitate individualized education programs and 504 services. The positions are supported by \$400K in funding.

Wavemaker Fellowship

The state has a tax relief program, program, called Wavemaker Scholarship, for graduates employed in specific professions. This program funds student loan repayments for graduates who work in Rhode Island. The Governor proposed, and the Assembly agreed, to extend the Wavemaker Scholarship program to teachers. Program details will be issued if passed. The Assembly appropriated \$800,000 to support the program. The RIFTHP testified in support of extending the program to teachers.

Fractional COLA

The Assembly budget enacted a proposal to provide $\frac{1}{4}$ of a pension adjustment every year instead of one adjustment every four years. Legislation was promoted by the RIAFT/R chapter to implement fractional COLA as a small measure to provide some relief to retirees.

Pension Funding Support

The state budget creates a requirement that 50% of a state surplus, after payments into the rainy day fund, be sent to the employees retirement system of Rhode Island with the other 50% allocated to a supplemental budget reserve account.

School Employee Assault

The House and Senate have both approved the RIFTHP initiative to protect teacher assistants and others who work directly with students assaulted on the job. [S 381](#) as amended by Senator Lombardi and [H 5564 Substitute A](#) as amended by Representative Craven both unanimously passed their respective chambers. [S 381aa](#) passed the Senate on a 37-0 vote on June 6. [H 5564Aaa](#) passed the House on a 72-0 vote on June 8. The bills are anticipated to pass the opposite chambers early this week and will then be submitted to the Governor.

This legislation has been introduced for several years and the RIFTHP is grateful for its passage. Both bill sponsors worked diligently to ensure passage this year.

Rule of 90 – Pension Eligibility

The RIFTHP is greatly disappointed that the state budget did not include any pension improvement for teachers, state workers and municipal employees such as the Rule of 90 legislation promoted by the RIFTHP. The state budget contained a small adjustment to how retiree COLAs are calculated and awarded. The budget also directed the Treasurer to study all aspects of the pension system and issue a report by next March.

Said RIFTHP President Flynn: “We are extremely disappointed that the General Assembly did not act on the “Rule of Ninety” legislation which is an RIFTHP priority. After a series of pension reductions over the past twenty years, culminating in the misnamed “Retirement Security Act,” employees have experienced a dramatic reduction in their potential retirement income. Everyone must now work a decade or longer to accrue a benefit which is half of what they would have previously earned. If we want to attract and retain teachers and other public employees it is imperative for the state to enhance retirement benefits, salaries, and other conditions of employment.”

The link to send emails is still available for those who want to let their Senator and Representative know that pension improvement for public sector workers remains a priority is available by clicking [here](#).

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