

Hope Scholarship Program

One week after the Hope Scholarship proposal was heard in the House Finance Committee, advocates returned to the Statehouse to offer testimony in support of the proposal. [S 77](#) by Senate Majority Leader Ryan Pearson and the Governor's Budget Amendment #9 were heard in a lengthy hearing in the Senate Finance Committee on Thursday, April 27, 2023. The program offers a two-year scholarship opportunity for Rhode Island College juniors and seniors who meet certain eligibility requirements. After RIC President Jack Warner testified on the RIC Budget, he explained the value of the Hope Scholarship and the benefits to RIC students, the Institution, and the State.

RIFTHP President Frank Flynn provided [written testimony](#) and verbal testimony in support of the proposal. He commented on how the program would help Rhode Island meet its workforce development need by creating a program that would increase degree completion rates of RIC students. He also spoke of the value of RIC as a college of opportunity, particularly for first generation students. The Economic Progress Institute and Kids Count also provided testimony in support of the Hope Scholarship program. The Committee voted to hold the bill, and other similar legislative proposals heard that evening, for further study.

School Vouchers and Private School Tax Credit Scholarships

RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi provided testimony in opposition to a trio of private school voucher bills heard in the House Finance Committee on Wednesday, April 26, 2023. [H 5637](#) by Rep. Chippendale would create a voucher program for private and parochial schools. [H 5795](#) by Rep. Rea would create an Education Savings Account proposal so that parents could spend taxpayer funds for home-schooling, private and parochial schools. [H 5804](#) by Rep. Rea would increase the existing corporate tax credit program for private schools from \$1.5 million to \$5 million annually.

Parisi expressed opposition to the use of public tax dollars to support private and religious schools. He said there was no education benefit for supplanting parent tuition payments with public taxpayer dollars. He noted the programs would reduce available funding for public schools by hundreds of millions of dollars.

The existing corporate tax credit program was enacted in 2006 and is available to businesses that contribute to private school scholarship organizations. The program excludes public school donations. Parisi informed the Committee that the program is very generous, offering up to 90% credit for the donation. Thus, when the state tax credit and the federal tax deduction are put together, businesses could actually make money by donating to private schools. The Finance Committee voted to hold all of the bills for further study.

State Worker Longevity Restoration

Legislation to restore longevity payments to state workers was considered by the Senate Finance Committee on April 27, 2023. [S 548](#) by Senator Ciccone would restore a program that was eliminated in 2011. The program, by virtue of state law, personnel rules, and collective bargaining agreements, provided pay increases based on years of service as follows:

5 years	5%
11 years	10%
15 years	15%
20 years	17.5%
25 years	20%

RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi submitted [written testimony](#) in support of the bill and he testified at the hearing. He noted with incredulity that it made no sense to lower the overall compensation for senior state workers by 20% while restricting bargaining over this common compensation system. Parisi and all other witnesses emphasized the difficulty that the state is having in filling vacancies as being directly tied to low pay, and pension reductions enacted in previous years,

Parisi asked the Senators to check with state agency directors and human resource managers about the challenges in filling vacancies and the role low pay has in the problem. Several union representatives from AFSCME Council 94, SEIU Local 580 and the NAFE all spoke in support of the bill. The Finance Committee voted to hold the bills for further study.

Human Services Minimum Wage

On Tuesday, April 25, 2023, testimony was taken in the Senate Finance Committee that would create a \$25 per hour minimum wage for human service providers, including those providing services to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. [S 248](#) by Senator DiPalma would also raise wages for more senior staff by 10%, 20%, or 30% based on years of service with the agencies. RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi testified and provided a [letter](#) in support of the bill.

Human Service agencies are still having a difficult time filling vacancies due to low wages. While the recent infusion of funding has helped, there are still significant numbers of senior staff leaving the agencies. Without these senior staff, services suffer when strong effective leadership at the workplace leaves. Parisi thanked Senator DiPalma for his dedication to advocating for solutions to problems in the human services field.

Education Funding Testimony

The House Finance Committee heard 23 separate bills being watched by the RIFTHP, most of which were related to education funding. The RIFTHP provided a [letter](#) in support of [H 6113](#) by Rep. Shanley. That bill would include special education costs in the state education funding formula. RIFTHP President Frank Flynn's letter urged the committee to consider revising the education funding formula to increase funding

for these students. The benefit of including expenses in the funding formula is that the formula is adjusted every year based on the costs of providing education in the region.

At the House Finance hearing, RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi offered verbal testimony in support of other special education funding bills submitted by Representatives O'Brien, Morales and Cortvriend.

Parisi also testified in support of [H 6112](#) by Representative Casey. That bill would increase the student success factor in the education funding formula from 40% to 45%. The student success factor is the amount of state funding that is increased for every student who meets certain poverty measures. While the RIFTHP has previously testified on the increase of the student success factor proposed by the Governor in his budget, the RIFTHP urged a major infusion of state funding to meet student needs by increasing the student success factor. All of the bills were held for further study.

Universal School Breakfast and Lunch

RIFTHP President Frank Flynn submitted written testimony ([click here](#)) in support of universal free school breakfast and lunch [H 6007](#) by Representative Tanzi was heard by the House Finance Committee on April 26. Flynn enumerated several specific provisions of the bill and supported the notion that a well-balanced diet is fundamental to student academic success. Federal funds supported free school meals during the pandemic but a state appropriation is needed to reinstate the program. Another bill supported by the coalition formed to support universal school meals is scheduled for a hearing this week.

AFT Political Engagement Survey

The American Federation of Teachers has initiated a political engagement survey of AFT members around the country. The brief survey questions members on issues and initial Presidential preferences, can be accessed using the following link: <https://www.research.net/r/2MYNHQW>

Bill Introductions

School Construction - Net Zero Energy by 2035

([S 537](#), Pearson, Senate Finance)

This bill would provide that not later than December 31, 2023, the Department of Education would develop and adopt, in consultation with the Office of Energy Resources, regulations requiring all school buildings to meet the standard of zero energy capable, as defined in § 16-7-36, by December 31, 2035.

Postsecondary Tuition Assistance For Shortage Teaching Fields

([S 542](#), Acosta, Senate Finance)

([H 6170](#), Giraldo, House Finance)

These bills would create post-secondary tuition assistance for shortage teaching fields which are defined as subject areas or teacher certifications that are experiencing a critical lack of educators in the state such as any sciences grades seven (7) through twelve (12) and any mathematics grades seven (7) through twelve (12). Recipients of tuition assistance would have to be enrolled, or accepted for enrollment at a Rhode

Island post-secondary institution in a program to become a teacher in a shortage field and complete at least three (3) years of full-time teaching in a shortage teaching field in this state.

COLA Restoration - Prior to July 1, 2012

([S 546](#), Ciccone, Senate Finance)

([H 5038](#), Bennett, House Finance)

These bills would restore the cost of living allowance (COLA) to state employees, and/or their beneficiaries, who retired prior to July 1, 2012.

State Employee Longevity Restoration

([S 548](#), Ciccone, Senate Finance)

([H 5194](#), Corvese, House Finance)

These bills would restore longevity payments of five percent (5%) of base salary for employees after ten (10) years of service and increase to ten percent (10%) of base salary after twenty (20) years of service, beginning July 1, 2023.

Income Tax Increase - Top 1%

([S 553](#), Ciccone, Senate Finance)

This bill would add one new income tax bracket for purposes of Rhode Island state income taxation. The new bracket would be a rate of eleven and nine tenths percent (11.90%) on taxable income over three hundred seventy-five thousand dollars (\$375,000) (in 2011 dollars). Adjusted for inflation, the new tax bracket would apply to taxable income over approximately five hundred thousand dollars (\$500,000) (in 2023 dollars).

Climate Change Education Program Act

([S 558](#), Lawson, Senate Finance)

([H 6106](#), Cortvriend, House Finance)

These bills would appropriate five hundred thousand dollars (\$500,000) per fiscal year to invest in climate change and ocean protection education to enhance literacy of these issues for Rhode Island's youth and would include a grant program.

Multilingual Educators Investment Act

([S 559](#), Cano, Senate Finance)

([H 6023](#), Morales, House Finance)

These bills would authorize the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to establish a program to expand the issuance of teaching certificates to bilingual dual language and world language teachers in urban and urban ring schools; would establish a scholarship program to promote and increase the number of bilingual dual language and world language teachers in urban and urban ring schools; and would establish the scholarship eligibility requirements and preferences.

Private Schools - Special Education Rights

([S 609](#), Lombardi, Senate Judiciary)

([H 5011](#), Azzinaro, House Education)

These bills would make it explicit that parents and guardians of children with disabilities in private schools have the same rights and remedies as parents/guardians of children in public schools. These bills would also provide a procedure in superior court to enforce these rights and remedies.

Student Computer Device Privacy

([S 702](#), Valverde, Senate Education)

([H 5561](#), Speakman, House Innovation, Internet & Technology)

These bills would prohibit an educational institution or school district from accessing any audio or video recording, transmitting or recording function on a student's institutional or personal device or using location data for tracking a student's institutional device or personal device, or allow a third party to do so, except in limited circumstances.

Deferred Compensation Plans - Roth

([S 714](#), Britto, Senate Finance)

([H 5519](#), Casimiro, House Finance)

These bills would allow state employees the ability to make an after tax contribution to a qualified Roth contribution program as a part of a deferred compensation plan.

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