
The

SMITH HILL REPORT



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Revenue for Rhode Island Bills Heard

The House Finance Committee and the Senate Finance Committee took testimony from dozens of witnesses this week on legislation that would raise revenue for Rhode Island by increasing taxes on income over \$475,000 by 3% of income. The proposal would yield over \$128 million a year that we could invest in education, infrastructure, and programs to support Rhode Island working families. The Senate bill was heard on Monday, May 3rd and the House bill was heard on Thursday, May 6th.

The RIFTHP is a founding member of the Revenue for Rhode Island coalition formed to support this initiative. RIFTHP President Frank Flynn wrote letters in support of [S0326](#) by Senator Mellissa Murray and [H5227](#) by Representative Karen Alzate. In his letters ([click here](#)), Flynn wrote *“While there is considerable federal spending coming into our state, those resources are for targeted purposes and for a limited period of time. We need a long-term revenue-raising strategy to move our state forward.”*

He added that the bills *“makes our unfair tax system more fair. The wealthiest 1% pay much less in overall income in taxes than the rest of us. They can certainly afford the proposed modest 3% income tax increase that will still leave them below average in overall taxes (income, sales, and property taxes) paid as a percent of income.”*

To send a letter to your Senator and Representative in support of these bills, visit the Revenue for Rhode Island website ([click here](#)).

RIFTHP and RIC AFT Advocate for Increased RIC Funding

The RIFTHP and RIC AFT offered testimony in support of increasing state funding for Rhode Island College by \$5.9 million, the amount requested by RIC but not proposed by the Governor. RIC has had staff reductions and other budget constraints due to inadequate state funding. The RIC budget was heard in a House Finance Committee hearing on Wednesday, May 5th. RIFTHP Lobbyist James Parisi and RIC Professor Tom Schmeling both testified in support of increased state support for RIC. RIC AFT President Erik Christiansen

and RIC Professors Mikaila Arthur and Vincent Bohlinger all submitted written testimony in support of the additional funding ([click here](#)).

After recounting how staff cuts have impacted students and workers at RIC, Parisi offered several reasons to increase state funding of RIC.

- **Save jobs** - The state needs to reverse some of the recent staff cuts by allocating more money to RIC.
- **Fund the Contract** - During the last round of contract negotiations, RIC faculty highlighted how low faculty pay was at RIC compared to peer institutions. RIC faculty agreed to a contract with the Postsecondary Council that raised pay. Unfortunately, those raises were not funded in subsequent Governor budget proposals even though the administration was part of the conversation.
- **Improve our Funding Ranking** - For years, Rhode Island has been a state with one of the lowest levels of state funding for public higher education. We have consistently ranked in the bottom 5 of the 50 states.
- **Prevent Tuition Hikes** - Because of low state funding, tuition rates this year are increasing 5%, a number much greater than the current rate of inflation. The hike is almost 6% if you include mandatory fees.
- **Address Student Debt Crisis** - Before COVID, student loan debt was the most-discussed emerging national crisis. That crisis has not disappeared. If you value lowering student loan debt, increase state funding for RIC. RI ranks as 6th highest student debt per borrower in the country at \$36,121.

Public School Donation Bill Supported

The RIFTHP offered written testimony in support of a bill by Representative Joseph Solomon that would provide a tax credit to businesses that donate money to public schools in order to make physical improvements to the schools. [H5117](#) has been introduced in prior sessions by Rep. Solomon. The bill was heard in the House Finance Committee on May 6th.

In his letter, RIFTHP Lobbyist James Parisi supported the legislation. He noted that there remain huge needs in school construction and renovation in our state. He addressed disparities with private and religious school donations in our tax code. Parisi wrote *“In 2006, Rhode Island established corporate tax credits for contributions made to private and religious schools. Despite our efforts at the time, that tax credit was not extended to donations made to public schools. H5117 would provide a tax credit incentive for public school donations.”* To view a copy of the RIFTHP letter, [click here](#).

BILLS ON THE MOVE

The following is a list of bills that have been passed by one house and has now been referred to the other for final approval.

Civics Education Requirement

[H5028](#), which was introduced by Representative Brian C. Newberry, passed the House on 4/15/2021 with a voted of 72 yeas, 0 nays, and 3 members not voting.

This bill would require the implementation of the civic literacy act for all students between the eighth grade and twelfth grade, attending public schools, or other schools managed and controlled by the State of Rhode Island, requiring the students to demonstrate proficiency in civics education, commencing with the graduating class of 2025 and all graduating classes thereafter.

Financial Literacy Course Standards

[H5073](#), which was introduced by Representative Joseph McNamara, passed the House on 4/6/2021 with a vote of 73 yeas, 0 nays, and 2 members not voting. This bill has been referred to the Senate Education Committee.

This bill would provide that the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education be encouraged to maintain, publish and update statewide standards for instruction of personal finance in public high schools.

School Accountability Reports - Student College Acceptance Data

[H5076 Sub A](#), which was introduced by Representative Joseph McNamara, passed the House on 4/27/2021 with a vote of 74 yeas, 0 nays, and 1 member not voting.

This bill would require the principal at each school to provide an annual report on the number of graduating students and the number applying for admission to college or vocational training. The report would also include the total number of students completing a free application for federal student aid ("FAFSA") form and the total number of students eligible to fill out and submit a FAFSA form, and would provide data on the race, ethnicity, and gender of the students.

This bill would take effect on June 30, 2022.

School Field Trip Fundraising

[H5079](#), which was introduced by Representative Joseph McNamara, passed the House on 3/16/2021 with a vote of 75 yeas, 0 nays, and 0 members not voting.

This bill would allow a school district to request or accept a donation from a student or the student's parent or legal guardian, in whole or in part, for the cost of district-sponsored field trips, provided that the district would pay the costs to meet any deficit that may remain after efforts to raise funds have concluded.

A RI Promise - Elimination of Sunset

[H5224 Sub A](#), which was introduced by Representative K. Joseph Shekarchi, passed the House on 5/6/2021 with a vote of 68 yeas, 5 nays, and 2 members not voting.

This bill would remove the requirement that the scholarship program cease with the enrollment of the high school graduating class of 2021 at the Community College of Rhode Island. The bill would also provide for students with disabilities to be afforded reasonable accommodations.

BILL INTRODUCTIONS

Universal Free Lunch

([S0824](#) *Cano, Senate Education*)

([H5931](#) *Ranglin-Vassell, House Finance*)

These bills would require free lunches to be provided for all elementary and secondary students attending public schools, to the extent state and federal funds are available.

Community Schools Act

([S0825](#) *Cano, Senate Education*)

This bill would furnish financial support for the planning and implementation of effective community schools that would provide students with equitable access to a high-quality education.

Charter School Weighted Lottery

([S0827](#) *Cano, Senate Education*)

([H6021](#) *Ajello, House Education*)

These bills would define educationally disadvantaged students. They would also require the use of a weighted lottery favoring educationally disadvantaged students for charter school enrollment, charter renewal and for student applications when there are not enough seats available.

State Reimbursement for School Construction - Deadline Extension

([S0828](#) *Pearson, Senate Finance*)

([H5232](#) *McNamara, House Finance*)

These bills would extend the time period that schools have to commence construction to correct health and safety deficiencies in order to qualify for increased school housing aid.

Genocide and Holocaust Education Commission

([S0840](#) *Goldin, Senate Education*)

This bill would create the Holocaust and genocide education commission to:

1. Gather and disseminate Holocaust and genocide information;

2. Review current statewide Holocaust and genocide memorial and education programs and initiatives, and partner with the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to prepare a program;
3. Promote public awareness of issues relating to Holocaust and genocide education;
4. Advise and educate the governor, general assembly, and state departments and agencies regarding the nature, magnitude and priorities of Holocaust and genocide memorial education, and develop policies and programs to address those needs; and
5. Seek opportunities to provide resources for schools to effectively teach about the Holocaust and genocide.

Modification of Education Funding - COVID Funding

([S0871](#) Goodwin, Senate Finance)

([H6287](#) Slater, House Finance)

These bills would reduce by 5% the foundation level of support required of municipalities, excluding funds received by the school district from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund, in connection with relief due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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