

The

SMITH HILL REPORT



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State Funding for Teacher Professional Development

The Senate Education Committee heard testimony on Wednesday, March 23 on four bills that garnered RIFTHP Testimony. Frank Flynn, President of the RIFTHP, testified in support of [S2035](#) by Senator Melissa Murray. The bill would create a state funding line item for teacher professional development in the amount of \$200 per student. Flynn noted that when Massachusetts implemented its education reform package in the early 1990s, it dedicated that amount of money to school districts for teacher professional development. There was state funded teacher professional development in Rhode Island years ago (known as Article 31), but the funding ceased during the recession and was never restored.

Flynn also reminded the Senators that the Assembly has enacted multiple laws related to changes in curriculum that create a demand for more teacher professional development. The list includes the 2019 curriculum bill for core subject areas, financial literacy legislation, civics legislation and the Right to Read Act. All of those legislative initiatives did not come with state funding to support school district professional development, creating a need fulfilled by S2035.

Additional Senate Education Committee Testimony

The RIFTHP offered support (without testimony) of a bill by Senator Lou DiPalma [S2442](#), that would create a joint House and Senate Commission to study state governance of K-16 education. According to the sponsor, the commission is going to study but the state Board of Education structure, not local school governance systems.

At the March 23rd Senate hearings, RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi offered testimony on [S2577](#). Senator Cano's bill would extend the current 90 cap on school days a retiree may work without suspending her/his pension to 120 days. Parisi supported efforts to get substitute teachers in the classroom to relieve teachers of the requirement to cover classes of absent teachers that impinges on their own prep time when no substitute teachers are available. The bill also raises the cap to a 120 days for positions a retiree may hold. Parisi noted that the law requires the positions to be offered to non-retirees without success before a position is offered.

Finally, RIFTHP President Frank Flynn offered testimony on [S2573](#) by Senator Melissa Murray. The bill creates a special education ombud position to assist parents who have issues with their school districts in relation to special education services. Flynn, who was a special educator in Cranston for 34 years, testified that there are currently resources and processes to resolve disputes in this area. He urged the Senators to consider examining the problems with the current process more closely before they create a new position and a new bureaucracy within state government.

HOPE Scholarship Legislation Considered

The RIFTHP testified in support of Senator Ryan Pearson's bill to create the Hope Scholarship program at Rhode Island College. The bill, [S2290](#), was heard in the Senate Finance Committee on March 24, 2022. The Committee also took testimony for two related bills. [S2685](#) by Senator Acosta would open the HOPE Scholarship program to all higher education institutions, both public and private, as well as workforce development programs. [S2591](#) by Senator Lawson would create a HOPE Scholarship program at RIC but would limit students to certain majors in order to be eligible for the scholarship.

S2290 by Pearson creates a program at RIC that would resemble the RI Promise program for students attending CCRI. It would apply to Juniors and Seniors at Rhode Island College who have 60 credits after two years and maintain a 2.5 grade point average.

The RIC/AFT submitted a letter of support for S2290 ([click here](#)).

RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi offered clear support of Senator Pearson's bill, though he thanked the other bill sponsors for their interest in expanding the Hope Scholarship. Parisi supported the bill as good policy. He highlighted the benefit reducing the need to borrow more money would have for students who are eligible for the scholarship. The bill supports college completion, reduces student debt, and helps RIC which has seen some enrollment loss because the Promise program was limited to CCRI.

Parisi told the Committee that the expansion of the scholarship program was an RIFTHP priority, and that we view S2290 as the best version of the bill. The RIFTHP is concerned about narrowing the benefits provided by a HOPE scholarship which allows state government to pick and choose which college majors merit a scholarship program. URI President Marc Parlange testified that URI wanted to be included in any RI Promise expansion. The representative of private colleges and universities testified in support of Senator Acosta's bill. RIC offered testimony in support of the Pearson bill.

Student Success Factor Change Proposed

Senate Melissa Murray introduced legislation that would increase the Student Success Factor in the state's education funding formula. The bill, [S2457](#), changes the additional state funding school districts get for each student in the district under a certain family income level. Right now, districts get a 40% supplement. The Murray legislation would increase that amount to 45%, or 50% in high poverty school districts. The bill is the centerpiece of the education funding agenda supported by a coalition that includes the RIFTHP, NEA/RI, School Committees Association, Superintendent's Association, and the Hassenfeld Institute.

RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi testified in support of the bill. He reminded the committee that when Rhode Island adopted an education funding formula in 2010, we were in the midst of an economic crisis that prevented the state from increasing the state share of local education costs. Times have changed and Parisi asked that the Assembly increase the state share of education costs. He said education experiences are disparate in Rhode Island because of the over-reliance of local property taxes to fund schools. He declared the solution to education inequity is increased state funding. The bill provides real property tax relief. Tim Duffy of the RI Association of School Committees also testified in support of the bill.

RIFTHP Supports Charter School Spending Cap

The RIFTHP testified in support of legislation by Senator Maryellen Goodwin that would cap the amount of money school districts have to spend on charter school tuition to 9% of a school district budget. The bill caps the amount of funding spent on charter tuition at 23% of a district's expenses when a district has been taken over by the state. Further, the bill permits the 9% cap to be exceeded if a district currently exceeds the 9% threshold but would prevent additional expansion.

RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi spoke in support of [S2319](#). He urged the Committee to enact the charter school spending cap to protect education programs and services in public school districts that suffer financially when districts must make ever-growing charter tuition payments. He said the charter experiment, started 25 years ago, was supposed to improve the entire education system but it has not. Loss of district funding leads to programmatic cuts to students in districts experiencing rapid growth. The RI Association of School Committees and the NEA/RI also supported the bill.

School Construction Bond

[S2596](#) by Senator Hanna Gallo would ask voters to approve a \$300 million school construction bond in November to rebuild, renovate, and modernize our schools. It would also extend certain funding incentives about to expire and create new funding incentives. One of the new funding incentives would be awarded to districts that embark on projects that utilize renewable energy. RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi offered brief testimony in support of the legislation. He noted that student learning conditions and school employee working conditions would benefit from the bond measure. He pledged that the union would work with other stakeholders to educate voters should the measure be put on the ballot in November. He noted that, if passed, the bond would continue the important goal of satisfying the tremendous school construction and renovation needs identified in the statewide Jacob's Report issued several years ago.

Additional Senate Finance Committee Legislation

The RIFTHP testified on Article 1 and Article 10 of the State budget that were also heard in the Senate Finance Committee on March 24. The Union supported the Governor's proposal to protect school district funding loss caused by recent enrollment loss. The cost to hold districts harmless, combined with extra state funding required by the existing funding formula is about \$50 million.

The RIFTHP testified in opposition to a Governor McKee proposal to fund municipal learning centers by \$5 million each year for the next three years. The RIFTHP does not oppose appropriating money for afterschool and summer programs and activities but believe that such programs should be coordinated and run by school districts, not mayors. Several Committee members were skeptical of the program that is based on a program Dan McKee initiated when he was Mayor of Cumberland.

The RIFTHP also voiced support of [S2309](#), a bill by Senator Ryan Pearson. The bill would provide \$1 million to Rhode Island College to provide certificates classes to teachers seeking bi-lingual, TESOL or ELL certificates when required to do so by their school district. James Parisi testified that there are several districts increasing certification requirements for English language learners and it would be beneficial to teachers seeking training to have the cost borne by the State. He also noted that other districts without large ELL populations now will experience increased need for ELL-certified teachers in the near future. Jeannine Dingus-Eason, the Dean at the School of Education at RIC and Erin Papa of the RI Foreign Language Association also testified in support of the bill.

Bill Introductions

Transparency in Education Curricular Materials

([H7335](#), Morgan, House Education)

This act would create the 2022 Transparency in Education Curriculum Materials Act, requiring the governing body of a public school to ensure that all instructional or training materials used for faculty and staff training, as well as all learning or curricular materials used for student instruction, be displayed on the school's website in an easily accessible location.

Early Childhood Innovation Act

([H7340](#), McNamara, House Finance)

This act would establish the Rhode Island Early Childhood Innovation Act. The act would authorize the department of human services to establish an early childhood innovation fund for the purpose of supporting programs designed to narrow the education achievement gap for at-risk children as they enter kindergarten. The act would provide that the general assembly would allocate \$1,000,000 annually to this fund.

Providence Elected School Committee

([H7377](#), Perez, House Education)

This act would authorize the city of Providence to have an elected school committee, as opposed to an appointed school committee, effective July 1, 2026.

Workers Compensation -- Teachers' Retirement Offset

([H7386](#), Shanley, House Finance)

This act would prevent the state from reducing retirement benefits due for teachers, by the amount they received for workers' compensation specific compensation and Medicare set aside allocations, thereby treating them the same way state and municipal employees are treated.

Human Services -- Minimum Wage

([H7390](#), Shanley, House Finance)

([S2407](#), DiPalma, Senate Labor)

These acts would require state contracted human services providers to pay their employees a starting hourly wage, of no less than twenty-one dollars (\$21.00) per hour, and to include wage incremental raises for existing employees.

Home Care Licensure Moratorium

([H7397](#), Serpa, House Health & Human Services)

This act would create a moratorium until at least July 1, 2027 on the issuance of new licenses for home care providers, home nursing care providers and hospice providers. Limited exceptions to the moratorium are provided. During the five (5) year moratorium period the department of health is to conduct a statewide utilization and capacity study and report.

Homecare Nursing Assistant Licensure

([H7398](#), Serpa, House Health & Human Services)

This act would establish the category of home care nursing assistants, who would be paraprofessionals licensed by the department of health to work exclusively in home care; require training specific to home-based care for vulnerable homebound patients; and allow greater opportunities for home care agencies to compete in the labor market in order to reduce long wait lists for activities of daily living services and supports at home.

Voter Initiative

([H7425](#), Perez, House State Government & Elections)

This act would amend the Constitution of the State of Rhode Island to include voter initiative.

Curriculum - Different Cultures

([H7435](#), Morgan, House Education)

This act would require schools to include in their curriculum the histories of all the people of various nationalities, who have come to America to make the United States their new home.

Tax Credit for Public School Donation

([H7441](#), Solomon, House Finance)

This act would create a tax credit for the amount in excess of ten thousand dollars (\$10,000) contributed to a public school district for the express purpose of making physical improvements to a school.



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