
The SMITH HILL REPORT

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Education Aid - Article 11

On Thursday, March 31, the House Finance Committee heard testimony on [Article 11](#) of the State Budget. The following link is the [presentation](#) put together by the House fiscal staff. The Governor proposed several changes to the education aid formula that benefit public school students. There were cuts to charter schools based on costs that districts have but charter schools do not. On the day before the hearing, Commissioner Ken Wagner addressed a joint session of the House of Representatives and the Senate. In that speech, he announced his plans to vest more authority to school principals and school staff in a program called Empowerment Schools. This idea was drafted in the form of legislation and introduced as an amendment to Article 11 on Wednesday. Thus, Thursday's House Finance Committee hearing encompassed the Governor's original Article 11 plus the March 30 amendment. RIFTHP President Frank Flynn offered extensive testimony on the many facets of Article 11. His testimony was as follows:

1. The RIFTHP supports the restoration of the Full-Day Kindergarten transition money that was presented to the House Finance Committee in a March 30, 2016 budget amendment. The RIFTHP has consistently supported the expansion of full-day kindergarten and believes the state should keep its promise of providing additional resources to those districts now being required to implement Full-Day K.
2. The RIFTHP supports the expansion of public information under the Uniform Chart of Accounts (UCOA) contained in Section 1 of Article 11. This would expedite the availability of public disclosure by providing information on adopted school department budgets.
3. The RIFTHP supports revisions to the Maintenance of Effort provisions of state law contained in Section 2 of Article 11. This provision would enhance resources for public

schools by recognizing cost of living increases and enrollment increases when determining local contributions to school districts.

4. The RIFTHP supports the \$355 per pupil reduction of expenses school districts incurred for charter tuition. This is a modest but important first step in remedying the significant fiscal inequities that exist in the Rhode Island method of funding charter schools. The House Commission, chaired by Representative Jay O'Grady, identified the significant elements used to justify this change contained in Section 3 of Article 11.
5. The RIFTHP also supports the \$300 per pupil state payment for school districts who send more than 5% of their students to charter schools. This provision contained in Section 3 is the first time in years that the state has recognized that expanded school choice options have a detrimental impact on the remaining students in neighborhood schools. There are arguments that this number is too low, but the RIFTHP supports the concept and urges the Finance Committee to fund this provision.
6. Another positive feature contained in Section 3 is the improved funding for "extraordinary costs" of special education students. State support will increase for students whose expenses are 4x core instructional costs instead of the current 5x such costs. Special education services are expensive and additional state support helps districts whose population contains such students.
7. The final component of Section 3 is something the RIFTHP strongly supports, and that is the enhanced funding for our State's English Learners. As a union that represents most teachers and many school staff working in urban school districts, our members understand the importance of finding resources to address the learning needs of this growing population. The 10% funding increase applied to EL students is necessary.
8. While we support all the initiatives in Section 3 of Article 11, there is one area that the RIFTHP asked the Committee to address. The RIFTHP asked the Governor's Funding Commission to remedy the significant disparities that exist because one group of schools is allowed to opt-out of the state teacher's retirement plan. Mayoral Academies are permitted to not participate in ERSRI. Independent charter school teachers and district charter school teachers are in ERSRI.
 - For several years, the RIFTHP supported legislation requiring all Mayoral academy teachers and staff to participate in the state retirement plan. The Mayoral Academies opposed the bill and they continue to provide a much less expensive retirement plan to their employees.

- It is important to recognize that most of the cost associated with pension payments by employers is for the unfunded liability. Mayoral Academies do nothing to help pay off the large unfunded liability that exists in this state and benefit from a large overpayment.
 - A chart that demonstrates the difference in expenses between mayoral academies and the public school districts that send students to those schools was distributed to the committee members. Using information from UCOA, there is a \$771 per pupil overpayment to Achievement First and a \$695 overpayment to Blackstone Valley Prep. The Governor did not address this issue, and the RIFTHP asked the Finance Committee to include an adjustment for pensions solely for the mayoral academies when they adopt this article.
 - The [chart](#), for FY 2014, understates the problem because it compares district costs for teachers and administrators to mayoral academy costs for all employees, including teacher assistants and secretaries.
9. Finally, with respect to Section 7 ([the Empowerment Act](#)), we appreciate Commissioner Wagner’s efforts to empower teachers at the building level and his emphasis on strengthening neighborhood schools. We agree that true, sustainable change can only occur when the voices of all parties at the school level work collaboratively.

We do have reservations regarding the impact this proposal would have on local collective bargaining agreements, particularly around reassignment and transfer.

Additionally, we are concerned about the lack of local approval of out-of-district tuition money. We believe that the elected officials of the sending school districts, whose students voluntarily choose to attend a charter school or an alternative school of choice, have a right and an obligation to approve the expenditure of local funds. It is their duty to protect the fiscal stability of their districts.

Article 5 – School Construction Bond

The House Finance Committee took testimony on [Article 5](#) of the Budget. Article 5 puts several bond questions on the ballot, including a \$40 million for school construction. The RIFTHP testified in support of this bond provision. RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi cited a recent Senate report indicating that, based on district self-assessment, Rhode Island needs to invest \$1.6 billion to get all public school buildings to “good” condition. While the need is significant, the RIFTHP

appreciates efforts to find some money. He said that many RIFTHP members work in schools that are in deplorable conditions, impacting the student learning environment and the staff working environment. Testimony revealed that there is currently a study of need that will further generate information to identify construction and renovation needs throughout the State.

Rhode Island Presidential Primary

Rhode Island's Presidential Primary is **Tuesday, April 26**. For those in need of an absentee ballot, the **deadline for requesting a mail-in ballot is April 5, 2016**, though emergency ballots may be requested after that date. On April 26, voters will be able to pick a presidential candidate and elect convention delegates for their chosen candidate.

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