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# SMITH HILL REPORT



PUBLISHED BY THE RHODE ISLAND FEDERATION OF TEACHERS & HEALTH PROFESSIONALS/AFT, AFL-CIO

April 6, 2026

## Brown Graduate Fellows Organizing Under Landmark RI Labor Law



Graduate student workers at Brown University have launched a first-in-the-nation effort to unionize graduate fellows, testing Rhode Island's new law guaranteeing collective bargaining rights for graduate student employees—and drawing strong backing from AFT-RI leadership.

Leaders of the Graduate Labor Organization (RIFT-AFT Local 6516) announced they have secured a supermajority of support among fellows and are seeking voluntary recognition from the university. The campaign would expand union protections to fellows who perform significant research and academic labor but are currently excluded from the bargaining unit.

AFT-RI President Maribeth Calabro delivered support for the effort, welcoming graduate fellows into the union and underscoring that Brown's success is built on their labor. She emphasized that the university's research output, institutional reputation, and the significant funding and resources it generates are all driven by the work fellows perform—making their full inclusion in union protections long overdue.

At the core of the campaign is a workplace equity issue: graduate fellows often work long hours conducting research and meeting academic expectations but lack access to grievance procedures, standardized pay protections, and enforceable workplace rights. Organizers argue this creates a two-tier system that undermines both fairness and stability on campus.

The effort builds directly on legislation passed by the Rhode Island General Assembly in 2025, strongly supported by AFT-RI and labor allies, which affirms graduate student workers' right to organize regardless of classification. AFT-RI leaders have framed the campaign as a critical test of the law's promise to extend collective bargaining rights to all workers performing essential labor.

AFL-CIO President Patrick Crowley, also underscored the significance of the moment, pointing to the state's clear policy of encouraging collective bargaining and emphasizing that graduate workers deserve the same rights as workers across Rhode Island.

The outcome at Brown will have implications beyond Providence. As one of the first major efforts to apply Rhode Island's new framework, this campaign could set a national precedent for how graduate fellows are treated—and reinforce the role of AFT in expanding worker protections in higher education.

### **Online Safety and Emerging AI Technologies**

AFT-RI joined lawmakers, parents, and education advocates at the State House this week to support a comprehensive package of legislation aimed at strengthening protections for children in an increasingly digital world, standing alongside NEARI in support of the effort.

The legislation, introduced by Representatives Tina Spears, Justine Caldwell, and Megan Cotter alongside Senate sponsors Senate President Valarie Lawson, Senator Louis DiPalma, and Senator Lori Urso, focuses on holding technology companies accountable and establishing clear safety standards for platforms used by children. The package reflects growing concern about the impact of social media, online platforms, and emerging technologies on student well-being.

The proposal includes several key bills: the Safe School Technology Act ([H 7895](#)), the Age-Appropriate Design Code ([H 7632](#) / [S 2406](#)), and the Social Media Regulation Act ([H 7953](#) / [S 2968](#)). Additional legislation includes the Rhode Island Children's Online Safety Act ([H 7746](#)), Use of Third-Party Digital Platforms in Public Education ([H 8345](#)), and AI Companion Models ([H 7350](#) / [S 2195](#)).

Parents and community members at the event shared powerful personal stories underscoring the urgency of these protections, including the devastating consequences that can result when harmful online activity goes unchecked. Their testimony highlighted the real-world impact of unregulated digital spaces and reinforced the need for stronger safeguards for children.

For educators and school staff, these issues are not theoretical. Students are navigating digital environments that can expose them to harmful content, exploitation, and mental health risks, often through school-issued devices or platforms used in educational settings. Without clear standards, schools and families are left managing risks created by technology companies without sufficient safeguards in place.

Educator presence underscored the shared commitment of Rhode Island's teacher unions to ensuring that student safety keeps pace with rapid technological change. Strong guardrails, transparency, and accountability are essential to creating digital environments that support—not undermine—student learning and well-being.

As this legislation moves forward, it represents a broader effort to align Rhode Island's policies with the realities facing students, families, and educators, while reinforcing the responsibility of technology companies to design products that prioritize safety over profit.

### **Take Action!**

Rhode Island cannot afford to divert more resources away from neighborhood public schools. Use the links below to tell your legislators to oppose charter expansion and invest in the students and educators in our public schools.

[Stop Charter Expansion: Pass the Moratorium and Cap Reduction](#)

[RI Communities First](#)

### **This Week**

- On Tuesday, the House State Government and Elections Committee will hear a bill that allows certain privately employed healthcare workers funded primarily by public dollars to opt into the state employee health insurance plan.
- On Wednesday, the Senate Education Committee will hear a bill that would end the state-directed turnaround plan for Providence Public Schools and return control of the district to local leadership. The House Education Committee will hear the companion bill on Thursday.
- On Wednesday, the Senate Education Committee will hear a bill that prohibits schools from tracking student devices using location data except in limited circumstances to protect student privacy.
- On Thursday, the House will vote on a bill that directs the state to establish a statewide anti-hazing policy for student athletics to improve student safety and accountability in school sports programs.
- On Thursday, the House will vote on a bill that updates the definition of dyslexia in state law to better reflect current understanding of reading disabilities and improve identification and support for students.

## Bill Introductions

### **Individual Accountability for Workplace Discrimination**

([H 7768](#), Edwards, House Labor)

([S 3200](#), McKenney, Senate Judiciary)

These bills would prohibit employers, employment agencies, labor organizations, and employees from engaging in unlawful employment practices and would allow individuals to be held personally liable for workplace discrimination.

### **Temporary Disability Insurance for State Workers**

([S 2927](#), Vargas, Senate Labor & Gaming)

This bill would make Rhode Island State Employees eligible for Temporary Disability Insurance benefits beginning January 1, 2027.

### **Non-Teacher Termination Reporting**

([S 3010](#), Valverde, Senate Education)

This bill would require school districts to provide the Department of Education with the names of non-teacher employees terminated for good and just cause.

### **Family Court Interagency Cooperation**

([H 7036](#), Casimiro, House Judiciary)

([S 2057](#), Tikoian, Senate Judiciary)

These bills would require school districts to provide courts with information about students when requested in family court proceedings.

### **School Safety and Security Funding**

([SJR 2030](#), Rogers, Senate Finance)

This resolution would provide approximately \$100,000 to each public school for safety and security improvements through a statewide appropriation.

### **Rhode Island Promise Scholarship Expansion**

([H 7052](#), Azzinaro, House Finance)

([S 2093](#), Gu, Senate Finance)

These bills would expand eligibility for the Rhode Island Promise Scholarship to include students enrolled in workforce-ready certificate programs at the Community College of Rhode Island.

### **Onward We Learn Scholarship Funding Adjustment**

([H 8162](#), Messier, House Finance)

([S 2094](#), Gallo, Senate Finance)

These bills would require any remaining funds from the Rhode Island Promise and Hope Scholarship programs to be redirected to the Onward We Learn scholarship program after eligible awards are distributed.

### **Out-of-District Pre-K Enrollment**

([H 8130](#), Giraldo, House Education)

([S 2207](#), Acosta, Senate Education)

These bills would allow municipalities participating in the state prekindergarten program to enroll students from outside their district and establish a lottery system for placement.

### **UCAP Board of Trustees**

([H 7271](#), Lombardi, House Education)

([S 2208](#), Bell, Senate Education)

These bills would amend the governance structure of the Urban Collaborative in Providence by establishing a board of trustees.

### **Unemployment Benefits for Striking Workers**

([H 7440](#), Furtado, House Labor)

([S 2170](#), Bissaillon, Senate Labor & Gaming)

These bills would allow workers who are on strike or locked out due to a labor dispute to receive unemployment benefits.

### **School Trauma Kit Requirements**

([H 7616](#), Bennett, House Education)

([S 2210](#), Sosnowski, Senate Education)

These bills would require all elementary and secondary schools to maintain accessible Trauma Kits on-site and provide liability protections for individuals who render emergency assistance.

### **504 Transition Planning for Students with Disabilities**

([S 2214](#), Quezada, Senate Education)

This bill would require transition planning for high school students with 504 plans, similar to the planning currently required for students with individualized education programs.

### **Out-of-School Suspension Authority**

([S 2215](#), Quezada, Senate Education)

This bill would allow school administrators to issue out-of-school suspensions when a student poses a threat to the safety of others.

### **Energy Capable School Buildings**

([H 8167](#), Cortvriend, House Finance)

([S 2229](#), Pearson, Senate Finance)

These bills would direct the Department of Education to develop regulations for energy-capable school buildings.

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### **Questions**

RIFTHP members with questions about the Smith Hill Report or our legislative agenda may reach out to RIFTHP Lobbyist Jeremy Sencer at (401) 273-9800 or at [jsencer@rifthp.org](mailto:jsencer@rifthp.org).

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