

The

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Charter Moratorium & Cap Reduction

This week, the Senate Education Committee heard [S2787](#), sponsored by Sen. Murray, legislation that would establish a three-year moratorium on new charter approvals beginning with the 2026–27 school year and limit future charter expansion while Rhode Island revisits its education funding formula. The bill’s House companion, [HB7415](#), was previously heard in the House, reflecting growing scrutiny over whether decades of charter growth have improved outcomes for Rhode Island students or instead contributed to a fragmented parallel system competing for limited public resources.

The hearing brought together educators, labor leaders, municipal officials, parents, and charter advocates, but one theme emerged repeatedly: Rhode Island’s public schools continue serving the highest-need students while facing mounting fiscal pressure, staffing shortages, and increasing demands on aging systems.

Supporters emphasized the legislation does not eliminate existing charter seats or remove options for current families. Rather, they argued Rhode Island should pause expansion while evaluating whether continued growth is sustainable and whether all publicly funded schools are equitably sharing responsibility for educating students with the most significant needs.

Among the hearing’s most notable moments, RIFTHP President Maribeth Calabro shifted discussion away from broad claims about charter performance and toward a more difficult question: who schools serve. Presenting RIDE categorical funding data, Calabro noted Providence receives approximately \$4.9 million in funding for high-cost special education students, compared with \$2.25 million in Cranston, more than \$1 million in Pawtucket, but just \$33,277 across all charter and state schools combined, reminding lawmakers that “we’re not comparing apples to apples.” Calabro also submitted [written testimony](#).

Committee members immediately repeated the figures aloud and requested additional context, underscoring continued questions about whether school comparisons account for student populations served and whether performance claims reflect equivalent levels of need. Chair Gallo noted the figures came directly from RIDE, reinforcing the significance of the data in discussions about accountability, outcomes, and who bears responsibility for educating Rhode Island’s highest-need students.

Legislators also pressed witnesses about special education enrollment, high-cost needs, and reports that some students return to district schools after struggling in charter settings. Committee

discussion repeatedly returned to whether outcome data sufficiently accounts for differences in student populations served.

Later testimony from RIFTHP Lobbyist Jeremy Sencer reframed the debate beyond charter schools themselves to Rhode Island's broader public education priorities. Sencer argued that charter schools were originally created by AFT as laboratories of innovation designed to strengthen all public education, but questioned whether decades of expansion have advanced that mission. Urging lawmakers to "prioritize the schools that serve all students," Sencer challenged supporters of continued growth to explain "how charter expansion has raised the tide for students in sending districts," arguing that after 30 years of expansion, Rhode Island must assess whether charter growth has improved outcomes systemwide or simply expanded parallel structures competing for scarce resources.

The hearing reflected growing willingness among policymakers to ask whether Rhode Island's education policies reward systems producing outcomes for selected populations while districts educating all students—including those with the greatest academic, social-emotional, and special education needs—continue absorbing the highest costs and responsibilities.

Municipal leaders and educators echoed those concerns. Testimony from local officials reflected growing anxiety about staffing shortages, budget strain, and the long-term sustainability of maintaining parallel systems while districts absorb increasing student need. Woonsocket Teachers Guild President Robert Stewart and Pawtucket educator and RIFTHP Legislative Action Committee member Heather Rodriguez described the impact charter expansion has had on communities already struggling to sustain comprehensive public school systems.

Those concerns were reinforced by testimony describing charter expansion as creating "two separate school systems funded by taxpayer money," limiting districts' ability to invest in infrastructure, multilingual learners, special education services, and classroom supports. Witnesses argued communities should not be forced to choose between maintaining neighborhood public schools and supporting expanding parallel systems—particularly when districts serving all students continue absorbing the highest-cost educational responsibilities.

Rhode Island AFL-CIO President Patrick Crowley summarized the broader concern succinctly, calling the legislation a "measured step forward" while arguing "the current status quo is broken."

The legislation was ultimately held for further study, but the hearing reflected increasing scrutiny of whether continued charter expansion aligns with Rhode Island's goals for equitable, sustainable, and fully funded public education.

The political landscape around the issue also appears to be shifting. Governor McKee, previously viewed as a likely obstacle to charter moratorium proposals, has indicated openness to a temporary pause on new charter growth while broader funding reforms are considered. Questions remain regarding provisions such as reducing the statewide charter cap, but the debate has moved beyond whether additional scrutiny is warranted and increasingly toward what form that scrutiny should take.

For supporters of [SB2787](#) and [HB7415](#), that shift may represent a meaningful turning point in Rhode Island's conversation about the future of public education.

Pension Improvement

The Senate Finance Committee heard a broad package of retirement legislation this week, including several bills supported by RIFTHP intended to strengthen retirement security for current and retired public employees and address pension policies that remain a top concern for many educators and public workers across Rhode Island.

Among the measures supported by RIFTHP were bills creating Rule of 85 and Rule of 90 retirement pathways ([SB2842](#) and [SB3251](#)), restoring annual compounded COLAs for state retirees ([SB2818](#)), expanding service credit protections for teachers taking parental or medical leave ([SB2537](#)), increasing survivor benefits ([SB2678](#)), and updating retirement calculations for certain post-2009 employees ([SB2538](#)). All measures were ultimately held for further study (8-0).

RIFTHP President Maribeth Calabro submitted [written testimony](#) and testified before the committee, while RIFTHP Lobbyist Jeremy Sencer, RIAFT Retirees President Roger Boudreau, and Woonsocket Teachers Guild President Robert Stewart provided in-person testimony supporting the package of reforms.

In testimony, Calabro argued retirement security remains one of the most significant unresolved issues facing Rhode Island's public workforce, emphasizing that many educators and public employees entered public service with the expectation of a secure retirement only to see pension rules change during their careers. She described the bills as an important step toward rebuilding retirement stability and restoring confidence in public service.

Calabro also pointed to increasing competition from neighboring states, arguing Rhode Island risks becoming a "training ground" for Massachusetts as educators seek retirement systems offering greater long-term stability and preserving purchasing power through stronger pension protections.

Supporters argued proposals addressing COLAs, retirement eligibility, parental leave protections, and survivor benefits are not only about retirees, but also about recruiting and retaining the next generation of educators and public employees. The hearing reflected a broader recognition that retirement security remains closely tied to workforce stability and Rhode Island's ability to attract and keep experienced professionals.

Charter Prevailing Wage Enforcement

The Senate Labor Committee heard [S2634](#), sponsored by Sen. Bissaillon, legislation intended to provide educators and administrators employed by charter schools and mayoral academies with prevailing wage and benefits oversight, along with recourse when violations occur.

RIFTHP President Maribeth Calabro submitted [written testimony](#) in support of the bill. RIFTHP Lobbyist Jeremy Sencer, testifying on behalf of AFT Rhode Island, argued the proposal became necessary after educators from multiple charter schools raised concerns about compensation disparities, workplace conditions, and support for high-need students.

Sencer testified that some charter educators appeared to earn more than 30 percent less than comparable peers, describing the bill as a way to enforce existing standards rather than create new ones: “The law already requires prevailing wage, so I ask a simple question: why are we not enforcing it?”

He also connected the discussion to broader funding challenges, arguing districts across Rhode Island have faced staff cuts, larger class sizes, and reduced student services while continuing to absorb the highest-cost student needs. Sencer argued that if some charter schools are operating without meeting prevailing wage standards while districts lose resources and continue serving the highest-need students, Rhode Island has a responsibility to pause further expansion and reassess whether current systems are equitable, sustainable, and accountable.

The bill was ultimately held for further study, but testimony underscored growing questions about whether publicly funded schools should operate under different standards for compensation, worker protections, and accountability.

Support and Access to Bilingual Education Act (SABE)



RIFTHP President Maribeth Calabro joined the Coalition for a Multilingual Rhode Island, Providence School Board members, and education advocates at the State House this week to support legislation intended to strengthen multilingual education programs and protect school funding in the face of potential budget cuts.

The coalition called for passage of [H7389](#), sponsored by Rep. David Morales, which would establish a dedicated bilingual education support fund within the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to expand dual language and multilingual programs in Rhode Island schools. Advocates argued multilingual education strengthens student opportunity, educational equity, and long-term workforce readiness.

The group also highlighted [H8511](#), legislation designed to ensure schools do not lose state aid because of changes or disruptions to SNAP funding, raising broader concerns about protecting educational resources amid federal uncertainty.

Later that day, [H7389](#) was heard before the House Finance Committee, where RIFTHP Lobbyist Jeremy Sencer submitted [written testimony](#) in support of the legislation, reinforcing calls for continued investment in programs supporting multilingual learners.

The hearing reflected growing recognition that multilingual education is increasingly viewed not only as a language access issue, but as an investment in student success and Rhode Island's future workforce.

Right To Bargain Longevity

The Senate Labor and Gaming Committee heard [S2501](#), sponsored by Sen. Famiglietti this week that would restore the ability of state union employees to negotiate longevity pay through collective bargaining agreements beginning July 1, 2026.

RIFTHP Lobbyist Jeremy Sencer submitted [written testimony](#) in support of the bill, arguing Rhode Island should not prohibit workers and employers from negotiating compensation structures that address workforce needs and retention challenges.

Sencer emphasized that longevity pay recognizes the value of experienced public employees, whose institutional knowledge and expertise strengthen public services, while noting the bill does not mandate longevity payments, but simply restores the ability to negotiate them.

Supporters argued the proposal reinforces a broader principle: compensation and retention incentives should remain subject to collective bargaining rather than statutory prohibition, particularly as public employers continue facing recruitment and retention challenges.

This Week

Tuesday, May 19 – Senate Finance Committee

- The Senate Finance Committee will hear legislation establishing a phased-in statewide universal school breakfast and lunch program intended to ensure all Rhode Island students have access to healthy meals regardless of income.
- The committee will consider a bill requiring Rhode Island schools to maintain staffing levels of one certified social worker for every 250 students, expanding student access to mental health and behavioral health support.
- The committee will hear legislation creating a dedicated bilingual education support fund to expand dual language and multilingual learning opportunities in Rhode Island schools.

- The committee will consider a proposal revising special education reimbursement formulas to provide additional support for districts serving students with high-cost needs and midyear enrollments.
- The committee will hear legislation requiring a review of Rhode Island’s education funding formula to evaluate whether current funding adequately supports high-need students.
- The committee will consider legislation increasing the student success factor for districts serving high concentrations of students experiencing poverty.
- The committee will hear legislation intended to establish a new statewide universal school meals program, expanding access to free breakfast and lunch in public schools.
- The committee will consider legislation intended to protect school funding levels from disruptions in SNAP participation data, addressing concerns about instability in education aid calculations.
- The committee will hear legislation authorizing up to \$25 million in borrowing for school construction and facility improvements in Central Falls.
- The committee will consider legislation creating education savings accounts that would redirect public education funding into privately managed accounts for educational expenses.
- The committee will hear legislation establishing a new school choice program allowing students to enroll in public or private schools outside traditional assignment structures.
- The committee will consider legislation expanding private school scholarship tax credits, increasing incentives for contributions supporting private and pre-K scholarships.

Wednesday, May 20 – Senate Education Committee

- The Senate Education Committee will hear legislation that would eliminate longstanding Providence Teachers Union bargaining protections, establish a separate minimum salary structure for Providence educators, and create new processes governing teacher dismissal and demotion as state control of Providence schools approaches its scheduled end.

Thursday, May 21 – Senate Finance Committee

- The Senate Finance Committee will consider legislation removing limits on charter funding holdback adjustments, affecting how reductions in local per-pupil charter funding are implemented.
- The committee will hear a proposal creating a comprehensive revision of Rhode Island’s education funding formula and accountability systems, potentially reshaping how public education is funded statewide.

Bill Introductions

Charter School Funding Holdback Adjustment

([S 3276](#), Thompson, Senate Finance)

This legislation would remove the fiscal year 2026 cap limiting reductions to local per-pupil funding for charter schools to 14 percent. The bill is intended to adjust how charter school funding changes are implemented, potentially affecting local district budgets and charter reimbursement levels.

Workers' Compensation Court Authority and Jurisdiction Updates

([S 3297](#), Ciccone, Senate Labor and Gaming)

This legislation would amend multiple sections of Rhode Island's workers' compensation law related to the authority and jurisdiction of the Workers' Compensation Court. The bill is intended to update how the court oversees workers' compensation disputes and administers claims involving injured workers and employers.

Public Employee Pension Revocation for Felony Sex Crimes

([S 3296](#), DiPalma, Senate Judiciary)

This legislation would authorize the State Retirement Board to revoke or reduce pension benefits for public employees convicted of, or pleading guilty or no contest to, felony sex crimes connected to their public office or employment. The bill is intended to increase accountability by limiting retirement benefits for individuals who commit serious criminal offenses while serving in public positions.

Access for Congressionally Chartered Youth Organizations in Public Schools

([S 3289](#), Acosta, Senate Education)

This legislation would require public schools to provide congressionally chartered youth development organizations with limited access for student recruitment and brief presentations, with parent notification requirements and protections preserving school safety and administrative discretion. The bill is intended to expand student awareness of youth development opportunities while maintaining local control over school operations.

Take Action

[Action Network Link: Email your legislators and tell them to pass Rule of 90!](#)

[Action Network Link: Email your legislators and tell them to pass the charter moratorium and cap reduction!](#)

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.



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