

The

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Charter Moratorium & Cap Reduction Clears Senate, Moves to House

After years of debate over the impact of charter school expansion on Rhode Island's public schools, the Senate voted 31-6 last week to approve [S2787](#), legislation that would temporarily pause new charter school approvals and reduce the state's charter school cap.

The vote marks one of the most significant education policy developments of the 2026 legislative session and represents a major step forward for educators, municipal leaders, school committees, and public education advocates who have raised concerns about the fiscal impact of continued charter growth.

Sponsored by Senator Melissa Murray of Woonsocket, the legislation would establish a three-year moratorium on new charter school approvals and reduce the statewide charter school cap from 35 to 28 schools. Existing charter schools would continue operating, and charter schools that have already received final state approval would be allowed to move forward. The legislation does not close any existing charter schools or eliminate any current charter seats. Instead, it pauses future expansion while Rhode Island evaluates the fiscal impact of charter growth and considers broader education funding reforms.

Supporters argue that Rhode Island has become an outlier among neighboring states. Despite serving a relatively small student population, Rhode Island already operates 24 charter schools and dozens of separate education agencies. Unlike neighboring states, Rhode Island has few meaningful fiscal safeguards protecting municipalities from the financial impact of continued charter expansion.

As students leave district schools, funding follows them, but many costs remain. School districts must continue maintaining buildings, transportation systems, special education services, and other core operations regardless of enrollment shifts. Municipal leaders and school officials have increasingly warned that continued charter expansion is creating unsustainable pressure on local budgets.

Supporters also point to persistent enrollment disparities. While charter schools serve some students successfully, traditional public school districts continue educating the overwhelming majority of students with the most intensive needs, including students requiring high-cost special education services and other significant supports. As a result, districts continue carrying many of the state's greatest educational and financial responsibilities.

The Senate vote came despite an extensive statewide campaign opposing the legislation. Charter advocacy organizations invested heavily in television advertising, digital media, direct mail, billboards, and lobbying efforts designed to defeat the proposal. Nevertheless, supporters successfully argued that Rhode Island should complete its ongoing review of the state education funding formula and fully evaluate the long-term consequences of charter expansion before authorizing additional growth.

The bill now moves to the House Education Committee, where lawmakers are expected to consider the proposal this week. With the Senate having already acted, attention now shifts to the House, where the future of one of the session's most closely watched education bills will be decided.

House Passes Budget, Adds Education Amendments

The Rhode Island House of Representatives approved the FY 2027 state budget this week, sending the \$15.2 billion spending plan to the Senate for consideration.

As discussed in last week's Smith Hill Report, the House Finance Committee budget included increased education aid, an expansion of the Student Success Factor, an extension of Rhode Island College's Hope Scholarship, and substantial investments in healthcare and higher education. Before final passage, House members adopted several amendments that added new funding priorities.

Among the additions was \$750,000 for a new Support and Access to Bilingual Education (SABE) fund within the Department of Education. The funding is intended to support multilingual learning programs and reflects growing recognition of the importance of bilingual and dual-language education in Rhode Island schools.

Lawmakers also added \$740,000 for the Rhode Island Auditory Oral Program, which provides early intervention, school-based services, technology support, and outreach for children with hearing loss and their families.

The House-approved budget now moves to the Senate Finance Committee, which is expected to consider the proposal before it advances to the full Senate for final action.

Millionaire Tax Included in House Budget

One of the most closely watched tax provisions of the legislative session is included in the House-passed FY 2027 budget.

The proposal would establish a one percent surtax on annual income above \$1 million, phased in over three years. House leaders have argued that the measure will help Rhode Island respond to growing fiscal pressures while generating revenue from those most able to contribute.

The proposal represents the culmination of years of advocacy by a broad coalition of labor unions, community organizations, faith leaders, and policy advocates who have argued that Rhode Island's tax system should ask more of the state's highest earners.

Among those involved in the effort from its early stages was longtime RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi, who retired earlier this year after decades representing educators and healthcare professionals at the State House. Parisi participated in the original coalition discussions surrounding a Rhode Island wealth tax and remained a consistent voice for tax fairness throughout his career.

Over time, the coalition expanded and continued advocating for a more progressive tax structure through multiple legislative sessions. While the proposal included in the budget differs from earlier wealth tax legislation, its inclusion reflects years of sustained organizing and policy advocacy around tax fairness.

This Week

- On Monday, the House Education Committee will consider legislation that would pause new charter school approvals and expansions for three years while reducing the statewide charter school cap and allowing Rhode Island to evaluate the fiscal impact of charter growth.
- On Monday, the House Education Committee will consider legislation that would strengthen school safety requirements by creating a statewide school emergency response committee and requiring annual school security assessments in every district.
- On Monday, the House Education Committee will consider legislation that would allow school days canceled due to a declared state of emergency to count toward Rhode Island's minimum annual school day requirements.
- On Monday, the House Finance Committee will consider legislation that would require approval from both the General Assembly and the Governor before Rhode Island participates in a federal school voucher tax credit program.
- On Monday, the House Finance Committee will consider legislation that would increase minimum survivor pension benefits for the spouses, domestic partners, and former spouses of deceased public retirees.
- On Monday, the House Finance Committee will consider legislation that would expand eligibility for in-state tuition rates at Rhode Island public colleges and universities for students who graduate from Rhode Island high schools.
- On Tuesday, the Senate Education Committee will consider legislation that would require public schools to make available seats accessible to students living elsewhere within the same school district after the initial enrollment period.

Bill Introductions

Education Funding Formula Study Commission

([SJR 3368](#), Gallo, Senate Finance)

This resolution would create a special joint legislative commission to conduct a comprehensive review of Rhode Island's education funding formula and broader education finance system. The commission would examine how state education aid is distributed, evaluate the adequacy and equity of current funding mechanisms, and develop recommendations for future reforms. The proposal comes as policymakers, educators, and municipal leaders continue to debate how best to support students and school districts facing increasing financial pressures and changing student needs.

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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