

The

SMITH HILL REPORT



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

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Session Opens

The 2026 session of the Rhode Island General Assembly opens tomorrow. The chambers are expected to move quickly into their regular weekly meeting schedules, with the session projected to conclude in late June. In the early weeks, legislators file new bills and committees begin posting hearing notices as the public process gets underway. Information about the General Assembly—including member rosters, bill text, hearing schedules, archived video of committee meetings, and tools to identify your Senator and Representative—is available on the Rhode Island General Assembly website at www.rilegislature.gov.

2025 Highlights

The RIFTHP enjoyed a very productive and positive 2025 legislative session. We focused on protecting collective bargaining rights, strengthening democratic local control in public education, and advancing policies that support safe, healthy learning environments for students and working conditions for employees. Major legislative accomplishments in 2025 included:

- **Education Takeover Limited to Individual Schools:** RIFTHP helped enact changes to Rhode Island's school intervention law to prohibit full-district state takeovers and limit state intervention to no more than two schools per district at a time.
- **RIDE Local 2012 Employee Bargaining Rights Affirmed:** RIFTHP helped secure a law clarifying that RIDE professional staff retain their collective bargaining **rights** and that existing agreements cannot be unilaterally abrogated.
- **Higher Education Bargaining Rights Protection:** RIFTHP supported enactment of a law expanding the definition of “employee” in Rhode Island labor law to include graduate student workers under the State Labor Relations Board’s jurisdiction.
- **School Personal Electronic Device Policy:** RIFTHP supported a new law requiring school districts to adopt policies limiting student access to personal electronic devices during the school day, with specified exemptions and a delayed effective date.
- **Central Falls Schools Local Governance Study Commission:** RIFTHP supported creation of a study commission to develop a plan and timeline to transfer Central Falls school governance back to the local community, with RIFTHP holding a seat on the commission.

- **Student Safety and Behavioral Health Committees:** RIFTHP supported a law requiring districts to establish Student Safety and Behavioral Health Committees that include union-appointed educators and support staff and produce annual reporting on student safety and mental health.
- **Court Reporter Page Rate Increased:** RIFTHP partnered with court reporters to pass a law increasing the statutory transcript page rate by 50 cents, updating a rate that had not changed for decades.
- **Freedom To Read Act:** RIFTHP supported enactment of the Freedom to Read Act, safeguarding intellectual freedom by setting clear book-challenge procedures, protecting librarians from retaliation, and affirming students' access to diverse ideas in public and school libraries.

2026 Priorities

Rule of 90

This bill allows public employees to retire with full benefits when age plus years of service equals 90, offering a fair and realistic path to retirement, especially for those who began working young. It corrects the inequities created by the 2011 pension overhaul and aligns Rhode Island with national norms for public service retirement.

Student and Teacher Classroom Safety Act

This bill gives educators the authority to remove students who are chronically disruptive or pose an immediate threat and requires meaningful teacher input before the student's return. It ensures timely follow-up, protects student rights, and prohibits staff retaliation.

Charter School Moratorium & Cap Reduction

This legislation pauses new or expanded charter schools, including mayoral academies, for three years and reduces the statewide cap from 35 to 25.

Charter School Funding Transparency

This bill requires RIDOE to publish information on charter school teacher and administrator prevailing wages. The bill also creates a 13-member commission to review charter school funding and administrative costs, with a report due by April 1, 2027.

RIFTHP Lobbyist Transition

RIFTHP Field Representative and Lobbyist James (Jim) Parisi has announced his retirement after 31 years of work at the RIFTHP. Parisi will finish his duties in mid-February. RIFTHP Field representative Jeremy Sencer, who worked with Parisi last session, will join RIFTHP President Maribeth Calabro to manage legislative and political affairs for the RIFTHP.

Jim began lobbying for the RIFTHP in the 1995 session after he was hired by former RIFTHP President Marcia Reback. One of his first projects was waging a veto override battle with newly elected Governor Almond. The fight was over our bill sponsored by the late Senator Maryellen Goodwin to permit unions to negotiate the ability to grieve and arbitrate teacher suspensions and dismissals instead of solely adjudicating those issues with the RIDE Commissioner. Parisi also recalls that year dominated by RIFTHP opposition to a proposal by legislative leaders to increase teacher and state worker pension contributions by 1%. It was the first of many pension fights Parisi was involved with over the ensuing two decades.

Jim began his career representing school support staff in Montgomery County Maryland represented by SEIU local 500. He then worked for the AFT in Maryland for over 5 years organizing new members, handling grievances and arbitrations and lobbying for the union in the Maryland statehouse. In Rhode Island, in addition to legislative work, Parisi also was Field Representative for six different local unions.

Parisi said *“It has been an honor to have had the opportunity to represent RIFTHP members at the state house over the past three decades. The Union always set an ambitious agenda and took firm stands on a wide-ranging set of issues. We never shied away from clearly and forcefully objecting to bad ideas no matter who the bill sponsor was and put together effective campaigns to promote good legislation.”*

Questions

RIFTHP members with questions about the Smith Hill Report or our legislative agenda may reach out to RIFTHP Lobbyist James Parisi at (401) 273-9800 or at jparisi@rifthp.org.

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