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# SMITH HILL REPORT



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

March 31, 2025

## **RIC/AFT Budget Testimony**

Budgets for public higher education institutions were heard in the Senate Finance Committee on Tuesday, March 25 and in the House Finance Committee on Thursday, March 27. RIC/AFT President Dr. Mikaila Arthur testified in support of RIC employees at the hearings. In her testimony, Arthur voiced concern about funding cuts emanating from the Trump Administration. She also asked the Assembly to ensure that RIC had sufficient funding to provide fair raises for RIC faculty and staff.



RIC/AFT President Dr. Mikaila Arthur

## **School Personal Electronic Device Policy**

RIFTHP President Maribeth Calabro offered verbal and written testimony on legislation to limit personal electronic devices in classrooms. [S 771](#) by Senator Melissa Murray would direct each school district to develop personal electronic device policies that restrict access during the school day. The bill was heard in the Senate Education Committee on March 26.

In her [written testimony](#), Calabro shared research demonstrating that student attention increases when access to their phones is restricted. Also, research shows the increased rates of anxiety and depression students experience with using social media. At the hearing, Calabro described the use of pouches that restrict student use of cellphones that were utilized in her school while teaching at Nathanael Greene Middle School in Providence. The Committee voted to hold the bill for further study.

### **Uniform School Start Date**

[S 773](#) by Senator Acosta would require a uniform start date throughout Rhode Island public schools. The bill was heard in the Senate Education Committee on March 26. RIFTHP President Maribeth Calabro offered brief testimony in support of the bill at the hearing. She described the challenges teachers and other school employees who are parents face when their work year begins on a different day than their children's school year.

### **Bargaining Unit Lists**

On Wednesday, March 26, the Senate Labor Committee took testimony on legislation filed by Senator Frank Ciccone that specified that unions are to get bargaining unit lists with specific information in a timely fashion. RIFTHP Lobbyist Jeremy Sencer offered brief verbal and [written](#) testimony in support of [S 127](#). Sencer said that labor-management communication and data access are important in upholding worker rights. The Committee voted to hold the bill for further study.

### **Arming Campus Police**

Thousands of gun control and gun access supporters filled the State House when a series of firearm bills were considered in the House Judiciary Committee on March 26. Among the bills heard that day was legislation to arm the campus police at Rhode Island College and CCRI. The bill has been submitted for years, and for years, AFT unions at RIC have opposed the bill. RIC AFT penned a [letter](#) opposing [H 5666](#) by Representative O'Brien. RIFTHP Lobbyist James Parisi submitted a [letter](#) opposing the bill, noting that the three AFT unions at RIC (faculty, professional staff, and adjunct faculty) all opposed the measure.

### **State Takeover- School Funding**

The City of Providence has supported legislation that would change the funding law for school districts that are taken over by the State. They have objected to a provision of the takeover law that requires the local contribution to schools increased by the same percentage that state aid increases. [S 663](#) would delete that funding provision and replace it with a local aid increase based on tax rates. [S 663](#) would also create a fiscal overseer for the district.

RIFTHP Lobbyist James Parisi submitted [written testimony](#) in opposition to the bill. He objected to any effort to reduce local funding of underfunded school districts. He also made the Committee aware of efforts to end future state takeovers of entire school districts that would render the bill moot.

### **Retirement Board Meeting Access**

The Employees Retirement System of Rhode Island has recently begun the practice of recording their meetings and posting the recording on their website. Recent ERSRI Retirement Board meetings can be found on the website [ersri.org](http://ersri.org). Legislation to memorialize that practice into law was considered by the Senate Judiciary Committee on March 27. [S 514](#) by Senator Burke gained the support of the RIFTHP. [Written testimony](#) by the RIFTHP was submitted, supporting the practice and supporting the provision of the bill that ensured that State Investment Commission meetings were also recorded, and the recordings posted on the website.

### **This Week**

- The full Senate will vote on the Court Reporter page rate bill on Tuesday
- Legislation to confirm bargaining rights for RIDE staff will be heard on Wednesday
- Legislation to restrict future school state takeovers to individual schools instead of entire school districts will be heard on Wednesday
- Legislation by Senator Zurrier to create a Receiver to take over Providence Schools instead of returning them to local control will be considered on Wednesday
- The Freedom to Read bill will be heard in the House State Government and Elections Committee on Thursday

### **Bill Introductions**

#### **Charter School Network Moratorium**

([S 389](#), Murray, Senate Education)

([H 6034](#), Messier, House Education)

These bills would provide that no new charter school application shall be granted, if the proposed school is a network charter school or the expansion of an existing charter school would create a network charter school.

#### **Education Funding-- Children with Disabilities**

([S 390](#), McKenney, Senate Education)

This bill would provide for better communication between sending and receiving districts regarding students receiving special education services. This bill would also adjust the costs between a sending and receiving district to educate and transport a student receiving special education services.

#### **Training - School Trauma Kits**

([S 391](#), Sosnowski, Senate Education)

This bill would require that every Elementary and Secondary school within the State of Rhode Island, whether they are public or privately run, provide and maintain clearly visible and easily accessible trauma kits. This bill would also provide for immunity for trained persons that gratuitously render emergency assistance to a person who experiences a traumatic bleeding injury.

### **School Vouchers - Test Scores**

([S 393](#), Paolino, Senate Education)

This bill would permit students at with low test scores to enroll in any public school. This bill would also establish the Rhode Island education revitalization fund to provide funding to the school choice program.

### **Sex Education Curriculum**

([S 395](#), Morgan, Senate Education)

This bill would provide that any school teaching sexual education to students shall provide the sexual education curriculum to every parent or legal guardian with a child in that school, and the parent or legal guardian shall consent, in writing, to the teaching of such sexual education curriculum to their child.

### **Parental Review of Education Materials**

([S 396](#), Morgan, Senate Education)

This bill would enable parents and guardians to review public school learning materials in advance and object if they decide that the material is harmful. The bill would provide that a parent or guardian may then withdraw their student from the activity or class where the material is used and request an alternative assignment. The bill would also require that in order to ensure the parent's or guardian's rights, every school committee or charter school governing body shall disclose on their website a list of the learning materials and activities used for instruction organized by subject area and grade level.

### **Early Retirement Penalty Reduction**

([S 420](#), Bissaillon, Senate Finance)

([H 5407](#), Bennett, House Finance)

These bills would reduce the current varying percentages for early retirement penalty for teachers, municipal and state employees to a cumulative annual reduction of three percent (3%) and monthly reduction of twenty-five hundredths percent (.25%).

### **Civics Education Categorical Funding**

([S 423](#), Gallo, Senate Finance)

([H 5981](#), Speakman, House Finance)

These bills would establish a new categorical funding category for civics education and create new funds dedicated to civics education. These bills would also require that the allocation of funding be approved and implemented by the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education pursuant to a request for proposal process.

### **CTE Funding Formula**

([S 424](#), Gallo, Senate Finance)

This bill would provide that the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, in consultation with a work group composed of various stakeholders, would develop a funding formula for school districts sending students to career and technical programs outside their district.

### **Healthy School Meals for All**

([S 430](#), Vargas, Senate Finance)

([H 5742](#), Cadwell, House Finance)

These bills would establish a statewide “Healthy School Meals for all” universal school breakfast and lunch program in Rhode Island public schools phased in over 3 years. The program would begin with all elementary school students, then add all middle school students in year two (2), and then provide universal meals for all students by the 2027-2028 school year. These bills would also direct that in operating its school breakfast and lunch program, each public educational entity would seek to maximize access to federal funds for the cost of the school breakfast and lunch program by participating in one of several identified federal programs in order to obtain federal funds to offset the costs to districts of providing free breakfasts and lunches and minimize the costs to the state.

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### **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](mailto:jparisi@rifthp.org).

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