

The

SMITH HILL REPORT



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Rule of 90 Advocacy Continues

On April 24, the RIFTHP launched an email campaign to permit members to voice their support of the legislation. To date we have had approximately 2400 members send two letters (one to their Representative, one to their Senator). We can come together and do better. After clicking on the link and entering your address, you will be presented with a sample letter to your Senator and Representative asking them to support the bill. You can add your own comments to the letter. To participate in the campaign, [click here](#).

New Senate Leadership Elected

On Monday, a funeral mass was held for former Rhode Island Senate President Dominick Ruggerio, who passed away a week earlier. On Tuesday, the Senate Democrats held a caucus to select a new Majority Leader and to support the current Majority Leader as Senate President. On a 24 to 8 (Pearson) and 4 (de la Cruz) vote, the Rhode Island Senate elected Valarie Lawson as Senate President. Lawson is a Senator from East Providence, former President of the East Providence Education Association and the President of the NEA/RI.

The Senate Democratic caucus supported Senator Frank Ciccone as Majority Leader. Ciccone retired from Laborers 808 and recently served as the Chair of the Senate Labor Committee. Majority Whip David Tikoian of Smithfield maintained his position with the new leadership team.

RIFTHP President Maribeth Calabro offered congratulations to Senator Lawson and her leadership team on their election. Calabro said "On behalf of the 12,000 members of the RIFTHP, I offer my warmest congratulations to Senator Valarie Lawson on her election as Senate President," said RIFTHP President Maribeth Calabro. "As a lifelong educator, a champion for public schools, and the current president of the National Education Association Rhode Island (NEARI), Senator Lawson brings a powerful voice for working people, students, and communities into one of the state's most influential roles."

Senator Lawson's election represents a significant moment for Rhode Island—elevating a leader whose values are deeply rooted in public service, education, and labor advocacy.

Her experience in the classroom and at the helm of a statewide education union will shape her leadership with empathy, strength, and a focus on equity.

"Val's dedication to Rhode Island's children and working families has long been clear in her advocacy and organizing," Calabro added. "Her leadership in the Senate will reflect the same integrity and care that has defined her work in education and the labor movement. We look forward to working in partnership with her to build a better future for all Rhode Islanders."

School Healthy Meals

On Tuesday, April 29, the House Finance Committee heard legislation to promote healthy school meals and to provide school breakfast and lunch without cost to students. [H 5742](#) by Representative Caldwell and others would phase in the cost-free meals over two fiscal years. RIFTHP President Maribeth Calabro provided [written testimony](#) and RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi testified at the hearing.

In her letter, Calabro cited research indicating improved student outcomes that come from proper nutrition. She wrote, "Decades of national research corroborate the undeniable link between healthy meals and positive educational outcomes. Studies have consistently demonstrated that students who regularly consume nutritious breakfasts and lunches exhibit enhanced concentration, memory retention, and problem-solving abilities, leading to better grades and overall academic success. Proper nutrition fuels brain development and function, resulting in improved attention spans, alertness, and cognitive processing. Access to healthy school meals can contribute to a reduction in childhood obesity and related health problems, leading to fewer absences due to illness and greater engagement in school. Universal free meals can help bridge the nutritional gaps that often exist between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, fostering greater equity in both health and educational opportunities."

Parisi joined a chorus of supporters extolling the virtues of the legislation. The bill was held for further study.

Charter School Union Neutrality

On April 30, 2025, RIFTHP Lobbyist Jeremy Sencer testified before the Senate Labor Committee in support of [S 912](#), the Charter School Employer Neutrality Act. Sencer emphasized the importance of ensuring a fair, intimidation-free environment for educators seeking to unionize in Rhode Island's charter schools. He cited recent instances where charter school management used coercive tactics to influence organizing efforts, underscoring the urgent need for stronger protection. He also noted that federal labor law is often slow and inadequate, leaving workers vulnerable during critical organizing periods. The bill addresses these concerns by requiring employer neutrality—ensuring no

interference, pressure, or retaliation during union campaigns. Sencer clarified that the bill preserves secret ballot elections and permits voluntary recognition processes like card check, which are already used in Rhode Island public sector labor relations. The committee voted to hold the bill for further study.

School Funding Bills Heard

The RIFTHP testified in support of five education funding bills during a busy House Finance Committee meeting on Tuesday April 29. RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi offered support for all five initiatives to increase state support for public education. The RIFTHP supported [H 5978](#) by Representative Casey that would increase the Student Success Factor component of the education funding formula. The Student Success Factor provides a 40% increase of state funding for students in poverty. Representative Casey's bill would increase the Student Success Factor to 45% or 50%, depending on poverty rates. The RIFTHP also supported Representative Casey's bill, [H 5977](#), to fully fund all education categorical funding, such as the special state funding pool for high cost special education needs or school transportation costs.

The RIFTHP offered testimony in support of [H 5750](#) by Rep. O'Brien that would increase state payment for high-cost special needs students. Currently, the State helps fund students whose education costs exceed four times base education funding. Rep. O'Brien's bill lowers the threshold to three times base education costs, making more special education costs eligible for state reimbursement.

The RIFTHP also supported two bills introduced by Representative Shallcross Smith. [H 5976](#) would provide \$4 million state funding for after-school programs. [H 6045](#) would provide \$2 million state funding to hire additional school social workers. H 6045 also creates a school social worker staffing ratio of one staff for every 250 students. The RIFTHP offered wholehearted support for both measures that fund programs that would improve education outcomes and student mental health issues. In addition to verbal testimony, RIFTHP President Maribeth Calabro offered [written testimony](#) in support of the school social worker legislation.

Student Safety and Behavioral Health Committees

On Wednesday April 30, the Senate Education Committee held a hearing on legislation promoted by the NEARI. [S 235](#) by Senator Appolonnio would create districtwide student safety and behavioral health committees. Teacher representatives and school paraprofessional representatives would be appointed by the respective collective bargaining agents.

RIFTHP President Maribeth Calabro provided [written testimony](#) and RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi offered verbal testimony at the hearing in support of the bill. Calabro cited research demonstrating safety and behavioral health needs that would be supported by

the new Committee. Parisi urged support since it brings the practitioner voice to the table when addressing policy related to student safety and mental health.

Virtual Learning Initiative Heard

On May 1, 2025, RIFTHP Lobbyist Jeremy Sencer testified before the House Education Committee in support of [H 6107](#), a bill establishing a pilot program for virtual reality (VR) learning in Rhode Island classrooms. The legislation allocates \$2 million in FY2026 to integrate immersive, standards-aligned VR instruction in math and science courses for students in grades 6–12. Sencer highlighted strong feedback from educators and students who have already used the platform, emphasizing its potential to boost engagement and achievement, particularly in high-need districts. Providence Teachers Union member and Alvarez High School math teacher Michael Vaughan led a live VR lesson during the hearing, allowing committee members to experience the technology firsthand. The committee voted to hold the bill for further study.

Worker Memorial Day

The labor movement recognized Worker Memorial Day at the end of April every year. This year, the AFL-CIO hosted a rally to commemorate Worker Memorial Day in Rhode Island. The group observed a moment of silence for the approximately 5,000 American workers who died this past year due to workplace accidents and preventable illnesses. Speakers at the rally promoted three pieces of legislation to address worker safety; including a ban on captive audience meetings, extreme temperature workplace regulations and legislation to ban smoking at Rhode Island casinos.



May Day Action



RIC AFT President Mikaila Arthur speaks at a May Day Celebration hosted by the Graduate Labor Organization (AFT, Local 6516)

This Week

- A bill to raise income tax on the wealthiest 1% will be heard in the House Finance Committee on Tuesday
- School vouchers will be considered in the Senate Finance Committee on Tuesday
- On Wednesday, the Senate Labor Committee will hear our bill to confirm bargaining rights for RIDE staff
- The Senate Education Committee has scheduled votes on the Freedom to Read bill and the Student Electronic Device policy bill on Wednesday
- The Rule of 90 and other pension improvement bills will be considered by the Senate Finance Committee on Thursday

Bill Introductions

MLL Students - IEP Process

([H 5838](#), Kislak, House Education)

This bill would provide additional procedural safeguards for English as a second language learners and English language learners during the IEP process.

K-12 Council Expansion

([H 5839](#), Morales, House Education)

([S 774](#), DiMario, Senate Education)

These bills would expand the council on elementary and secondary education to ten (10) members; make six (6) members a quorum; would make the teacher of the year a voting member; would require the student advisory council to meet at least quarterly; would make the chair of the student advisory council a voting member of the council; would expand the board of education from seventeen (17) to nineteen (19) members and would include the Rhode Island teacher of the year and the chairperson of the student advisory council and would also be voting members to the board.

Charter School - Union Neutrality

([H 5840](#), Casey, House Education)

([S 912](#), Thompson, Senate Labor & Gaming)

These bills would require all certified independent or district charter schools upon application for a renewal of said charter or an application for a new charter school to provide a union neutrality clause in the charter.

Gender Determination - Sports

([H 5842](#), Roberts, House Education)

([S 304](#), Morgan, Senate Judiciary)

These bills would categorize women by their biological identity at birth rather than their gender identity for purpose of organized sports. A team would be categorized as males, men, or boys; females, women, or girls; or coed or mixed. If there is a dispute, a student would establish sex by presenting a signed physician's statement that shall indicate the student's sex. Additionally, these bills would create a cause of action for any student who is deprived of an athletic opportunity or subject to retaliation as a result of violations of this chapter.

OPEB Trust Funding Report

([H 5962](#), Santucci, House Municipal Government)

This bill would require a municipality or quasi-public agency to file a report with the Department of Municipal Finance if it has not made its payment to its other post-employment benefits trust fund or if it is less than thirty-five percent (35%) funded.

Building Opportunities in Out-Of-School Time

([H 5976](#), Shallcross Smith, House Finance)

([S 870](#), DiMario, Senate Finance)

These bills would provide four million dollars (\$4,000,000) to support comprehensive and effective afterschool, school vacation, summer learning and workforce development programs for students in grades kindergarten through twelve (K-12), provide professional development to employees of out-of-school time programs, and require an annual report to the general assembly and the governor on the status and progress of the programs.

Student Success Factor Increase

([H 5978](#), Casey, House Finance)

([S 190](#), Murray, Senate Finance)

These bills would provide that in local educational agencies when over forty-five percent (45%) of the children have a family income that is at or below one hundred eighty-five percent (185%) of federal poverty guidelines then the student success factor will be fifty percent (50%) by the core instruction per-pupil amount.

Private School Transportation Categorical Funding

([H 5980](#), Cortvriend, House Finance)

This bill would amend categorical state funding to include excess costs associated with transporting homeless students to out-of-district public schools. This act would also provide that certain nonprofit nonpublic schools would share in the cost of transporting students with the sending school districts.

Free School Breakfast and Lunch

([H 5983](#), Sanchez, House Finance)

This bill would require free breakfast and lunches to be provided to elementary and secondary students attending public schools.

DD Provider - 2.3% Increase

([H 5989](#), Dawson, House Finance)

This bill would provide for a two and three-tenths percent (2.3%) increase of provider reimbursement rates for intellectual and developmental disabilities commencing October 1, 2025; provided that the state's overall Medicaid budget does not decline by more than twenty percent (20%) from FY2025 to FY2026.

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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