
The

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Providence Public Schools Study Commission

Senator Samuel Zurier introduced legislation at the end of the 2023 session to create a study commission to examine professional and labor-management standards for Providence Public Schools that provide flexibility and accountability. The 15-member study commission included representatives from RIDE, Providence Public Schools, and community members. Providence Teachers Union President Maribeth Calabro and RIFTHP Organizer / Communications Representative Jeremy Sencer served on the Committee. The Commission had an extensive and ambitious hearing schedule in the fall and winter.

The [initial draft report](#) released January 28, 2024 contained numerous problematic “findings” and some unacceptable legislative recommendations. The RIFTHP worked with PTU to develop a [document](#) identifying concerns and objections. That document was submitted and discussed at the February 5 Commission meeting. Among the concerns with the initial draft report is that it portrayed ideas offered through invited witness testimony as Commission findings without any vetting or debate. The report also lacked sufficient focus on Providence-specific history and analysis. Among the objectionable legislative proposals in the report is a reduction in job security by changing the teacher tenure law or reducing the role of seniority in layoff decisions.

The February 5 Commission meeting was a robust discussion of some of the issues raised by the union and Providence Public School administrators. The discussion was productive and was more focused on Providence-specific history and data. The Commission will meet again in the first week of March. PTU President Calabro said *“I appreciate the time and effort the guests, Commissioners, and Senate staff have given over the past few months to this work. We listened to testimony from a variety of experts and heard loudly and clearly, **you cannot legislate collaboration**. We have also heard from Commissioners and state leaders about the strong desire to be like or better than Massachusetts. We must acknowledge that over two decades ago, Massachusetts legislated significant budgetary support and stayed the course regardless of who was leading. That is the foundation that we are lacking.”*

She continued, “This Commission has been urged by members to legislate adult behaviors and mandate collaboration from folks who have not been in classrooms in more than two decades, and have not taught or lead in a post-Covid educational system. Many of the aspirational suggestions of the Commission already exist within the four-corners of the Collective Bargaining Agreement”.

All Charter Public School Model

On Wednesday, February 7, the House Education Committee heard testimony on legislation by Representative David Place that would create a process for a school district to transform into a charter school district. [H 7354](#) also contains legislative provisions to encourage “nontraditional approaches to learning”. In introducing his legislation, Representative Place criticized the current charter school system as being parallel school district throughout the state. He wanted nontraditional charter schools to get the capacity of a current charter school if closed.

RIFTHP President Frank Flynn testified against the bill and provided [written testimony](#). President Flynn objected to the bill that supports getting rid of existing public schools and replacing it with a charter system. He said that teachers currently differentiate instruction. He also voiced being bewildered by a section of the bill that constrains “*a reading approach to learning because reading is fundamental to a student’s learning.*”

Flynn strongly supported one portion of the bill related to the process of granting charter schools. Representative Place proposed that the creation of a charter district be supported by the city/town council and school committee, then be put to the voters. Flynn lauded the idea and urged the Committee to consider mandating this democratic process for all new charter schools and expansion of existing charter schools.

Public Higher Education Hearing

On Wednesday, February 7, the Senate Education Committee held a hearing with the leaders of all three public higher education institutions. Postsecondary Commissioner Shannon Gilkey testified that 46% of Rhode Islanders possess a postsecondary degree and 7% possess a credential. The state goal is to have a total of 70 % of Rhode Islanders possessing a degree or credential by 2030. Some of the challenges to attaining this goal is a decreasing k-12 population, an aging workforce, and lack of student preparedness exacerbated by the social isolation of the pandemic.

CCRI Interim President Rosemary Costigan testified after the Commissioner. She informed the Committee that CCRI had a 2% enrollment increase from the Fall of 2022 to the Fall of 2023. She testified that about 40% of CCRI graduates go on to another higher education institution, 70% of that 40% go to either URI or RIC.

RIC President Jack Warner testified that RIC’s budget issues from a year ago have improved and the recent trend in enrollment decline had stopped. RIC has increased its enrollment of transfers and students are increasing the number of credits they are taking. Warner highlighted the benefits of the recently enacted Hope Scholarship program. RIC has intensified its recruitment. Warner closed by

asking the Senators to support the extension of the Hope Scholarship pilot program for an additional two years to permit more data to be collected on the program's impact on students and RIC.

The final witness at the hearing was URI President Marc Parlange. He described URI freshman enrollment as being 48% Rhode Islanders and about 30% first generation college students. He highlighted efforts to have a more diverse student body with the Talent Development Program and the recent program to have scholarships for members of the Narragansett Tribe. He offered startling data when looking at state efforts to support its flagship university from 1980 to 2021, Rhode Island is last in the country! He addressed a few budget issues, including capital investments, lagging support for initiatives proposed by the University, and concern about an enrollment trend of declining percentage of Rhode Islanders in the freshman class that he believes is caused in part by the Promise and Hope Scholarship programs.

Bill Introductions

Higher Education Opportunities For Students With Disabilities

([H 7253](#), Cortvried, House Finance)

This bill would establish the Higher Education Opportunities for Students with Disabilities Act. This bill would enable students with disabilities who are ages eighteen (18) through twenty one (21) years, and in some cases to age twenty-two (22) years, to audit and otherwise attend state colleges and universities using the Student's Foundation Education Aid.

Public Employee Pension - Accrual, Early Retirement Penalty, FAS

([H 7274](#), Edwards, House Finance)

This bill would amend sections of law relating to the retirement of various public employees and the calculation of their final average salary and service accruals.

Student Absenteeism Pilot Program

([H 7289](#), McNamara, House Education)

This bill would direct the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to establish a two (2) year pilot outreach and tracking program at two (2) public high schools to address issues of attendance and chronic absenteeism among students.

Chronic Absenteeism Data and Intervention

([H 7290](#), McNamara, House Education)

This bill would direct each local education agency to adopt a program to monitor absenteeism data to identify students in their schools who are at risk for chronic absenteeism before it becomes a chronic situation. This bill would also direct school districts experiencing high rates of student absenteeism to establish attendance support teams to address this absenteeism. The act would also direct the council on Elementary and Secondary Education to establish a chronic absenteeism prevention and intervention plan by January 1, 2025. The bill would also direct the council on Elementary and Secondary Education to include each school district's absenteeism rate within the report on school discipline presented annually to the General Assembly, and to include the school or district's absenteeism rate in any report card or evaluation of the effectiveness of a school or district.

Rhode Island Early Care And Education Workforce Data Act

([H 7291](#), Shallcross Smith, House Education)

([S 2142](#), Cano, Senate Education)

These bills would codify the previously funded Rhode Island early care and education workforce registry data system in R. I. General Law, require that the data system meets national standards, and provide a deadline for implementation. It also directs the Department of Human Services to produce annual reports on the status of both the registry data system and the early care and education workforce.

Home Care Provider Rates

([H 7298](#), Serpa, House Finance)

This bill would establish Medicaid fee-for-service reimbursement rates set as the rate floor for commercial insurance and private pay rates by home care, home nursing care and hospice providers licensed by the Department of Health and adopt the rate review recommendations from the office of the health insurance commissioner for home care, home nursing care and hospice providers. This bill would also reduce the administrative burden on Medicaid-contracted home care providers and the executive office of Health and Human Services by eliminating a statutory reporting requirement that is no longer relevant to current and future Medicaid home care reimbursement rates. This bill would further permit the Rhode Island Partnership for Home Care, with oversight by the Executive Office of Health and Human Services, to offer behavioral health training to licensed nurse assistants and homemakers delivering paraprofessional care services to Medicaid home care beneficiaries.

Threats Against School Employees - Felony

([H 7303](#), Noret, House Judiciary)

This bill would add school superintendents, central office officials, school principals, and all other school employees, to the definition of a "public official" for purposes of the criminal prohibition against making threats to public officials.

Arming Campus Police

([H 7308](#), O'Brien, House Judiciary)

This bill would mandate arming campus police at public higher educational institutions and would include campus police in the definition of "law enforcement officer" for the purposes of the "Law Enforcement Officers' Bill of Rights."

DSP and Nursing Home Employees - State Medical Plan

([H 7332](#), Shanley, House Finance)

This bill would allow private employees at nursing homes, developmental disability and home care providers whose salaries are ninety percent (90%) funded with federal or state monies to be eligible to opt into the state healthcare plan. The premium payments would be the responsibility of the employee with the employer having the option to pay all or a portion of the insurance premium.

Early Intervention Rate Increase

([H 7334](#), Cotter, House Finance)

This bill would direct the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) to increase Medicaid rates for the early intervention programs allowing for payment of competitive wages for qualified professionals. This bill would further change the title of the section from early intervention program for developmentally disabled infants to early intervention program for infants and toddlers with developmental delays and/or disabilities and update the basic program requirements and name of the state agency responsible for the program to be the executive office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) which has been overseeing the early intervention program under Part C of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Act.

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