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# SMITH HILL REPORT



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## **Regulation of School Closure**

The House Education Committee held an extensive hearing on legislation by Representative David Morales to regulate the closure of public schools. H 7726 was heard in the Committee on Wednesday, March 13. Students, families, and teachers from Providence 360 (closing this year) and Broad Street Elementary (closed last year) testified in support of the need for an open and transparent process. They shared their experiences with the marginalization they experienced when schools closed suddenly and without a process for community engagement. [H 7726](#) would create a system throughout the state requiring public notice and public hearings prior to any school closure decision. The bill would also require the posting of certain school closure information on-line and require a transition plan for student placements prior to a decision on school closure.

RIFTHP President Frank Flynn provided [written testimony](#) in support of the bill. His letter described the bill and supported the notion of needing a public process for school closures. Flynn noted that school closure decisions are difficult and sometimes valid, but that there needs to be transparency in the process.

## **Emergency Teacher Certification Timeline**

On Wednesday, March 13, the House Education Committee heard testimony concerning a bill to extend the number of years a person can get an emergency teaching certificate. [H 7725](#) by Rep Bill O'Brien would permit a person to get an emergency certificate for a total of five years, permitting two 2-year extensions. The RIFTHP supported the concept but offered two specific amendments.

In both verbal and [written testimony](#), RIFTHP President Frank Flynn suggested that emergency certificates should only be offered on an annual basis, requiring school districts to hire a regularly certified teacher before retaining an emergency certified teacher for a second year. Flynn also asked to maintain in statutory the regulatory requirement that teachers on an emergency certificate continue efforts to get a regular certificate while working under the emergency certificate. NEARI, RIDE, and the Superintendent's Association also testified in support of the bill, with RIDE and NEARI supporting our amendments. The committee held the bill for further study.

## Right to an Adequate Education

On Thursday March 14, the House State Government and Elections Committee held a hearing on legislation to place an education constitution amendment on the November ballot. The bill, [H 7396](#) by Representative Messier would place the following language on the ballot for voters to consider:

***“In furtherance of the duty to establish and maintain a system of free public schools, it shall be the duty of the general assembly and the state to guarantee an equitable, adequate, and meaningful education to each child.”***

RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi submitted a [letter](#) of support for the legislation. In that letter, he opined that the Rhode Island education trajectory would have more closely tracked Massachusetts over the last three decades had our Constitution contained this provision. Parisi also welcomed addressing education funding inadequacy without the need to wait for a change in the Rhode Island Constitution. The Committee held the bill for further study.

## Rhode Island State Archives

As reported in a previous issue of the Smith Hill Report, Governor McKee has proposed a \$60 million bond to support the construction of a State Archives Building in Providence. Article 5 of the state budget was heard by the Senate Finance Committee on March 14. RIFTHP President Frank Flynn submitted a [letter](#) in support of the bond to the Committee. In that letter, Flynn wrote:

*“As one of the thirteen original colonies dating back nearly four hundred years and one of thirteen original United States of America, we have a long, distinguished place in the history of our nation. Preserving unique, priceless, irreplaceable documents and artifacts should be a state priority. For too long these items have been housed in inadequate, insufficient, inaccessible locations. It is time to follow the example of virtually every other State and have a dedicated building not only to house these treasures but a venue to preserve and display them for our citizenry to view and appreciate our rich history.”*

## K-12 Education Presentation

On Wednesday, March 13, 2024, the Senate Education Committee held a hearing on statewide academic standards, financial data through the uniform chart of accounts (UCOA) and the primary education regulation the Basic Education Plan. The Commissioner and members of her leadership team offered a presentation and answered questions. RIDE staff were asking questions about how they were using the data illustrating the high percentage of teachers working under an emergency certification or teaching out of the field was being used to recruit and retain more experienced teachers. RIDE staff members were questioned about the focus of test preparation instead of high-quality instructional materials. The hearing, as all other hearings at the State House, can be viewed in a video archive of committee hearings at the Capitol TV tab of the General Assembly website ([click here](#)).

## Bill Introductions

### **School Social Worker Categorical Funding**

([H 7545](#), Shallcross Smith, House Finance)

([S 2597](#), Sosnowski, Senate Finance)

These bills would require all public schools, in grades kindergarten through twelve (K-12), to have at least one full-time certified school social worker for every two hundred fifty (250) students and provide for an appropriation by the General Assembly in the amount of two million dollars (\$2,000,000) in the budget for Fiscal Year 2025 to the various school districts and municipalities to employ additional social workers.

### **Taxation of Higher Education Endowments**

([H 7546](#), Morales, House Finance)

([S 2564](#), Mack, Senate Finance)

These bills would provide for a tax upon the endowment of a private institution of higher education equal to two percent (2%) upon each dollar or dollar value within the endowment in excess of one billion dollars (\$1,000,000,000). These funds would be used to hire, retain, and support behavioral health staff within the public schools of the municipality where the private institution is predominantly located.

### **Public Libraries - Affirmative Defense**

([H 7575](#), Morales, House Judiciary)

([S 2429](#), McKenney, Senate Judiciary)

These bills would establish, as an affirmative defense to the crimes of circulating obscene publications or shows and selling or exhibiting obscene publications to minors, the person's employment status as an employee of a school, museum, or library.

### **Teacher Post Retirement Employment Extension**

([H 7592](#), O'Brien, House Finance)

This bill would extend the sunset provision of § 16-16-24.2 to June 20, 2026.

### **Bilingual, Dual Language and World Language Teachers Investment Act**

([H 7594](#), Morales, House Finance)

This bill would authorize the office of postsecondary commissioner to establish a program to expand the issuance of teaching certificates to bilingual, dual language and world language teachers in urban and urban ring schools; would establish two scholarship programs to promote and increase

the number of bilingual dual language and world language teachers in urban and urban ring schools; and would establish the scholarship eligibility requirements and preferences.

### **Occupational Licensing Reform Act**

([H 7608](#), Nardone, House Corporations)

([S 2690](#), Paolino, Senate Labor)

These bills would authorize any and all state licensing authorities to issue licenses to individuals moving into this state with a minimum of three (3) years of practice, in good standing in any other state jurisdiction, as long as the individual's former home state requires a substantially equivalent education, experience and training as the respective state licensure requirements.

### **Parental Diabetes Information Material**

([H 7613](#), Donovan, House Education)

([S 2516](#), Lauria, Senate Education)

These bills would require RIDE to develop type one diabetes informational materials for the parents and guardians of students that will be posted publicly on RIDE's website.

### **K-12 Council Student Representative - Advice and Consent**

([H 7614](#), Morales, House Education)

([S 2287](#), Lawson, Senate Education)

These bills would require the student advisory council to meet at least quarterly and provide the chairperson with equal voting powers as adult members on the council. If a student is under eighteen (18) years of age, they shall be exempt from the senate advice and consent process.

### **RIC School of Social Work Study Commission**

([H 7627](#), Casimiro, House Health & Human Services)

This bill would create a twelve (12) member special legislative study commission whose purpose it would be to study the feasibility of utilizing Federal Title IV-E dollars to leverage and help enroll and graduate students in the field of social work, and who would report back to the House and Governor no later than October 1, 2024, and would expire on January 24, 2025.

### **Sovereign Immunity**

([H 7636](#), Batista, House Judiciary)

([S 2675](#), Bissaillon, Senate Judiciary)

This bill would provide a remedy for any harm caused due to a deprivation or violation of rights by the State of Rhode Island or its political and/or administrative units or subdivisions, secured by the Constitution of the State of Rhode Island.

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