

The

SMITH HILL REPORT



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

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Final Average Salary Pension Improvement Campaign

As announced in last week's Smith Hill Report, the RIFTHP has created a link to permit RIFTHP members and allies to send an email to their Senator and Representative in support of bills to improve pension benefits for public sector workers. The proposal is to boost pensions by using a 3-year average instead of a 5-year average of total compensation when calculating the retiree benefit.

To access the link, [click here](#). As of this morning, **2861** emails have already been sent by RIFTHP members to urge the Assembly to improve pension benefits for all public employees. There are approximately 12,000 members of the RIFTHP, most of whom reside in Rhode Island and have the ability to request action by their own Senator and Representative. Budget decisions will be made in the next few weeks so advocacy should not be put off to a later date.

Speaking about member advocacy and the Pension Improvement Campaign, RIFTHP President Frank Flynn said "Teachers, state, and municipal employees, as a result of a series of drastic pension changes, must work much longer for a significantly reduced retirement benefit. We are asking the General Assembly to support this bill which would restore the *"Final Average Salary" computation to where it was prior to 2009. We urge you to reach out to your elected officials and ask them to support this reasonable request.*"

Provider Rate Increase

Legislation passed the Assembly two years ago that requires the state to review the rates paid to providers of social service programs. The RIFTHP joined a number of advocates to support that bill in 2022. Rhode Island now has comprehensive analysis of the level reimbursement rates must be in order to provide essential services. Rate information is available but was not necessarily used in the budget proposed by the Governor.

Legislation was introduced to require the Governor to request funding based on the rates identified by the rate review process. [H 7591](#) by Representative Spears would require the Governor to use identified rate increases in future budget submissions. The bill was heard in the House Finance Committee on May 15. The RIFTHP offered [written testimony](#) in support of the bill.

In his letter, RIFTHP Lobbyist James Parisi supported the legislation so that a budget submission reflects actual costs necessary based on the rate review process. While the Assembly retains final authority in adopting a state budget, the RIFTHP asked that the decisions be made based on a budget request that

shows what providers should be paid to provide necessary services. RIFTHP members working at the Trudeau Center have a particular interest in provider rates.

Bilingual Dual Language Certification Scholarships

On Tuesday, May 14, legislation by Representative Morales was heard in the House Finance Committee to create a scholarship program for individuals seeking to get a Bilingual Dual Language or a World Language teaching certificate. The bill, [H 7594](#), would also allocate funding for teachers seeking to get certified in Bilingual Dual Language or World Languages Representative. Morales' bill which seeks \$2 million for undergraduates and \$1 million for teachers.

In order to be eligible for the scholarship program, undergraduates would need to be eligible for in-state tuition, maintain a 2.5 GPA, and commit to teach in an urban or urban ring school for a period of time commensurate with the scholarship award. The Office of Postsecondary Commissioner would administer the scholarship program.

The RIFTHP testified at the hearing and provided a [letter](#) of support for the bill. In his testimony, RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi noted that the State has repeatedly failed to provide state funding for teacher professional development, and that this legislation would provide a targeted state funding streams for the teaching workforce. There is a critical shortage of Dual Language and World Language teachers, and this bill would help create and sustain the pipeline of teachers necessary to eliminate that shortage.

Retiree COLA Campaign

The Rhode Island AFT retiree chapter, RIAFT/R, has embarked on a campaign to get pension improvements for retired teachers and state workers. RIAFT/R is working with the Rhode Island Public Employee Retiree Coalition to support legislation that would grant a 2% pension adjustment. RIAFT/R has created a link to access their campaign to support the pension help for retirees. All RIFTHP members and allies are invited to add their voice to this campaign to benefit retirees by [clicking here](#). Retiree pensions have been virtually frozen for the past twelve years while the cost of living has increased over thirty percent. It is long overdue for the legislature to provide relief.

Charter School Funding Change

Under current education funding law, local school districts pay tuition for each student attending a charter school. School districts are able to reduce their payment to charter schools by either 7% of local costs or more if they itemize certain funding categories such as out-of-district special education services, retiree medical benefits, or out-of-district transportation. School districts that itemize their costs are also able to further reduce their payment to mayoral academies for the cost difference in pensions. Most school district pension costs cover the unfunded pension liability accrued for past services. Mayoral Academy administrators willingly choose not to participate in the state teacher retirement plan to avoid statutory pension costs by offering a low-cost plan. They should not be rewarded at the expense of the sending districts.

Governor McKee offered a budget amendment to change charter funding by eliminating the ability to itemize costs and reduce payments to mayoral academies based on pension costs differences. [Governor's Budget Amendment #18](#) was submitted on Friday May 10 and was heard in the House Finance Committee

on Thursday May 16. The House Finance Committee budget staff offered some analysis of the impact. Some districts would pay more, and others would pay less under the proposal. Overall, if the change were implemented this year, charter schools would garner an additional \$1.6 million from public school districts, with Central Falls and Woonsocket paying most of that increase.

The issue will be considered as the Assembly puts its FY 2025 budget together over the next few weeks.

Bills on the Move

The following bills have both passed the Committee that heard the bill and the full chamber. Bills must pass both chambers in concurrence (in identical form) before being sent to the Governor for signature.

Education Accountability Act - School Climate

[H 7232](#), which was introduced by Representative McNamara, passed the House on 5/15/2024, with a vote of 65 yeas, 0 nays, and 0 members not voting.

This bill would incorporate the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's SurveyWorks school climate indicators disaggregated by local education agencies ("LEAs") and individual public schools, or any other such future system used as a replacement or substitute for SurveyWorks to measure school climate indicators for evaluating the performance of LEAs and individual public schools.

Athletic Trainer Availability

[S 2146](#), which was introduced by Senator Lombardi, passed the Senate on 5/16/2024, with a vote of 24 yeas, 10 nays, and 3 members not voting.

This bill would require all school districts to designate an athletic trainer to be available for high school athletic practices and games.

Right To An Adequate Education

[S 2147](#), which was introduced by Senator Picard, passed the Senate on 5/16/2024, with a vote of 34 yeas, 0 nays, and 3 members not voting.

This amendment to the Constitution of the State, if approved, would provide that it would be the paramount duty of the General Assembly, the Department of Education, and other Government Agencies to provide Rhode Island residents with equal opportunities to receive an education that is adequate, equitable and meaningful effective January 1, 2025.

K-2 Class Size Reduction

[S 2148](#), which was introduced by Senator Gallo, passed the Senate on 5/16/2024, with a vote of 30 yeas, 4 nays, and 3 members not voting.

This bill would mandate that public-school classroom size be limited to twenty (20) students for kindergarten through grade two (2) on or before October 1 of each school year. Exceptions would be made for

emergencies, for temporary situations not to exceed three (3) days and for mid-year enrollments when it would be impractical to assign the student to any class except for an existing class of maximum size.

Prekindergarten Lottery Process

[S 2519](#), which was introduced by Senator Cano, passed the Senate on 5/16/2024, with a vote of 34 yeas, 0 nays, and 3 members not voting.

This bill would allow municipalities participating in the state prekindergarten program to accept students from outside the municipality under certain conditions and establish a lottery for enrollment in the program.

Universal Pre-K

[S 2843](#), which was introduced by Senator Gallo, passed the Senate on 5/16/2024, with a vote of 29 yeas, 5 nays, and 3 members not voting.

This bill would establish guidelines for the continued implementation and expansion of public, high quality prekindergarten education programs with the goal of reaching all children ages three (3) and four (4) throughout Rhode Island to increase children's school readiness. This bill would require continued investments in the RI Pre-K, Head Start, and Early Head Start models; require adequate funding to provide compensation parity with comparably qualified public kindergarten teaching staff; and require a 30% funding set-aside of prekindergarten expansion funds to sustain and expand access to high-quality childcare and early learning programs for infants and toddlers. This bill would also repeal the statutory laws pertaining to the initial pilot 9 prekindergarten program.

Office Of The Special Education Ombud

[S 2844](#), which was introduced by Senator Murray, passed the Senate on 5/16/2024, with a vote of 29 yeas, 5 nays, and 3 members not voting.

This bill would establish the office of the Rhode Island ombud for special education, which would serve independent of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, to ensure school districts throughout the state meet the minimum standards required to comply with the individualized education programs for students with disabilities. This bill would also require that families be provided with a method of evaluation for collecting feedback about the level of satisfaction with the special education services and dispute resolution processes available to them.

Patient Records - BHDDH Investigations

[S 2945](#), which was introduced by Senator Miller, passed the Senate on 5/16/2024, with a vote of 34 yeas, 0 nays, and 3 members not voting.

This bill would amend provisions relative to confidentiality of health care communications and the process for requesting records and/or confidential health care information.

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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