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# SMITH HILL REPORT



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## Quiet Week for Bill Hearings

There were a number of bill hearings at the State House this week but none of the bill hearings were on bills which the RIFTHP provided testimony. The House Education Committee heard testimony on bills related to student mental health, computer science curriculum, and methods to address student absenteeism.

There was considerable activity and debate on legislation to extend the Governor's authority to issue executive orders related to the COVID state of emergency. The floor debate on Thursday centered on amendments to the legislation to give the Governor an extension on his authority because one of the executive orders concerned the mask mandate in schools.

## Higher Education Facility Renovation

On Tuesday, February 8<sup>th</sup>, the House Finance Committee heard testimony on several proposals in the Governor's budget to either bond or use federal funds to renovate Rhode Island Public Education campuses. One portion of the proposal is a \$35 million investment in a new Student Services Center on the Rhode Island College campus. The project will permit consolidation of numerous offices providing student services under one roof. The plan is to use federal American Rescue Plan funds for this project. The union that represents the professional staff at RIC provided written support for the plan. To view the letter by PSA@RIC Treasurer Maria Boutier, [click here](#).

## Additional RIFTHP Initiative Introduced

The RIFTHP is working on an ambitious package of proposals this session. Among the initiatives of the RIFTHP are several bills that were introduced in prior years, and a few new ideas. The following five bills introduced recently demonstrate the breadth of issues we tackle at the Statehouse:

### **Adjunct Faculty Medical Insurance**

Legislation has been introduced to require the state's public higher education institutions to offer medical insurance benefits to adjunct faculty provided the faculty work at least 50% of the load of full time faculty. The RIFTHP represents adjunct faculty at Rhode Island College. The RIFTHP had worked on this issue years ago, but has not had the bill introduced for the last four years. [S2199](#) was introduced on February 8<sup>th</sup> by **Senator Josh Miller**. The bill was co-sponsored by Senators: Cano, Quezada, Murray, DiPalma and Seveney. The bill has been referred to the Senate Health and Human Services Committee.

### **Providence Elected School Committee**

Last session, the RIFTHP supported Senate legislation to create an elected school committee in Providence provided that Providence voters approve the change. This year, a House bill on the same topic has been introduced. The bill would provide for an elected school committee in Providence subject to approval at a general or special election in Providence by July 1, 2026. [H7377](#) was introduced on February 9<sup>th</sup> by **Representative Ramon Perez** and was referred to the House Education committee. Co-sponsors are Representatives Vella-Wilkinson and Williams.

### **Fractional COLA**

For several years, the AFT retiree organization has worked on legislation to provide a fraction of a pension COLA each year instead of the COLA being paid once every four years. While the overall COLA would not change, annual increases would be provided by the legislation. [H7239](#) was introduced on January 28<sup>th</sup> by **Representative Carol Hagan McEntee**. The bill was co-sponsored by Representatives: O'Brien, Serpa, Donovan, Ranglin-Vassell and Messier. The bill has been referred to the House Finance Committee.

### **Human Services Minimum Wage**

The RIFTHP is working with several other unions and interested parties to increase the wage for human service providers. The RIFTHP represent Direct Support Professionals at the J Arthur Trudeau Memorial Center. The legislation creates a \$21 minimum wage for workers in organizations funded by BHDDH, DCYF, DHS and the Department of Health. The bill provides greater pay for those with more experience. [H7390](#) was sponsored by **Representative Evan Shanley**. The bill was introduced on February 8<sup>th</sup> and has been referred to the House Finance Committee. Co-sponsors include Representatives Bennett, Hawkins, Vella-Wilkinson, Tanzi, Kazarian, Slater, Morales, Williams and Amore.

### **Right to Read Act Extension, Revisions**

As previously reported, the RIFTHP is working on legislation to extend the deadline for compliance with the Right to Read Act while proposing certain specific exemptions to the requirements enacted in 2019. The Senate version of the legislation, [S2169](#) was introduced by **Senator Valarie Lawson**, an East Providence teacher. The bill was on February 8<sup>th</sup> and has been referred to the Senate Education Committee. Co-sponsors of the legislation are Senators Seveney, Coyne, Quezada, Euer, Cano and DiPalma.

## **Bill Introductions**

### **Taxation of Private School Tuition**

([S2146](#) *Bell, Senate Finance*)

This bill would authorize municipalities to tax net tuition income for all private institutions of K-12 or higher education. Financial aid would be exempt. No tax would be imposed on thirteen thousand dollars (\$13,000) annually for tuition for kindergarten through grade twelve (K-12) and for twenty-five thousand dollars (\$25,000) for postsecondary education and training. This act would also require municipalities to include an explanation of the basis for tax exemption status for property located in the municipality. Any person or legal entity in the state would be authorized to challenge the exempt status.

### **Public Employee Right to Strike**

([S2152](#) *Bell, Senate Labor*)

This bill would provide for the right to strike for public sector workers in Rhode Island, including teachers, with exceptions for police officers, firefighters, 911 employees, and correctional officers.

### **Right to Read Act Extension, Exemptions**

([S2169](#) *Lawson, Senate Education*)

This bill would extend the time period from the school year 2023-2024 until 2025-2026 to require all teachers to demonstrate proficiency in knowledge and practices of scientific reading and structured literacy instruction. This bill would further extend the time period from the school year 2023-2024 until 2025-2026 requiring all new hires for a teaching position to demonstrate an awareness in knowledge and practices of the scientific reading instruction credential and a structured literacy instruction credential as a condition of hire, or within one year of hire, if already licensed. A teacher may demonstrate such knowledge and practice by: (1) Possessing a Master's degree in reading; (2) Possessing a reading specialist and/or consultant certificate; (3) Attending twenty-four (24) hours or more of training in scientific reading and structured literacy instruction; (4) Providing proof of completion of a course or training program in scientific reading instruction; (5) Passing a test in scientific readings and structured literacy instruction; or (6) Having a least fifteen (15) years of teaching experience at the elementary school level. The Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) shall issue rules and regulations in regards to this act no later than August 1, 2022.

### **Universal Free Student Lunch**

([S2172](#) *Cano, Senate Education*)

This bill would require free lunches to be provided for all elementary and secondary students attending public schools, to the extent state and federal funds are available.

### **Teacher First Aid Training**

([S2173](#) *Archambault, Senate Education*)

This bill would require that one third (1/3) of all Rhode Island teachers, each year, for the next three (3) years, be trained in the basic emergency and response skills curriculum ("BEARS"), specifically in hand-only cardiopulmonary resuscitation, Heimlich maneuver, and bleeding control.

### **Student Success Factor – ELL**

([S2174](#) *Cano, Senate Finance*)

This bill would add to the determination of the need to support high-need students a separate and independent qualifying factor of whether the student is an English language learner as defined by the Department of Education's regulations.

### **State Funding - Reading/Mathematics Specialists**

([S2175](#) *Cano, Senate Education*)

This bill would provide local education agencies (LEAs) hiring site-based specialists for reading and math to receive state reimbursement based on enrollment and specific guidelines.

### **School Social Worker Staffing Ratio**

([S2176](#) *Sosnowski, Senate Education*)

This bill 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 four hundred (400) students.

### **Charter School Lottery**

([S2177](#) *Zurier, Senate Education*)

This bill would require district charter schools, independent charter schools, and mayoral academies to use an annual lottery process established pursuant to rules and regulations promulgated by the Department of Education, to select students who would be invited to enroll in a public charter school. The bill would also provide that parents and guardians of students could inform the sending public school district or the Department of Education of their intent to have or not have their child entered into the lottery. The bill would also provide that a student could choose to accept or reject the offer to enroll in the public charter school.

### **Funding For Out of School Time Programs**

([S2190](#) *Cano, Senate Finance*)

This bill would provide two million dollars (\$2,000,000) to support comprehensive and effective afterschool, summer learning and workforce development programs for students in grades kindergarten through twelve (K-12), and requires an annual report to the General Assembly and the Governor on the status and progress of the program.

### **Student Assistance Program Funding - Marijuana Fines**

([S2198](#) *Miller, Senate Health and Human Services*)

This bill would: (1) Place approval of drug awareness programs for minors up through high school level charged with civil marijuana offenses in the discretion of the Department of Behavioral Healthcare,

Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals (BHDDH); (2) Redirect funds from certain civil fines imposed to the general revenue fund to be expended by BHDDH to fund substance abuse and student assistance programs for youth; (3) Mandate that BHDDH establish funding criteria for distribution of funds and require that municipalities receiving funds file annual reports verifying that the funds are being used for substance abuse prevention programs; (4) Make high schools eligible for assistance programs; and (5) Change the title of chapter 16-21.3 to reflect high school participation in the programs.

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