



# SMITH HILL REPORT

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## **RIFTHP Objects to School Voucher Bill**

The Senate Education Committee heard from two dozen witnesses testifying on legislation to create a private school voucher system in Rhode Island. The bill, [S0607](#) by **Senator Cote**, was co-sponsored by **Senators E. O'Neill, Kettle, Ottiano, Morgan and Gee**. This hearing was the first time a school voucher bill was heard in the Rhode Island Senate in decades.

RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi was one of the last witnesses to testify, voicing vehement opposition to a budget busting bill that would siphon tens of millions of dollars from the state coffers to fund private education. He objected to some prior testimony using the phrase "failing schools" to describe urban schools filled with caring teachers and school support staff attempting to teach in challenging circumstances. While some of the proponents described the legislation as not costing the taxpayer's money, Parisi pointed to the section of the bill that permitted existing private school students to get up to \$6,000 per year in state money to attend private schools.

S0607 would provide state payment for private schools, home schools, or enrollments in public schools from another district. The voucher is in the form of an education savings account. Opposition to the bill centered on the high costs and need to invest public dollars in public education.

The committee members, including several who are public school teachers, asked many questions of the witnesses to better understand the impact of the legislation. Opponents to the bill includes representatives of the NEA/RI, RI School Committees, RI Superintendents, the ACLU, and several parents. The bill was introduced on behalf of the corporate-funded right-wing think tank Center for Freedom and Prosperity. There were a number of religious school parents and staff testifying in support of the bill. The Rhode Island Department of Education did not testify on the legislation.

## **Settlement Bills Introduced**

The Chairs of the House and Senate Finance Committees have introduced bills to implement the proposed pension settlement still working its way through the judicial process. [H6181](#) by **Representative Raymond Gallison** was heard on June 3<sup>rd</sup> and [S0876](#) by **Senator Daniel DaPonte** was heard on June 1<sup>st</sup>.

## **Study Commission Report Published**

The House Study Commission to review the Education Funding Formula issued its report on May 18, 2015. [Click here](#) to review the report. The report contains data and analysis revealing how the education funding system benefits mayoral charter schools and independent charter schools at the expense of traditional public school districts.

## **Increased Funding For Public Higher Education Urged**

RIC/AFT faculty member Rudy Krause asked the state to increase its support of RIC, CCRI and URI at a budget hearing on the public higher education budget on May 21<sup>st</sup> before the Senate Finance Committee. Other than the Postsecondary Commissioner and the college Presidents, Prof. Krause was the only other person to testify that afternoon.

The Governor has proposed a 3.8% state increase which received support. Krause told the committee it was particularly challenging when recruiting faculty, considering the compensation that compares poorly with neighboring peer institutions. He also spoke of the challenges students face when having to work while taking classes. Krause also recounted the poor standing Rhode Island holds among states in its lack of support for public higher education.

## **Senate Finance Committee Holds Two Hearings Related to Funding of Developmental Disabilities Providers**

On Tuesday, May 19, 2015 the Senate Finance Committee conducted two separate but consecutive hearings relating to funding of state operated, non-profit community agencies providing services to people with developmental disabilities in Rhode Island.

At 3 PM, the Committee convened a hearing to be briefed on the Governor's budget proposal and plans for the Department of Behavioral Healthcare, Development Disabilities and Hospitals (BHDDH). Part of the discussion centered on the release of the initial report of the Working Group to Reinvent Medicaid which proposed to convert the state operated system of group homes and day program centers to private sector operation.

The employees at the state operated system, Rhode Island Community Living and Supports (RICLAS) are represented by AFSCME, Council 94, Local 1293. As part of the labor panel presenting to the committee in objection to this proposal, RIFTHP Director of Political Activities Maureen Martin joined Council 94's Executive Director Gerry O'Neil and lobbyist James Cenerini. As a former president of Local 1293, Martin was able to share a historical view of the RICLAS system and its inception over thirty years ago when RI joined the national movement to transfer people out of institutions and into community settings in order to provide care in less restrictive settings.

Martin objected to the initiative which would enable the transition of publicly operated group homes for individuals with DD by migrating the existing homes to private sector operations. "The collaborative work done between the union and the state during the deinstitutionalization process was because everyone understood the importance of maintaining a well trained workforce who were justly paid and who were a stabilizing force during the process". Martin pointed to the continuity of care which is so essential for the wellbeing of people living in the system and the problems with removing over 300 employees who participate in the state's retirement system. She asked the committee to remember that every day they and other elected officials from President Obama to Senate President Paiva Weed talk about how the economy hinges on having enough good paying, middle class jobs. Finally, she reminded the committee that at the very next hearing, they would hear testimony about the sub-standard wages that the private sector workers, who provide the same care to people with developmental disabilities, make and to consider that we need to raise the bar rather than lower it for these workers.

At a later hearing that evening, [S0044](#), (***DiPalma, Goldin, Ottiano, Pichardo and Sosnowski***), a bill that would set an amount that the BHDDH would reimburse to community

and nonprofit agencies providing services to people with developmental disabilities was heard. The RIFTHP represents workers at the Trudeau Center.

This legislation would increase the state reimbursement rate to \$13.97 per hour effective April 1, 2015 with annual percentage increases based on the Consumer Price Index.

The Direct Care Professional (DSP) Rate has been in flux for years making it difficult for providers and employees. Martin spoke in favor of the bill suggesting that this would be a “modest step in the right direction.”

Martin distributed a rate history sheet developed by the RIFTHP to show committee members the history of the rate since 2011 when the General Assembly reduced the DDO funding by \$24 million. The history showed that in 2012 \$9.6 million was restored but that was only a 40% restoration of the 24 million dollar cut.

Martin referred to the earlier hearing and the topic of the state operated system’s employee salaries and benefits and said that should be the standard of wages when they consider this bill. She testified that because the work is hard, taking its toll physically, mentally and emotionally, and because the pay is so low, the turnover rate in the private provider system is a huge problem.

In closing, Martin shared the results of a recent Working Rhode Island poll that indicated that 69% of those polled agreed that front line workers caring for people with developmental disabilities deserved to be paid a living wage of \$15 per hour.

SEIU’S Emanuel Faulk also testified in favor of the bill as did two private provider administrators.