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# SMITH HILL REPORT



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## DeVos Confirmed

In an historic vote, the United States Senate confirmed Donald Trump's Education Secretary last week. Betsy DeVos, a billionaire heiress to the Amway fortune, has no public school experience and has worked for decades to promote charter schools and private school vouchers. Public school advocates had mounted a vociferous campaign against the nominee. Both Rhode Island Senators, Sheldon Whitehouse and Jack Reed voted against DeVos. When two Republican Senators cast votes against the Trump nominee causing a 50 – 50 tie, Vice-President Michael Pence cast a tie-breaking vote . This was the first time in United States history that the Vice-President had to break a tie on a Cabinet nominee.

## RIFTHP Supports Direct Support Professional Raise

RIFTHP President Frank Flynn testified in support of Budget [Article 23](#) in the House Finance Committee on Wednesday February 8. The Budget Article calls for an unspecified increase for Direct Support Professionals working with the State's developmentally disabled population. RIFTHP represents approximately 250 workers at the Trudeau Center, many of whom would benefit from the raise.

Elsewhere in the Raimondo budget, she dedicates \$3 million, matched by federal Medicaid funding, to provide a 5% raise to the workers. The current reimbursement rate is \$11.91 per hour of service. The RIFTHP has long advocated to raise rates for this underpaid group of workers.

President Flynn told the Finance Committee about his late brother Christopher as he testified Wednesday evening. ***“My family was truly fortunate that my brother had the opportunity to live in a caring, supportive environment. We often felt that Chris had two families. We developed a long term relationship with many of his housemates and the staff. Often times staff members would escort him to our homes and celebrate holiday meals with our family. I’m afraid many other families will not be as fortunate. Previous cuts to the DD budget as well as difficulties hiring and retaining staff are taxing many agencies’ ability to provide these services which are so important to clients like my brother and their families.”***

He added ***“The backbone of these services are the dedicated Direct Support Professionals who work selflessly and tirelessly in the centers, agencies, residences, and group homes throughout our state. Without their dedication and compassion these services would not exist. Rhode Island’s \$10.82 combined average wage has increased a paltry 1.6% over the past 5 years while our surrounding neighbors Massachusetts and Connecticut over the same period have increased by 7% to \$13.02 and 8% to \$12.19 respectively.”***

The article will be voted on when the entire budget is approved later in the session.

### **RIFTHP Supports Data Collection**

On Wednesday February 8, the RIFTHP lent its support to legislation that would require RIDE to compile data on school social workers. The bill, ([H5325](#)) by Representative Kazarian, would cause the collection of data on different aspects of school social worker caseloads and requires RIDE to issue a report to the General Assembly by January, 2019.

### **Bill Introductions**

#### **Mayoral Academy/MET Funding – Pension Costs**

([H5459](#) O’Brien, House Finance)

The RIFTHP supports this act which would provide for a reduction to local per pupil funding for state-operated schools that do not have teachers who participate in the state teacher's retirement system.

#### **School Athletics – Required Athletic Trainer or Nurse**

([S0023](#) Lombardi, Senate Education)

This act would refine the law on guidelines for concussions at school and youth programs so that an adult trained in recognizing the symptoms of a concussion is required to be present during all events.

#### **Student Immunization Exemptions – HPV**

([S0047](#) Raptakis, Senate Health and Human Services)

This act would make several changes to the department of health's authority to mandate certain vaccinations, would reinstate the philosophical exemption to vaccinations, and would require public hearings when changes to required vaccinations are proposed.

#### **School Social Worker Data Collection**

([S0099](#) Satchell, Senate Education)

This act would create a process for the department of education collection and organization of information concerning the workload and scope of the duties and responsibility performed by school social workers.

#### **Child Opportunities Zones**

([S0104](#) Picard, Senate Education)

This act would define and declare the purpose of child opportunity zones and would provide for annual reporting from the commissioner of elementary and secondary education to the general assembly on each zone.

### **Competency-Based Education Regulations**

([S0203](#) *Picard, Senate Education*)

This act would require that the board of elementary and secondary education adopt a competency-based/proficiency-based learning policy whereby students can earn credits through demonstration of competency.

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