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# SMITH HILL REPORT



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## **Board of Education Qualifications Proposed**

On Wednesday, March 22<sup>nd</sup>, RIFTHP President Frank Flynn testified in support of legislation that would create new qualifications for all future appointees to the RI Board of Education, which consists of two separate councils. [H5906](#) introduced by Rep. Duffy Messier, a retired teacher, was heard in the House HEW Committee. Her bill provides that future gubernatorial appointments to the Post-secondary Council would need to have prior experience in public higher education. Additionally, future Governor appointments to the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education would have to have prior experience as a public-school teacher, administrator, staff or service on a school committee.

Frank Flynn told the committee that having knowledge of public schools is essential to making sound education decisions. He noted the Bar Association is made up of lawyers and the Board of Nursing is made up of nurses, so a Board governing education should be composed of educators and others familiar with public schools. Tim Duffy of the RI Association of School Committees also testified in support of the bill. Opposing the bill was Andy Andrade of RIDE, Commissioner Jim Purcell, and Michael Walker Jones of the Office of Post-secondary Education.

## **Senate Leadership Changes**

Senate President Teresa Paiva Weed announced her resignation from the position of Senate President last Wednesday. She is expected to formally resign her Senate seat in District 13 (Jamestown and Newport). She is taking the position of Executive Director of the Hospital Association of Rhode Island. On Thursday, March 23<sup>rd</sup>, the Senate Elected Dominick Ruggiero and the Democratic Caucus of the Senate elected Senator Michael McCaffrey as Senate Majority Leader. Both Ruggiero and McCaffrey have been frequently endorsed by the RIFTHP over the years.

RIFTHP President Frank Flynn said of Ruggiero's election: "On behalf of the R.I. Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals I congratulate Sen Ruggiero on his election as Senate President. Throughout his long tenure in the R.I. Senate he has been a strong supporter of numerous pieces of

legislation which improved the lives of our members and all working families. We look forward to working closely with him in his new role on the many important issues which affect our members.

“The RIFTHP also wants to congratulate Sen. Michael McCaffrey on his election to Senate Majority Leader. Sen. McCaffrey has been a strong advocate of the RIFTHP and has been instrumental in moving many of our legislative priorities through the Senate.”

“We commend both of these gentlemen for their willingness to step forward and assume leadership roles during these tumultuous times.” Flynn added.

### **English Language Learner Funding Supported**

On Tuesday, March 21<sup>st</sup>, RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi testified in support of Budget [Article 18](#). The budget article would make last year’s one-time \$2.5 million funding for English Language Learners a permanent part of Rhode Island’s education funding formula. Over a dozen speakers all supported the budget article in the House Finance Committee hearing, including representatives of school committees, superintendents, charter schools, and other interested parties.

Parisi testified that administrators making funding decisions would benefit from knowing that the supplemental ELL funding is available every year. While recognizing that the \$2.5 million is inadequate, Parisi urged that the Assembly make the ELL funding permanent this year. After all, districts are already working to create spending plans for the next school year and they should possess information on what resources are available to support English Language Learners.

### **RIFTHP Urges Enhanced RIC Funding**

The Senate Finance Committee considered the Governor’s proposed higher education budget at a hearing on March 23<sup>rd</sup>. Post-secondary Commissioner Jim Purcell and the Presidents of all three public higher education institutions testified on specific portions of their budget. RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi provided testimony related to the Rhode Island College budget, since there are three AFT local unions at RIC. He urged the Senate to increase state support for RIC and other public institutions. The Governor provides a modest increase to RIC, while tuition is increasing 7%. Parisi testified on the low level of state support Rhode Island provides its public higher education institutions compared to the rest of the country. He acknowledged that advocates need to do a better job creating an environment of support. He promoted efforts to increase the capacity of RIC to offer advising services to students to enhance their ability to graduate on time. He told the committee that faculty salaries are low compared

to peer institutions. Parisi also spoke of the need to provide funding so that RIC and other public institutions could provide medical benefits to adjunct faculty members.

### **DSP Rate Increase Garners Continued Support**

In the Senate Finance Committee on Tuesday, March 21<sup>st</sup>, the RIFTHP testified in support of Budget [Article 23](#), which encourages state funding to the Department of Behavioral Health, Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals to fund a wage increase for Direct Support Professionals. The budget article was heard in the House Finance Committee several weeks ago. RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi and SEIU lobbyist Emmanuel Falck both testified about low salaries and high turnover for DSPs because of low state funding. The Article supports raising DSP wages to \$15/hour in five years.

### **Bill Introductions**

#### **UI – Seasonal Employment**

[\(S0504 Pearson, Senate Labor\)](#)

[\(H5479 Hearn, House Labor\)](#)

The RIFTHP opposes these act which would create a seasonal employment designation for purposes of unemployment insurance, which would allow employers regularly hiring employees on a recurring basis for less than twenty (20) weeks to apply for a seasonal determination from the department of labor and training. Seasonal employees would not be eligible to collect unemployment insurance for wages earned during the term of their seasonal employment.

#### **Education Aid – Maintenance of Effort – Inflation**

[\(S0568 DiPalma, Senate Finance\)](#)

The RIFTHP supports this act which would amend the maintenance of effort provisions to require that local aid be determined by the amount of the previous year's aid, plus inflation or the local contribution for schools for the previous fiscal year plus and increase on a per pupil basis for each additional pupil when average daily membership increases by at least one percent (1%) for two (2) consecutive years.

#### **Teacher Survivor Benefit Increase**

[\(S0571 Da Ponte, Senate Finance\)](#)

The RIFTHP supports this act which would increase the monthly minimum benefits of spouses and domestic partners of deceased teachers, and would authorize additional yearly non-compounded adjustments.

#### **Pension COLA – Retired Prior to July 1, 2012**

[\(H5504 Messier, House Finance\)](#)

The RIFTHP supports this act, effective January 1, 2018, which would grant an annual increase of

three percent (3%) cost-of-living retirement adjustment on the first fifteen thousand dollars (\$15,000) of a retiree's annual allowance, until the funded ratio of the pension funds, calculated by the retirement system's actuary on an aggregate basis, exceeds eighty percent (80%).

### **Pension COLA – Investment Performance**

[\(H5992 O'Brien, House Finance\)](#)

The RIFTHP supports this act which would award all members of the pension system a three percent (3%) annual benefit adjustment (COLA) applied to the first fifty thousand dollars (\$50,000) of a member's retirement allowance on and after January 1, 2018, provided the prior year investment return yields a gain of ten percent (10%) or more until the pension system funding ratio exceeds eighty percent (80%).



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