



SMITH HILL REPORT

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Meeting Notice Postings

On Tuesday, March 23, the RIFTHP presented written testimony to the House Judiciary Committee in **opposition** to two similar bills that would change the requirement that Rhode Island school committees post meeting notices in newspapers. While the RIFTHP recognized that **H7626** (Newberry) does maintain a posting requirement, giving school boards the option to post on either a website or in

newspapers, we stated that since there is no universal access to the internet, electronic posting is not a sufficient alternative to posting notices in newspapers. **H7677** (Winfield and Petrarca) goes even further by completely stripping any need for school committees to post public notices in any paid newspaper while not adding any requirement for electronic or other means of postings.

Firearms on School Grounds

Testimony on **H7832** (Diaz) was also heard on March 23 before the House Judiciary Committee. This bill prohibits any unlawful discharge of a firearm or other weapons on public or private elementary and secondary school grounds or while riding school-provided transportation. This act exempts certain activities when they are officially recognized and sanctioned by the school; instruction or safety courses, marksmanship events, military history and firearms collection courses, etc.

School Closing – Presidential Primaries

The House Judiciary Committee also heard **H7424** (O'Neill) on March 23 which would require all RI elementary and secondary public schools to be closed for presidential primaries. Currently, public schools are only required to be closed for general elections and for statewide primaries. Public school building use would be restricted to use as polling places only. The bill would allow use for the purpose of school staff development days.

On one side of the issue, there were concerns for the safety of students while voting is taking place during

school hours. Conversely, one group's opinion was that a valuable civics lesson could be taught using the polling place as a classroom tool.

Interestingly, the Block Island school district would be exempt due to the fact that there is only one school on the island and it is not used as a polling place. Several flaws were pointed out in the bill, including that the bill did not address the issue of private and parochial schools and the complications when only public schools close.

Uniform Chart of Accounts – Municipalities

On March 23, the Senate Finance Committee heard testimony on **S2114** (DiPalma) which would create a uniform system of auditing for municipal finances. The act allows for certain alterations when it is not practical for a municipality to abide by the uniform account and provides for penalties for municipalities that fail to use the system, including withholding distribution of State aid to that city or town. School districts are already required to have a uniform chart of accounts.

Bill Introductions **House Bills**

- **Private School Vouchers**
(H7844 *Brien, House Finance*)
The RIFTHP **opposes** this act which would create a scholarship program for children from low and middle-income families to attend the public or non-public elementary or secondary school of their choice. The program would involve the use of scholarship money as an entitlement to the eligible student. The maximum voucher would be \$5,500 per student. This act is patterned after model legislation suggested by the American Legislative Exchange Council and the Alliance for School Choice.
- **Budget Commission Authority – Contract Abrogation**
(H7808 *Watson, House Labor*)
The RIFTHP **opposes** this act which would authorize budget commissions in the various cities and towns to suspend or modify collective bargaining agreements with municipal employees and/or school district employees.
- **Caruolo Act Elimination**
(H7658 *Kilmartin, House Finance*)
The RIFTHP **opposes** this act which would repeal those provisions of Section 16-2-21.4 which permits a school committee to seek additional appropriations by bringing an action in Superior Court seeking more funding from the appropriating authority. This act would also delete a cross-reference to these deleted provisions and actions.
- **Unfunded Education Mandates**
(H7897 *Carter, House Finance*)
The RIFTHP **opposes** this act which would require that educational mandates be fully funded or else unenforceable and would also allow the Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education to grant variances to Title 16 – the State’s education laws.
- **Correction**
Public Employee Benefits – Part-Time
(H7678 *Kilmartin, House Labor*)
The RIFTHP **opposes** this act which would change the definition of part-time State employees regarding eligibility for medical insurance benefits. It would increase the minimum weekly hours worked from twenty (20) to thirty-five (35) hours.

Senate Bills

- **Teacher Mediation Fees**
(S2379 *Ruggerio, Senate Labor*)
The RIFTHP **supports** this act which would require that the State pay the total cost of compulsory mediation for school teacher contract negotiations.
- **Council Approval of Employment Contracts**
(S2404 *Pinga, Senate Education*)
The RIFTHP **opposes** this act which would require that all school contracts, including contracts of employment, must be ratified by the local taxing authority. It would also require any compensation to the school superintendent be approved by the city or town council.
- **School Staff Mediation Fees**
(S2381 *Ruggerio, Senate Labor*)
The RIFTHP **supports** this act which would require the State to pay the cost of compulsory mediation involving municipal employees who work for school districts.
- **Continuing Contract – Teacher Negotiations**
(S2603 *McCaffrey, Senate Labor*)
The RIFTHP **supports** this act which would provide that if a successor collective bargaining agreement has not been agreed to by the parties, then the terms and conditions of the old teachers’ contract would remain in full force and effect until a new agreement is reached.