

# The FEDERATIONIST



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## Big Changes for Evaluation Systems in RI

Rhode Island educators are getting a crash course in the significant changes in evaluation systems affecting teachers and principals that are now required by RIDE in every district. This school year marks what RIDE is referring to as "Gradual Implementation" of evaluation systems that meet the "RI Educator Evaluation System Standards" and have been approved by the department. At this point, districts are "gradually implementing" one of three evalu-

ation models: The RI Model developed by RIDE, the RI Innovation Model developed by the RIFTHP and six district partners: Central Falls, Cranston, Pawtucket, Providence, West Warwick and Woonsocket, and the Coventry Model developed with leadership from the Coventry Teachers Alliance.

What does all of this mean for you? According to RIDE's Gradual Implementation guidelines, all RI teachers and principals must set one Professional Growth Goal, two Student Learning Objectives and participate in one formal and one informal observation of practice during the 2011-2012 school year. The application of the Student Growth formula based on data from statewide assessment, one of the most controversial elements of the new evaluation systems, will not be included in the Gradual Implementation year. However, RIDE expects districts to fully implement an approved model in 2012-2013 with educator evaluation based on observation of professional practice and the application of the Student Learning formula leading to an effectiveness rating of Highly Effective, Effective, Developing or Ineffective.

The RIFTHP supports high quality evaluation systems for the purpose of improving professional practice and student

achievement, and we are very proud of our leadership on this issue. The organization's advocacy for multiple measures influenced RIDE's decision to move away from basing its "51%" of educator evaluation largely on student achievement on state assessments, toward the use of Student Learning Objectives in that calculation, something that should more accurately reflect what happens in our classrooms. The RIFTHP also influenced the decision to change the *Minimally Effective* rating to *Developing*, reflecting our commitment to a system that provides teachers with important feedback on their practice, rather than a "gotcha" system designed to label and make headlines.

It is important to remember that this year is intended as an opportunity to test out the systems. The RIFTHP is working closely with its Innovation districts to provide significant training and follow-up for evaluators and training and support for teachers to help them understand and get the most out of the new evaluation system. You should expect nothing less no matter what model is being implemented in your district. Teachers need to have opportunities to learn about the new sys-

tem and its expectations. They need opportunities to work with colleagues to learn about and practice writing Professional Growth Goals and Student Learning Objectives. Expectations regarding Observation and Conferencing should be clear and training should be provided to both teachers and evaluators in how all the pieces come together to determine effectiveness. Without such information, opportunities and supports in place no evaluation system can be *Highly Effective*.

This is a new system with many unanswered questions. People are understandably concerned, especially in light of the commissioner's proposal to link evaluation to certification! However, we hope that this year will truly be a time to better understand the system, try it out and use it to inform practice. Most importantly, we should gather important information on the system's "do-ability" in order to make recommendations and adjustments prior to full implementation.

Rest assured that the RIFTHP will continue its leadership role on this issue, advocating for changes and supports necessary for a "highly effective" evaluation system based on what we learn this year.

*Colleen A. Callahan, Ed.D.*

### RI Federation of Teachers & Health Professionals

**Frank J. Flynn, President**

**Robert E. Casey**  
*Field Representative*

**Michael J. Mullane**  
*Field Representative*

**James A. Parisi**  
*Field Representative*

**Colleen A. Callahan, Ed.D.**  
*Director of Professional Issues*

**Maureen Martin**  
*Director of Political Activities*

**Kenneth L. Fontaine**  
*Executive Assistant*

**Carol S. Santangini**  
*Staff Assistant*

**Charlene A. Lee**  
*Administrative Assistant*

## President's Message

Our members who enter careers in public service do so for primarily altruistic reasons. They are drawn by an opportunity to improve society; whether it be educating our children and young adults, caring for our



sick and infirmed, or providing social or support services through

our many state agencies. Their only expectations are a decent salary and fringe benefits, safe working conditions and the opportunity to have a dignified retirement with economic security. These are, and should continue to be, basic aspirations for all workers.

We are now under attack and our retirement security is in jeopardy. The teacher and state worker pension system has a projected unfunded liability of approximately \$7 billion dollars. The cause of this liability has many components. Initially, for several decades the State did not make the required payments necessary to securely fund the system. Over the years, changes were made to the system that improved benefits but were not properly funded. Additionally, the return on investments over the past several years has under-performed expectations. This problem has taken sixty years to get to this point, and it cannot be addressed with a "quick fix" remedy.

The Employee Retirement System of Rhode Island was founded in 1936 for state employees and since 1949 public school teachers in Rhode Island have been contributing members. At 9.5% for teachers and 8.75% for state workers, we pay some of the highest pension contribution rates in the nation. Since its inception, each member of the system has made the required contributions through bi-weekly deductions from their pay checks. Employees did not create this problem.

The Treasurer and most elected officials agree that the unfunded liability must be addressed. If not, the State and local municipalities' annual contributions will increase dramatically over the next several years. This rise will necessitate cuts in aid to municipalities and school funding resulting in the elimination of many programs and services that are vital to our State and its cities and towns.

The Treasurer and Governor have promised to submit legislation to the General Assembly. We have been working closely with other labor unions to educate and mobilize our membership to shape the proposed legislation and fight draconian pension cuts. We have had conversations with both the Governor and the Treasurer. We have not had access to the specific plan that will be unveiled. However, based on comments that have been made publicly, we expect that it will involve changes to the COLA, the accrual rate, the age of retirement eligibility,

and a shift to a hybrid plan that is a combination of the current defined benefit plan, as well as a 403b type defined contribution plan.

While the Treasurer acknowledges that public employees did not cause this problem, it seems that her solutions rest largely on a plan to reduce benefits. Current Plan B employees have been subjected to three pension changes in the past six years and are currently paying over seventy-five per cent of the "normal cost" of their pension. During the recent Pension Advisory Group hearings, much of the discussion centered on the concept of risk-shifting. This is simply a clever way of saying that the State and Municipalities want to place the burden of the unfunded liability, as well as future retirement debt, on the backs of the current employees.

In conjunction with our labor colleagues throughout the State, we are engaged in an education and mobilization campaign through the Rhode Island Retirement

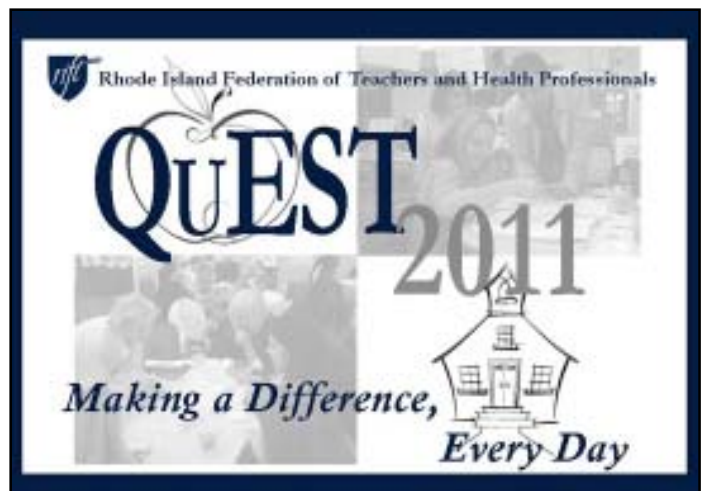
Security Coalition (RIRSC). Ultimately, the responsibility for changing pension benefits rests with the General Assembly. We must be ready to reach out to them and demand that any changes that are enacted are necessary, fair and equitable. This should be about finding solutions, not inflicting pain.

Our adversaries are well-organized and well-funded and have already begun a media campaign. Every one of us must reach out and let our voices be heard. We cannot let opportunists exploit the current shortfall and impose unfair and unjust measures while supporting tax cuts for the rich. This legislation will have a profound effect on every state employee, teacher, and municipal worker in Rhode Island. Please join us in our efforts to ensure that your right to a secure retirement is protected.

Thank you for all you do to make Rhode Island a great place to live and work.

*Frank J. Flynn*

## Save the Date



**December 2-3, 2011 Rhode Island Convention Center**

## 2011 General Assembly Review

The 2011 session of the Rhode Island General Assembly ended with the body failing to enact meaningful changes to the teacher bargaining law to preserve collective bargaining. The Assembly leaders also limited the scope of bargaining by freezing state worker longevity benefits through the state budget.

The Assembly rejected a proposal by the Governor to increase public worker pension contributions, but promised to reconvene in the fall to review and presumably act on pension changes that will be proposed by General Treasurer Raimondo and Governor Chafee.

### Budget Issues

**Longevity** - Article 8 of the State Budget narrowed the scope of collective bargaining for all state workers. The Article froze existing longevity benefits paid to state workers. The Article also added a provision preventing contracts from including a longevity provision after July 1, 2011.

Representative Robert DaSilva proposed an amendment in the House to preserve the ability to bargain longevity. His amendment failed on a 39-33 vote. A similar amendment in the Senate by Senator John Tassoni failed on a 7-28 vote.

### Developmentally Disabled

The Governor submitted a budget proposal to cut the funds to the providers of services to the Developmen-

tally Disabled by about \$9 million. The Assembly added further reductions so that the providers lost a total of \$24 million. The state agency then processed the budget cuts by lowering reimbursement to providers based on a 23% cut in worker wages and a 5% cut in worker benefits. The agencies will determine how to manage the budget reduction.

**Education Aid** - The Governor submitted a budget that added \$17 million in new dollars to fund the new education funding formula. He also used \$32 million of the federal education jobs fund to backfill budget gaps instead of passing the money on to local school districts. The Assembly supported the Governor's plan.

**School Construction** - The Assembly placed a three year moratorium on the state reimbursement for school construction. The moratorium contains a possible exemption for remediation of health and safety concerns.

**Pension Contribution Increase** - The Governor proposed a budget that would have increased employee contributions into the pension fund to 11.75% of salary. The Assembly did not support the employee contribution increase.

**Higher Education Organization** - The General Assembly directed the Governor's Director of the Department of

Administration to study the organization and governance of public higher education and to issue a report by November 1, 2011.

### Legislation

#### School Employee Arbitration

The Senate supported the bill by Senator Michael McCaffrey to create binding arbitration for teacher contract disputes by a 20-17 vote. The RIFTHP membership waged a campaign to support the bill in order to preserve collective bargaining. The Senate eliminated school support staff from the binding arbitration proposal. The House did not vote on the proposal.

#### Post-Retirement Employment

Commissioner Gist proposed legislation to allow her to hire retired teachers and administrators to work

for the State. She acknowledged that her plan would permit the consultants to earn \$500 per day. The Senate supported an RIFTHP amendment to permit post-retirement employment only when the State could not hire a non-retiree. The House let the bill die without a vote.

#### School Employee Medical Insurance

Existing state law created a state board to develop uniform medical insurance plan designs for all school employees. Once adopted by the Board, the school committees and unions would be bound to only select medical insurance plan designs adopted by the board. After separation of powers concerns were raised, the Assembly passed legislation to change the Board's authority from binding to advisory.

*James Parisi*

## Community Connections

At AFT's national "Building Futures Together" convention last year in Seattle, President Randi Weingarten made it clear that AFT and its affiliates must step up the work they do with a broad range of civil rights, faith, youth, immigrant rights and other progressive organizations, as well as other labor unions to address issues such as good public education, safe and secure schools, and creating jobs.

The RIFTHP and its affiliate locals clearly understand the concept of working with

community groups and being engaged in the community. RI Jobs with Justice, Ocean State Action and Fuerzo Laboral are some of the community-building, worker and social justice organizations the RIFTHP has been coordinating with on issues such as mass firing of teachers in Central Falls and Providence.

Recently, community involvement and coalition work was best highlighted when the Cranston Teachers Alliance, Local 1704, joined forces with the RI Jobs with

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Justice (JwJ) during the fight to prevent a publicly-funded mayoral academy to open in Cranston. The CTA, under the leadership of their President Liz Larkin, thought that the battle would be relatively simple considering the Superintendent, the School Committee and the City Council had opposed the charter school plan. It was clear to most in the Cranston community that the proposed mayoral academy would drain money and resources from the under-funded Cranston public school district. But the mayor's support, buoyed by statements made by the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education in

support of the out-of-state organization seeking to open the charter school, intensified the fight.

JwJ Director Camilo Viveiros was in contact with Cranston parents, students and residents eager to do some grass roots advocacy against the move to have a mayoral academy in their city. With Achievement First and its supporters lining up against them, the addition of the JwJ organization was vital to the fight by bringing the conversation beyond the union membership and into the community.

In the end, the Board of Regents rejected the mayoral academy proposal, primarily due to the lack of community support for the project. JwJ community activists sent a

strong message to the Regents. They were clearly in support of the quality education and academic innovations taking place in the Cranston public schools and didn't want to see resources diverted to a privately-run school unaccountable to the locally-elected school committee.

In August, CTA President Larkin attended the JwJ's national conference in DC aptly called "Build Power and Fight Back". Larkin participated on a panel to discuss how the education community reaches out to neighborhoods with community based wrap-around schools. She also spoke about the Cranston experience and how the JwJ went beyond the union member-

ship and into the neighborhoods to get signatures, organize phone trees, attend meetings and share information.

Unfortunately, we know the mayoral academy battle will now move to Providence where the fight will take on new proportions. We need to help ensure that the mayoral academy discussion in Providence is open to the voice of parents and activists who support public schools.

For more information on how to get involved in community organizations in your district, contact Maureen at [rftmaureen@aol.com](mailto:rftmaureen@aol.com).

*Maureen Martin*