

The

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Speaker Shekarchi Passes The Torch

A major leadership transition is underway at the State House after Speaker Joseph Shekarchi stepped down from House leadership to pursue an appointment to the Rhode Island Supreme Court. The House elected Christopher Blazejewski as Speaker, while House Democrats elevated Katherine Kazarian to Majority Leader, making her the first woman in Rhode Island House history to hold the position.

For RIFTHP, this moment is both a transition and an opportunity to recognize Speaker Shekarchi's years of service and leadership. Since becoming Speaker in 2021, he guided the House through major debates on housing, healthcare, economic development, public education, labor standards, and state budget priorities. His tenure reflected a leadership style centered on accessibility, coalition-building, and a willingness to engage directly with educators, public workers, organized labor, and community stakeholders across Rhode Island.

Under Shekarchi's leadership, the General Assembly advanced major investments in affordable housing, healthcare reimbursement rates, nursing home staffing, workforce development, and higher education affordability through programs like Rhode Island Promise and the Hope Scholarship. His office also prioritized long-term housing policy reforms, including the creation of Rhode Island's first dedicated funding stream for affordable housing and the establishment of the state Department of Housing.

During Speaker Shekarchi's tenure, RIFTHP members and affiliates also saw several significant legislative and policy victories, including:

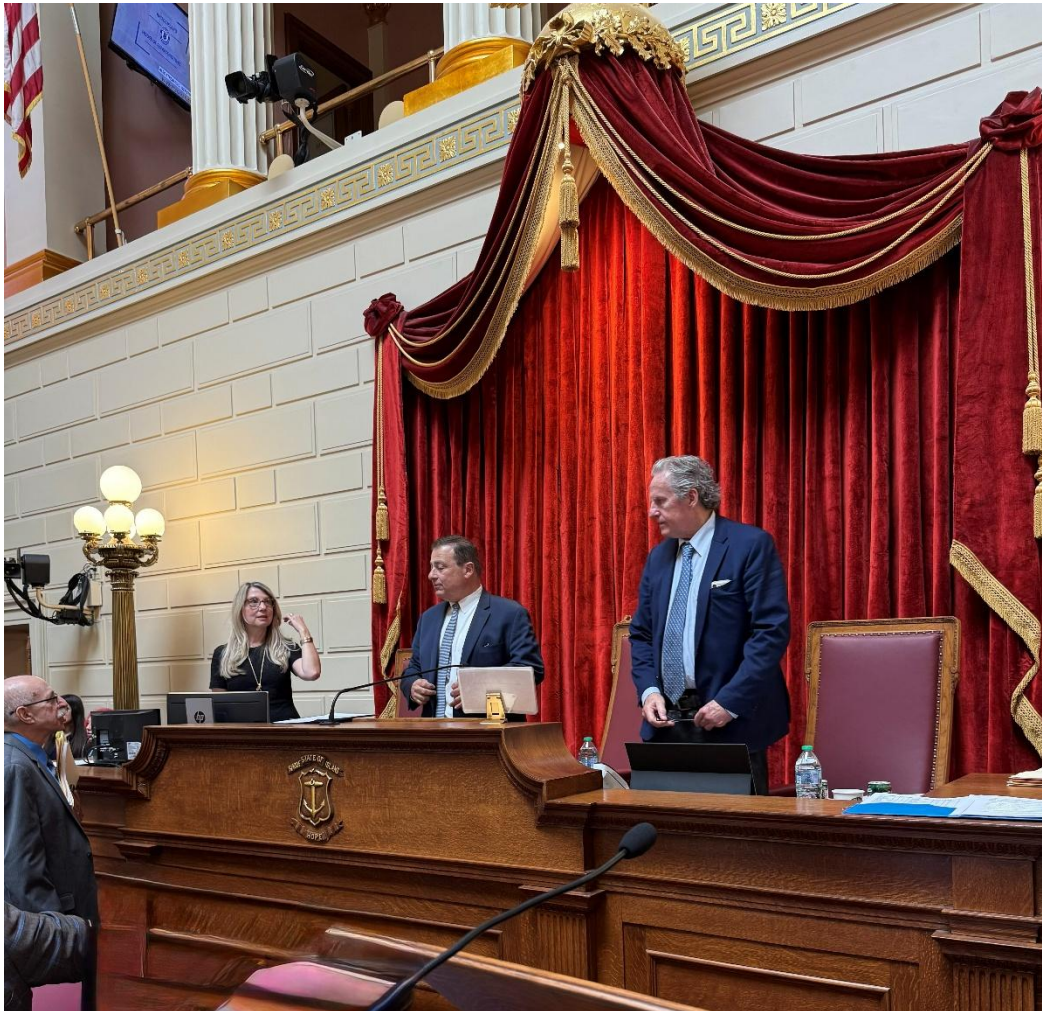
- Improvements to Final Average Salary pension calculations for retirees
- Legislation ending future state takeovers of school districts
- Creation and expansion of the Rhode Island College Hope Scholarship
- Expansion of the legal definition of "employee" for higher education workers
- Worker protections for RIDE union members
- Improvements to Multilingual Learner (MLL) funding
- Increased salaries for Rhode Island court reporters

Blazejewski's elevation signals continuity in House leadership during a period when the General Assembly continues confronting major issues including education funding, housing affordability, healthcare access, and workforce shortages. At the same time, the transition reflects a broader generational shift within House Democratic leadership.

Kazarian’s election as Majority Leader represents a historic milestone for the chamber and reflects the increasing role women continue to play in shaping Rhode Island’s legislative agenda. As Majority Leader, she will play a central role in caucus operations, legislative negotiations, and policy priorities moving forward.

“Speaker Joseph Shekarchi has consistently demonstrated respect for educators, public workers, and working families throughout Rhode Island,” said Maribeth Calabro. “Our union deeply appreciates his thoughtful leadership, his willingness to engage directly with stakeholders, and his commitment to strengthening Rhode Island’s public institutions. We thank him for his years of service to the state and wish him continued success in this next chapter of public service.”

As the House enters a new leadership era, RIFTHP looks forward to continuing its work with Speaker Blazejewski, Majority Leader Kazarian, and members across the chamber to advance strong public schools, protect workers’ rights, strengthen healthcare services, and invest in Rhode Island students and families.



Speaker Joseph Shekarchi addresses the chamber after announcing that he will pursue an appointment to the Rhode Island Supreme Court

Classroom Safety

RIFTHP testified this week in support of legislation sponsored by Senator Brian Thompson aimed at strengthening classroom safety protections for both students and educators across Rhode Island schools.

Senate Bill [2524](#), the Senate companion to legislation previously heard in the House, would establish a statewide framework allowing educators to remove chronically disruptive students or students posing an immediate safety threat from the classroom while also requiring documented interventions, administrative review, behavioral supports, parent notification, and student due process protections. The legislation additionally preserves protections for students receiving special education services and explicitly protects collective bargaining rights for educators and school employees.

The bill remains one of RIFTHP's legislative priorities this session as educators continue raising concerns about unsafe classroom conditions, escalating behavioral challenges, and the impact these disruptions have on teaching, learning, and educator retention.

RIFTHP President Maribeth Calabro submitted [written testimony](#), testified in person, and answered questions from committee members regarding classroom conditions, educator safety, student supports, and the need for consistent procedures when serious disruptions interfere with instruction. RIFTHP Field Representative Jeremy Sencer also testified in person before the Senate Education Committee in support of the bill.

During the hearing, Senator Thompson spoke about the urgent need to help stabilize and support schools in Woonsocket and emphasized the importance of ensuring educators and administrators have the tools necessary to maintain safe and productive learning environments. His remarks reflected broader concerns educators continue raising statewide regarding classroom disruptions, staffing shortages, and student behavioral needs.

RIFTHP's testimony focused on the real-world impact unsafe classroom conditions have on both educators and students. The union emphasized that the bill is designed to balance classroom safety with student protections by limiting removals to serious or repeated disruptions, requiring documentation and intervention strategies, and ensuring students continue receiving educational services and behavioral support following a removal.

National Education Association Rhode Island also testified in support of the legislation. The American Civil Liberties Union testified in opposition.

Following testimony, the Senate Education Committee voted unanimously to hold the bill for further study, a common procedural step as discussions continue on one of the session's most closely watched education policy proposals.

RIFTHP will continue advocating for policies that strengthen classroom safety, support educators, and ensure Rhode Island students have access to stable and productive learning environments.

Pre-K Expansion

RIFTHP Field Representative Jeremy Sencer submitted [written testimony](#) in support of legislation sponsored by Senator Hanna Gallo that would expand access to free, high-quality pre-kindergarten programs for three- and four-year-old children across Rhode Island by incorporating pre-K into the state's education funding framework.

The Senate Education Committee held the bill for further study.

RIFTHP Supports Revenue Fairness Legislation

RIFTHP Lobbyist Jeremy Sencer provided [written testimony](#) in support of legislation sponsored by Representative Karen Alzate that would create an additional 3% tax rate on taxable income above \$640,000 beginning in tax year 2027.

In testimony to the House Finance Committee, RIFTHP argued the proposal would help Rhode Island generate sustainable revenue needed to support public education, healthcare, housing, and other essential public services while creating a fairer tax structure that places less burden on working families.

The House Finance Committee held the bill for further study.

This Week

Expanding Access to Bilingual Education Across Rhode Island

On Tuesday, the House Finance Committee will hear the Support and Access to Bilingual Education (SABE) Act, legislation backed by the Coalition for a Multilingual Rhode Island and supported by RIFTHP that would create a permanent \$950,000 state investment in bilingual and dual language education, expand certification pathways for bilingual educators, and help high-need districts build programs that better support multilingual learners and strengthen student outcomes statewide.

Charter Moratorium and Cap Reduction

On Wednesday, the Senate Education Committee will hear one of RIFTHP's top legislative priorities: [S 2787](#), legislation to place a three-year pause on new charter school expansion and reduce Rhode Island's statewide charter cap from 35 to 25. After decades of unchecked growth, Rhode Island now operates a fragmented parallel school system that diverts millions of public dollars away from public schools while placing enormous fiscal pressure on municipalities already struggling with budget shortfalls, staffing shortages, and rising student needs. In communities like Providence, Central Falls, Pawtucket, and Woonsocket, charter expansion has accelerated funding instability even as district schools continue serving the overwhelming majority of students, including students with the highest special education, behavioral, and multilingual learning needs. This bill is about finally putting Rhode Island communities first by protecting public school funding, restoring accountability, and ensuring state education policy prioritizes strengthening the public schools that serve every child.

Retirement Security and Pension Improvements

On Thursday, the Senate Finance Committee will hear a wide range of pension improvement bills affecting teachers, municipal employees, firefighters, police officers, retirees, and other public workers, including legislation addressing COLAs, survivor benefits, service credits, retirement calculations, parental leave protections, and retirement eligibility. RIFTHP supports efforts to strengthen retirement security for public employees and recognizes that many workers continue to struggle with the long-term impacts of pension changes enacted more than a decade ago.

Among the bills being heard is [S 3251](#), a long-standing RIFTHP priority that would establish a “Rule of 90” retirement pathway allowing teachers, state employees, and municipal workers to retire upon reaching age 60 with 30 years of service or when their age and years of service combined equal 90. After years of workforce shortages, burnout, and delayed retirements, this legislation would provide a fairer and more sustainable path to retirement for the public employees who have dedicated decades of service to Rhode Island communities.

Bill Introductions

Workers’ Compensation Court Jurisdiction Changes

[\(H 8524](#), Corvese, House Labor)

This legislation would amend multiple sections of Rhode Island’s workers’ compensation laws relating to the jurisdiction and authority of the Workers’ Compensation Court. The bill proposes updates affecting how the court handles claims, disputes, and enforcement matters involving injured workers, public employees, and employers under the state’s workers’ compensation system.

Expanding Reemployment Opportunities for Lower-Income Retirees

[\(S 2741](#), Sosnowski, Senate Labor & Gaming)

This legislation would allow retired teachers, municipal employees, and state workers to return to employment without losing retirement benefits if they reside in Rhode Island for at least 270 days annually and earn less than \$55,000 per year from all income sources. The bill is intended to help lower-income retirees remain financially stable while allowing public employers to address ongoing workforce shortages and retain experienced employees.

Restricting Governance Roles in Mayoral Academies

[\(S 2783](#), Pearson, Senate Education)

This legislation would limit voting membership on mayoral academy boards of directors or trustees to mayors and town administrators. The bill is intended to clarify governance authority and ensure that voting control of mayoral academies remains directly connected to elected or appointed municipal leadership.

Limiting Charter School Network Expansion

[\(S 2784](#), Murray, Senate Education)

This legislation would prohibit the approval of new charter school applications if the proposed school would operate as part of a charter school network or if an expansion would create a network charter structure. The bill is intended to limit the growth of multi-school charter systems and maintain greater local oversight of charter school expansion in Rhode Island.

Take Action

Major education and retirement legislation is moving at the State House, and lawmakers need to hear directly from educators, public workers, retirees, and community members. Take a moment to contact your legislators and support policies that strengthen Rhode Island public schools, protect retirement security, and invest in our communities.

[Action Network Link: Email your legislators and tell them to pass Rule of 90!](#)

[Action Network Link: Email your legislators and tell them to pass the charter moratorium and cap reduction!](#)

Questions

RIFTHP members with questions about the Smith Hill Report or our legislative agenda may reach out to RIFTHP Lobbyist Jeremy Sencer at (401) 273-9800 or at jsencer@rifthp.org.

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