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# SMITH HILL REPORT



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## **Session Enters Final Stretch with Major RIFTHP Priorities Still in Play**

With the Rhode Island General Assembly entering the final weeks of the 2026 legislative session, many of RIFTHP's highest-priority bills remain active as lawmakers begin scheduling committee consideration votes ahead of adjournment.

In Rhode Island, a bill being held for further study is often not the end of its path. Several major proposals affecting retirement security, charter expansion, educator working conditions, and classroom safety remain alive, with advocates continuing to push for movement before the session concludes.

For members, the message is simple: many of the year's most important fights are far from over. The coming weeks may determine whether long-standing priorities advance to floor votes or become unfinished business for another year.

### **Charter Moratorium & Cap Reduction ([S2787/H7415](#))**

Legislation to temporarily pause approval of new charter schools and limit future charter expansion remains very much in play as lawmakers enter the final weeks of session, with advocates anticipating further action before adjournment. The proposal drew testimony from educators, municipal leaders, and community advocates raising concerns about funding inequities, exclusionary enrollment practices, and the strain of maintaining parallel education systems in a small state. As the bill advances, supporters are expected to face continued opposition from well-funded charter interests that have invested heavily in lobbying, organizing, and public campaigns opposing efforts to slow expansion. With the Governor indicating support, the legislation remains one of the year's most consequential education debates—and one where continued advocacy may prove decisive.

### **Rule of 90 ([H7390/S3251](#))**

Legislation creating a Rule of 90 retirement pathway, allowing eligible educators and public employees to retire at age 60 with 30 years of service, remains under active consideration as lawmakers weigh a broader package of pension improvements before session concludes. Retirement security remains one of RIFTHP members' top legislative priorities, with more than 5,000 messages already sent to lawmakers supporting pension reform. As proposals advance in the final weeks of session, supporters argue measures like Rule of 90 are essential to restoring retirement stability, honoring commitments made to public employees, and strengthening Rhode Island's ability to recruit and retain educators and public workers. Continued member engagement is expected to remain critical as pension legislation moves toward potential committee votes and floor consideration.

### **Student and Teacher Classroom Safety ([S2524/H7526](#))**

Legislation establishing clearer authority to address serious classroom disruptions and safety concerns while maintaining protections for students and educators is scheduled for Senate Education Committee consideration on May 26, making it one of the first major RIFTHP priorities positioned for possible advancement this session. The proposal reflects growing concern from educators about unsafe learning environments, repeated classroom disruptions, and the impact on student learning and staff retention. As lawmakers consider the bill in the final days of session, supporters argue stronger classroom safety policies are essential to creating learning environments where students can succeed and educators can teach effectively.

### **Charter School Prevailing Wages ([H8248/S2634](#))**

Legislation extending prevailing wage and benefits protections to educators and administrators employed by charter schools and mayoral academies remains active as lawmakers consider labor and education priorities in the final weeks of session. Supporters argue the bill addresses longstanding inequities by ensuring publicly funded schools cannot rely on lower compensation standards while competing with traditional public districts for educators and staff. As debates over charter expansion continue, advocates contend stronger labor protections are essential to maintaining fair standards across Rhode Island's publicly funded education system.

As legislative calendars narrow and committee votes accelerate, the final weeks of session will determine whether these priorities advance—or whether advocates will need to continue the fight into another year. For RIFTHP members, continued engagement may prove especially important as some of the year's biggest decisions on public education, retirement security, and worker rights remain unresolved.

### **After Six Years of State Control, Providence Schools Enter a New Era**

After more than six years of state control, Providence Public Schools will return to local governance on July 1, according to an announcement this week from Education Commissioner Angélica Infante-Green—a significant and somewhat unexpected shift that reshapes the future of Rhode Island's largest school district.

The announcement represented a notable change from earlier public comments regarding the timeline and comes after years of advocacy from educators, city leaders, and community stakeholders calling for a return to local governance.

Among those efforts, RIFTHP and the Providence Teachers Union has consistently supported legislation seeking to end or shorten state control of Providence schools, including [H7414/S2526](#), which will nullify recommendations extending Providence's turnaround plan and restored local decision-making authority. Similar proposals in prior years faced resistance as state officials maintained additional oversight remained necessary.

The return to local control also follows broader policy changes supported by RIFTHP to limit future state intervention in school districts. During the 2025 legislative session, lawmakers enacted changes prohibiting full-district state takeovers and limiting intervention to no more than two schools per district at one time, shifting Rhode Island toward more targeted intervention models and away from prolonged district-wide control.

The commissioner's announcement also came as the Senate Education Committee heard [S2934](#), legislation that would terminate state control while establishing a separate salary structure for Providence teachers and creating new processes governing dismissal and demotion. RIFTHP President, Maribeth Calabro submitted [written testimony](#) and testified before the committee, while RIFTHP Lobbyist, Jeremy Sencer and PTU COPE Chair Patrick Shelton also delivered testimony opposing the proposal.

Supporters of the bill, including Providence Mayor Brett Smiley and former PTU President Steve Smith, argued the legislation would help define governance and employment structures following the return to local control. Opponents contended the proposal effectively conditions local control on changes to longstanding educator protections and collective bargaining rights.

The debate generated substantial engagement, with approximately 160 letters of opposition submitted to the committee, reflecting significant concern among educators, union members, and community stakeholders regarding the bill's potential impact. The bill was held for further study.

While many welcomed the return to local control as an overdue transition, the announcement has also prompted renewed questions about student outcomes, district governance, and what responsibilities state and local leaders share moving forward after more than six years of state intervention.

For educators and families who spent years advocating for local control, the announcement closes one chapter but leaves a larger challenge ahead: ensuring Providence's next era is defined not only by who governs, but by stronger schools, stable staffing, and better outcomes for students.

### **Healthy School Meals**

The Senate Finance Committee heard two proposals this week aimed at expanding access to school meals for Rhode Island students, reflecting growing recognition that nutrition and food security remain closely tied to student learning and well-being.

[S2083](#) (Acosta) and [S2663](#) (Vargas) would each establish a statewide Healthy School Meals for All program, phasing in universal access to free breakfast and lunch for public school students over three years.

RIFTHP Lobbyist, Jeremy Sencer submitted [written testimony](#) supporting both measures, emphasizing that access to nutritious meals helps remove barriers to learning, reduces stigma associated with meal eligibility programs, and supports healthier school environments for all students.

Supporters argued universal school meals are increasingly viewed as an educational investment as much as a public health initiative, recognizing that students are better positioned to learn when basic needs are met.

The hearing reflects continued legislative interest in policies intended to expand student supports and reduce barriers affecting academic success and attendance.

## **Senate Finance Revisits Charter Funding Protection Added During Prior Budget Cycle**

The Senate Finance Committee heard [S3276](#) (Thompson) this week, legislation that would remove a 14% limitation on reductions to local per-pupil charter funding adjustments, revisiting a charter funding protection added late in the budget process last year.

The proposal arrives amid continued debate over education funding equity, district budget pressures, and the financial impact of charter expansion on traditional public schools. Supporters argue removing the cap would allow funding adjustments to better reflect enrollment and fiscal realities facing local districts, many of which continue grappling with staffing pressures, rising costs, and competing budget demands.

RIFTHP Lobbyist, Jeremy Sencer submitted [written testimony](#) and testified before the committee, arguing the measure is part of a broader need to reassess policies that shield charter growth from the fiscal realities affecting district public schools. Testimony emphasized concerns that continued charter expansion and funding protections place additional strain on districts serving the highest-need students while absorbing the majority of public education responsibilities.

The bill was held for further study, but remains part of a broader conversation this session about whether Rhode Island's education funding policies appropriately balance support for charter schools with the needs of the public school systems serving the vast majority of students.

The hearing also follows growing legislative scrutiny of charter funding and expansion, including proposals to pause new charter approvals and revisit long-term funding structures, signaling continued debate over the role of charter schools within Rhode Island's public education system.

## **Increased Funding for High-Need School Districts**

The Senate Finance Committee heard [S2826](#) (Murray) this week, legislation that would increase Rhode Island's Student Success Factor for districts where more than 45% of students come from low-income households, directing additional resources to schools serving communities with concentrated poverty.

The proposal recognizes that students facing economic hardship often require additional academic, behavioral, and wraparound supports, while districts with high concentrations of need continue to face staffing and resource challenges.

RIFTHP Lobbyist, Jeremy Sencer submitted [written testimony](#) in support of the bill, emphasizing that education funding should better reflect the realities facing schools serving large numbers of students impacted by poverty.

The bill was ultimately held for further study, but remains a key proposal aimed at strengthening Rhode Island's commitment to funding students based on need and improving resource equity across school districts.

## Comprehensive Revision to Rhode Island's Education Funding Formula

The Senate Finance Committee heard [S3015](#) (Gallo) this week, legislation that would establish a new Rhode Island Education Funding and Accountability Act, proposing a broad overhaul of how public education is funded across the state.

The bill draws from recommendations developed by the Rhode Island Foundation's Blue Ribbon Commission on Education Funding, a statewide effort bringing together education leaders, advocates, researchers, and stakeholders to examine whether Rhode Island's current funding formula adequately reflects the realities facing students and school districts. The Commission concluded the existing formula, adopted more than 15 years ago, requires modernization to better address student need, concentrated poverty, multilingual learners, high-cost special education, and long-term funding sustainability. Read the full report [here](#).

RIFTHP President Maribeth Calabro, who participated in the Blue Ribbon Commission, submitted written testimony in support of the legislation, connecting the proposal to broader efforts to build a funding system that is more equitable, transparent, and responsive to the needs of students and communities across Rhode Island.

Supporters argue the legislation presents an opportunity to move beyond piecemeal adjustments and create a funding structure designed around what students need to succeed, while increasing predictability and reducing fiscal pressure on local districts and municipalities. The Commission's recommendations included expanding what costs are covered by the formula and increasing state responsibility for certain high-cost obligations currently borne by districts.

The bill was ultimately held for further study, but remains among the most ambitious education proposals considered this session, with potential implications for how Rhode Island defines, funds, and sustains public education for years to come.

### This Week

#### **Tuesday, May 27 – Senate Education Committee**

- The Senate Education Committee will consider a RIFTHP priority bill designed to strengthen classroom safety, support educator retention, and establish clearer processes for responding to serious disruptions while protecting the rights of both students and educators.

#### **Tuesday, May 27 – Senate Labor & Gaming Committee**

- The Senate Labor & Gaming Committee will consider legislation intended to expand collective bargaining rights by allowing currently unrepresented workers to organize and negotiate collectively with employers.

#### **Tuesday, May 27 – Senate Finance Committee**

- The Senate Finance Committee will hear legislation expanding access to state employee health benefits for adjunct faculty teaching at least half-time, addressing longstanding concerns about compensation and workforce stability in higher education.

#### **Thursday, May 29 – Senate Finance Committee**

- The Senate Finance Committee will consider legislation exempting ERSRI pension benefits from Rhode Island income tax, an effort supporters say would improve retirement security and help retirees keep more of the benefits they earned through public service.

## Bill Introductions

### High-Quality Science Curriculum Requirements

([S 3318](#), McKenney, Senate Education)

This legislation would require the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education to direct local school districts to adopt one of several approved high-quality science and technology curricula by June 30, 2027. The bill is intended to promote greater consistency in instructional materials and strengthen science education standards across Rhode Island schools.

## Take Action

[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!](#)

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### 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](mailto:jsencer@rifthp.org).

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