

January 29, 2024

Workplace Readiness Week

On Wednesday January 24, 2024, RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi testified in support of legislation designating a week in April every year as Workplace Readiness Week in all Rhode Island public schools. He also submitted [written testimony](#) in support of the bill. [H 7019](#) was heard in the first bill hearing of the House Education Committee this year. Freshman representative Tina Spears introduced the bill and testified with a constituent who suggested the idea after seeing similar legislation enacted in California.

The bill would designate a week to observe workplace readiness that would include programs to raise awareness about workplace health and safety laws, wage and hours laws, unemployment insurance and workers compensation, and unionization of the workforce. The bill also provides that students should be exposed to apprenticeship training programs and continued language about worker rights information students should have before they obtain work permits.

Parisi testified in support of the idea of making students aware of workplace laws, regulations, and practices before they enter the workforce. He lauded the idea of exposing students to apprenticeships as a means to get access to good jobs without incurring college debt. He also flagged the issue that compliance with the bill will require time and effort by school staff to develop materials to implement the bill. He urged the Assembly to provide necessary resources should they move forward with the legislation.

The AFL-CIO, NEA/RI and SEIU all testified in support of the bill. The Department of Labor and Training issued a letter of support. The Governor's Commission on Disabilities testified of some amendments to the bill it was seeking. The Committee heard the bill and held it for further study.

Budget Appropriations

In addition to the budget articles highlighted in last week's Smith Hill Report, the proposed state budget contains numerous appropriations of state funding that are important to RIFTHP members. The appropriations are examined in Finance Committee hearings based on the state department or agency the appropriation is made. Among the highlights of proposed state funding changes are:

Retiree State Income Tax Exemption – The FY 25 state budget proposal estimates a reduction in state revenue of **\$3 million** by exempting \$50 thousand of pension income from state income tax instead of the current \$20,000 exemption for half a year. The annual cost of this proposal is \$6.2 million in FY 26.

Wavemaker Fellowship – The FY 25 state budget proposes to spend **\$3.6 million** in tax credits for the Wavemaker Fellowship program for student loan forgiveness and extends the program an additional year.

P-Tech Initiative – The FY 25 state budget proposes to extend the P-Tech Initiative another year and allocates **\$400,000**. The program creates partnerships with high schools, higher education institutions and employers for course offerings to HS students.

Education Funding Formula Reduction – Budget Article 8 changes the cost index in the Rhode Island education funding formula from a 3-year average to a 5-year average, reducing state education aid allocated by the funding formula by about **\$26 million**. The FY 25 budget increases the education funding formula by \$19.2 million, but that increase would be \$26 million more if the formula continues to use a 3-year average.

Enrollment Loss Transition Fund – Last year’s budget included additional state education aid for districts projected to lose state funding due to enrollment decline. The program offers two years of funding to lessen the impact of declining state revenue tied to declining student enrollment. The FY 25 state budget allocated **\$25 million** for this program.

Poverty Loss Stabilization Fund – Another recent Assembly funding initiative was transition funding to lessen the impact when school districts lose state funding due formula calculations related to poverty. The FY 25 allocation is **\$1.2 million**, which is \$4.5 million less than last year’s education budget.

Early Childhood Education – The FY 25 state budget proposes to increase state funding for early childhood education by **\$7 million**, allowing for 35 additional classrooms.

English Language Learner Funding – The FY 25 state budget proposal increases state funding for English Language learners by **\$16.6 million**. The formula used increases the per pupil cost for each eligible student to 25%, instead of the current 15% adjustment.

Student Breakfast and Lunch Subsidy – The FY 25 state budget allocates **\$800,000** to subsidize the cost of student meals so that those in the reduced-price category get free breakfast or lunch.

Early Intervention Services – The FY 25 state budget includes an additional **\$3.8 million** to increase rates for Early Intervention providers. The RIFTHP represents EI providers working at the Trudeau Center.

Learn365RI – The FY 25 state budget allocates **\$5 million** of federal funding for the Governors out-of-school time education initiative.

Math and English Language Arts – The FY 25 state budget proposes a one-time **\$15 million** to hire math and ELA coaches in districts with high academic need and to fund teacher professional development.

Court Reporters – The FY 25 state budget allocates **\$200,000** and adds two full time equivalent (FTE) positions in the Judiciary to hire court reporters. The RIFTHP represents court reporters in Family and Superior Court.

Pension Advisory Working Group

The next scheduled meeting of the Pension Advisory Working Group is on Wednesday January 31 at 4:00 pm at the State House. We anticipate that some of the actuarial analysis of proposed ideas to improve pension benefits will be presented at the meeting. The meeting will be televised on Capitol TV.

Bill Introductions

General Assembly Approval of Regulations

([H 7178](#), Corvese, House State Government & Elections)

This bill would require that all agencies' final rules, promulgated pursuant to the administrative procedures act, be approved by General Assembly action, but in no case later than December 31 of the year it is promulgated before it can become effective.

Student Asthma Data Collection

([H 7195](#), McNamara, House Education)

This bill would authorize a one-year pilot program during the 2024-2025 school year. This program would involve the Department of Health, the Department of Elementary and Secondary education, the State Office of Medicaid, and the RI Data Hub. The program would provide outreach and tracking at two (2) public high schools and two (2) public middle schools to address issues of asthma and attendance among students. The pilot program team would report findings and recommendations to the Governor and the General Assembly by November 7, 2025.

School Policy - Student or Staff Death

([H 7196](#), Casimiro, House Education)

This bill would require public school districts to adopt a policy for responding to the death of a student or staff member. This bill would also amend the title of chapter 16-21.7 to "The Nathan Bruno, Jason Flatt, and Alicia Biros Bereavement Act."

Municipal Employees Binding Arbitration

([H 7200](#), Bennett, House Labor)

This bill would recognize that municipal employees have the opportunity to utilize interest arbitration and would establish new factors for the arbitrators to consider. These factors would include comparisons of wages and hourly conditions of employment in similarly skilled jobs. This bill would also grant the arbitrators power to render an award over all negotiated matters, including the expenditure of money.

Student Transportation - Full Funding

([H 7206](#), Cotter, House Finance)

This bill would provide that, effective with the fiscal year 2025 budget, the General Assembly would ensure that transportation categorical funds between the state and regional school districts would be fully funded in order to ensure that the interests of regional school districts are protected and also to advance the education mission of regional school districts.

Seizure Safe Schools Act

([H 7214](#), Fogarty, House Education)

This bill would require the department of elementary and secondary education and the Department of Health to adopt policies, rules and regulations for the administration of seizure rescue medications for children who have been medically identified as having epilepsy/seizure disorder.

Education Accountability Act - School Climate

([H 7232](#), McNamara, House Education)

This bill would incorporate the department of elementary and secondary education's SurveyWorks school climate indicators disaggregated by local education agencies ("LEAs") and individual public schools, or any other such future system used as a replacement or substitute for SurveyWorks to measure school climate indicators for evaluating the performance of LEAs and individual public schools.

State Employee Longevity Payments

([H 7249](#), Corvese, House Finance)

This bill would restore longevity payments of five percent (5%) of base salary for employees after ten (10) years of service and increase to ten percent (10%) of base salary after twenty (20) years of service, beginning July 1, 2024.

Special Education Categorical Funding Increase - Three Times Cost

([H 7250](#), O'Brien, House Finance)

This bill would amend the definition of the term "extraordinary costs" for the purposes of excess costs associated with special education students. The new definition of extraordinary costs would be educational costs that are over three (3) times the average statewide special education cost.

Special Education Categorical Funding Increase

([H 7252](#), Donovan, House Finance)

This bill would amend the calculation of state funding provided to local education agencies for special education services. The bill would revise the calculation of extraordinary special education costs in fiscal years 2026 and 2027, and would also provide additional funds for excess costs for Special Education students who move into a district after a district has approved this fiscal year.

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