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# SMITH HILL REPORT



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## **Assembly Schedule**

The Rhode Island General Assembly had a lighter than usual schedule last week after Tuesday's session and committee meetings were cancelled due to the snow storm. The RIFTHP did not have any bill hearings last week. The Assembly is not meeting this week because of the winter recess. General Assembly sessions and committee hearings will recommence next week.

## **Final Pension Advisory Working Group Meeting Scheduled**

The final scheduled meeting of the Pension Advisory Working Group will be at 3:00 pm on Monday, February 26, 2024. We anticipate that they will adopt a final report that contains a cost analysis of different pension improvements proposed by the RIFTHP, other unions and retiree organizations. You can view the meeting on Capitol TV by visiting the Assembly website at ([Capitol TV](#))

## **Public Higher Education Bond Hearing**

On Valentines' Day, the House Finance Committee met and heard testimony on the higher education bonds that Governor McKee has proposed to put on the November ballot. [Budget Article 5](#) contains a proposed \$135 million bond for public higher education. The bond includes \$80 million for a Life Sciences Building at URI. The URI financing plan anticipates an additional \$8.5 million in private funding for the project. The Governor has also proposed a \$55 million bond to renovate Whipple Hall to house the new Institute for Cybersecurity and Emerging Technologies at RIC.

Committee members questioned several of the witnesses about potential costs overruns of the bond projects after being informed of cost overruns beyond the bond authority approved by the voters for prior higher education construction projects.

URI President Marc Parlange testified in support of the Life Science portion of the bond at the February 14<sup>th</sup> hearing. He asked the Assembly to increase the bond amount by \$8.5 million to cover the initial University request that was adjusted by Governor McKee. He testified that the new Biomedical Sciences Building would also benefit students enrolled in other programs.

Jack Warner, who had just been named President of Rhode Island College that morning, testified in support of the RIC bond request to support the Cybersecurity Institute. Former Congressman James Langevin leads the newly-created Cybersecurity Institute but was unable to testify at the hearing.

Whipple Hall is one of six original buildings at RIC and is in need of repair. The total cost is \$73.5 million, with other state funds not requiring voter approval covering the difference. The project will add 20,000 square feet and upgrade the heating system.

### **Bill Introductions**

#### **School Construction and Renovation - Energy Efficiency**

([S 2168](#), Pearson, Senate Finance)

([H 7593](#), Cortvriend, House Finance)

These bills would provide that not later than June 30, 2024, the Department of Education would develop and adopt, in consultation with the office of energy resources, regulations requiring all school buildings to meet the standard of zero energy capable, as defined in § 16-7-36, by December 31, 2036.

#### **Campus Security Detention Authority**

([S 2232](#), Tikoian, Senate Judiciary)

([H 7344](#), Craven, House Judiciary)

These bills would permit non-sworn public safety officers and non-sworn security guards at private colleges and universities to detain individuals within the campus's jurisdiction when the officer or guard has reasonable grounds to believe that the person has committed a criminal offense. Upon detaining said person, the non-sworn public safety officers/security guards, must immediately request the assistance of the state police or local police having jurisdiction and may not detain the person for a period of time longer than thirty (30) minutes.

#### **Physical Education - Student IEP**

([S 2280](#), DiMario, Senate Education)

([H 7561](#), Casimiro, House Education)

These bills would enable cities and towns to enact enabling legislation authorizing a partner program to assist students with an IEP for specially designed physical education classes.

#### **Freedom To Read**

([S 2281](#), McKenney, Senate Education)

([H 7386](#), Stewart, House State Government & Elections)

These bills would encourage and protect the freedom of public libraries to acquire and deaccession materials without limitations and to be protected against attempts to ban, censor or otherwise restrict access to books and other materials. These bills further prohibits materials being removed from public libraries due to partisan or doctrinal disapproval.

**Workplace Readiness Week**

([S 2282](#), Bissaillon, Senate Education)

([H 7019](#), Spears, House Education)

These bills would establish a "workplace readiness week". It would require all public high schools, including charter schools, to annually observe that week by providing information to students on their rights as workers and would specify the topics that must be covered.

**State Work Internship**

([S 2283](#), Zurier, Senate Education)

This bill would create a civic apprenticeship program for recent Rhode Island high school graduates to gain work experience working in Rhode Island State Departments.

**Innovation Schools**

([S 2284](#), de la cruz, Senate Education)

This bill would allow for the establishment of innovative schools for the purpose of improving school performance and student achievement through increased autonomy and flexibility.

**Postsecondary Student Vaccine Discrimination**

([S 2285](#), DeLuca, Senate Education)

This bill would prohibit discrimination in postsecondary education of students who are enrolled in graduate or professional degree programs, along with faculty members and other staff in those programs, who are granted medical or religious vaccine exemptions by a sponsoring university or college.

**Charter School Enrollment Limit**

([S 2286](#), Bissaillon, Senate Education)

This bill would provide limitations and prescribe caps on a district's total charter school expenses. This bill would provide that a school district's budget for charter schools is not to exceed nine percent (9%) of the school district's budget unless the school district is under state control and then the school district's budget for charter schools would not exceed twenty-three percent (23%).

**Teacher Preparation Programs - Cultural Competence**

([S 2288](#), Cano, Senate Education)

This bill would require all educator preparation programs to include lessons on cultural competency and how teachers shall meet the instructional needs of multilingual learners.

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