

April 24, 2023

## Hope Scholarship Program

On Thursday, April 20, the House Finance Committee took testimony on the Hope Scholarship program. The Hope Scholarship is a two-year earned scholarship for Rhode Island College Juniors and Seniors who have met criteria such as being on-time to graduate in 4 years and have obtained at least a 2.5 GPA. The Hope Scholarship has been promoted by Governor McKee, who supports the program and proposed an amendment to his budget ([GBA#9](#)) to provide \$9.4 million federal rescue plan dollars to pilot Hope Scholarships at RIC over 3 years. Legislation by Representative Joseph McNamara ([H 5090](#)) contains the details of the pilot program.

The RIFTHP supports this initiative. It is a high legislative priority for the RIFTHP and the three local unions at Rhode Island College. Frank Flynn, RIFTHP President, submitted [written testimony](#) in support of the bill. [Click here](#) to view a two-page fact sheet on the Hope Scholarship program.

RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi testified at the House Finance hearing. He supported the initiative as a program that would help stabilize Rhode Island College enrollment while providing for more degrees in shortage-areas such as teaching, nursing, and social work. He also testified that the measure would make college more affordable, increase degree attainment, and reduce the growth of student debt. RIC President Jack Warner, RIC students and alum, and Kids Count all testified in support of the bill. The bill was held for further study.

## Elementary School Discipline Restrictions

The RIFTHP testified against legislation by Senator Anna Quezada that would restrict elementary school suspensions except for students who are a threat to themselves or others. [S 189](#) was heard in the Senate Education Committee on Wednesday, April 19. RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi provided extensive testimony against the bill. Parisi informed the Committee that teachers do not suspend students; administrators do. He expressed concern that students who commit egregious acts would be returned to classrooms without any support because alternative placements do not exist in most elementary schools. He also expressed concern that the bill provides no resources necessary to support emotional and behavioral needs of students.

The bill was supported by the ACLU and Kids Count. The Committee held a lively conversation about the bill, asking questions and offering opinions about student behavior and the availability of alternatives to out-of-school suspensions. Current law requires districts to analyze student suspension data and produce reports to RIDE. ACLU testimony indicated that no school district has complied with this law since it was enacted in 2016. The Committee voted to hold the bill for further study.

### **School Schedule Bereavement Policy**

Legislation was introduced by Senator Alana DiMario to permit a flexible a school schedule for up to five days in the event of a tragic death of a student or educator. [S 181](#) was heard in the Senate Education Committee on April 19. RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi testified in support of the legislation. He testified that the bill would permit, but not require, that up to five days of school could be used to handle the grief arising from the sudden death of a student or colleague, including incidence of a sudden death such as a traffic fatality or suicide. Parisi noted that the bill is enabling and does not require any leave days or waiver of student instructional days. The past Rhode Island Teacher of the Year, a North Kingston teacher, also testified in support of the bill. The Committee held the bill for further study.

### **Seizure Safe Schools**

The RIFTHP voiced several concerns about legislation filed by Senator Lou DePalma called Seizure Safe Schools. The bill, [S 763](#), would permit teachers and other school staff to administer seizure medications in an emergency if authorized by parents. The bill would also require annual training of all school employees, and require all Rhode Island students in private, parochial, and public schools receive classroom instruction in seizures.

RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi raised objections to the bill. He informed the Committee that the RIFTHP had planned a meeting with bill advocates to seek common ground the following week. Parisi voiced concern that the bill would permit school staff to volunteer to administer seizure medications even though they do not have medical training. The School Committees Association raised concerns about the time and money necessary to comply with the comprehensive mandate. Several individuals and advocates testified in support of the bill. The Senate Education Committee voted to hold the bill for further study after the bill was heard on April 19.

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### **Bill Introductions**

#### **School Sports - Gender Designation**

([S 391](#), Morgan, Senate Judiciary)

This bill would categorize women by their biological identity at birth rather than their gender identity for purpose of organized sports. A team would be categorized as males, men, or boys; females, women, or girls; or coed or mixed. If there is a dispute, a student would establish sex by presenting a signed physician's statement that shall indicate the student's sex. Additionally, this bill would create a cause of action for any student who is deprived of an athletic opportunity or subject to retaliation as a result of violations of this chapter.

### **Municipal Employee Binding Arbitration**

([S 426](#), Lawson, Senate Labor)

([H 5180](#), Bennett, House Labor)

These bills would establish new factors for the interest contract arbitration board for municipal employee unions, to consider in rendering a binding decision on the contract, would grant the board power to render an award over all negotiated matters, including the expenditure of money and would provide for a review of the arbitration panel's decision, by writ of certiorari to the supreme court.

### **Education Aid Formula - MLL**

([S 456](#), Pearson, Senate Finance)

This bill would amend the student success factor calculation of the state share ratio for foundation aid by accounting for English language in determining the state's share of foundation aid eligibility for each school district. This bill would also mandate that each community fund its school committee at the state share ratio by July 1, 2028. This bill would take effect on July 1, 2023 and be applicable for the 2023-2024 fiscal year.

### **Universal Pre-Kindergarten Plan**

([S 463](#), Gallo, Senate Education)

This bill would further develop a plan to expand public, high quality prekindergarten education programs which are available to all children ages three (3) and four (4) throughout Rhode Island to increase children's school readiness. This bill would require the department of education to make funds available to sustain all existing state prekindergarten classrooms and the Department of Human Services to make funds available to layer on top off federal funds to sustain all existing Head Start and Early Head Start classrooms for the school year 2023-2024, with sufficient resources for programs to offer competitive wages to attract and retain qualified and skilled early educators. This bill would repeal the statutory laws pertaining to the initial pilot prekindergarten program.

### **Graduate Student Vaccine Exemption**

([S 480](#), DeLuca, Senate Education)

([H 5279](#), Perez, House Education)

These bills 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.

### **Providence School Committee Authority**

([S 481](#), Zurier, Senate Education)

This bill would amend the provisions governing intervention and support for the Providence Public School District. The bill would provide that the Providence School Committee would review and approve the appointment of senior school district administrators, and would also provide that the amended provisions of §16-7.1-5.1 of the General Laws would remain in effect for the duration of the State's takeover of the Providence Public Schools.

### **Student Excused Absences**

([S 483](#), Sosnowski, Senate Education)

This bill would provide that school policies which provide for excused absences for participation in a sport or other extracurricular activity would be amended and deemed to include attending agricultural fairs as an excused absence.

### **School Restroom Requirements**

([S 487](#), Morgan, Senate Education)

This bill would require that public school children on an overnight trip not be roomed with students of the opposite sex. Additionally, this bill would provide that schools provide separate restrooms for students of the opposite sex and an intentional and willful violation may be punishable by a fine not to exceed one thousand dollars (\$1,000).

### **School Committees Policy Availability**

([S 494](#), Gallo, Senate Education)

([H 5671](#), Baginski, House Education)

These bills would repeal the requirement that the School Committee policy manual be kept in the school library, public library and administrative building and require that the manual be available on the school district website.

### **State Retiree \$500 Stipends**

([S 519](#), DiPalma, Senate Finance)

([H 6117](#), Cortvriend, House Finance)

These bills would allow effective members and/or beneficiaries of members who retired on or before January 1, 2023 to receive a one-time stipend of five hundred dollars (\$500) within sixty (60) days of the effective date of these bills and an additional five hundred dollar (\$500) stipend one year thereafter.

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