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# SMITH HILL REPORT



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## Vision Services Program Reinstated

At a press conference held at the Sherlock Center on the Rhode Island College campus on Monday May 10<sup>th</sup>, legislative leaders announced that the Rhode Island Vision Education and Services Program (RIVESP) will be restored. All teachers had been issued layoff notices when RIDE unilaterally decided to put the program out to bid.

House Speaker Shekarchi and Senate President Ruggiero announced that the program will remain for two years as a group is convened to work on a long-term funding plan for vision services. They also announced that the layoff notices would be rescinded. Speaker Shekarchi recognized the advocacy of parents and teachers in his remarks. RIFTHP President Frank Flynn and Howard Union of Teachers President Cheryl Glowewski attended the press conference representing the teachers. [Click here](#) to view press coverage.

RIFTHP President Frank Flynn said *“We are grateful for the leadership of Speaker Shekarchi, Senate President Ruggiero, and Governor McKee who listened to the concerns from students, parents, and teachers and interceded to correct this injustice which was created by the R. I. Dept of Education. Thanks to their intervention, students with visual impairments will continue to receive the high-quality vision, orientation, and mobility services provided by the educators at the Sherlock Center at R.I. College. We look forward to continuing our work with our elected officials to ensure that the vital services provided by RIVESP will flourish long into the future.”*

## RIFTHP Supports Labor Bills

The RIFTHP offered written testimony on two bills in the Senate Labor Committee on Wednesday May 12<sup>th</sup>. The RIFTHP supported legislation by Senate Majority Leader Michael McCaffrey that would continue state employee contract provisions while the parties negotiate a successor agreement. The bill, [S0887](#), is modeled after contract continuation legislation Senator McCaffrey championed two years ago for teachers and municipal workers. RIFTHP offered support of the bill on behalf of the six state employee bargaining units we

represent. In his letter ([click here](#)), RIFTHP Field Representative James Parisi reminded the Committee that some public sector workers have binding arbitration on all issues while state workers do not. Without full binding arbitration on all issues, the RIFTHP asked the Assembly to enact contract continuation for state workers. After the bill was heard, the Senate Labor Committee voted passage of the bill on a 7-0 vote (Senator de la Cruz was absent). The bill will soon be considered on the Senate floor.

Another bill considered by the Labor Committee was legislation to recognize that public sector workers, except for public safety employees, have the right to strike. The bill would impact teachers, state workers and municipal employees. Senator Bell introduced the legislation and referenced Supreme Court dissent of a Westerly teacher strike case by Chief Justice Thomas Roberts. Senator Bell's bill, [S0548](#), was held for further study.

RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi wrote a letter in support of the bill. In his letter ([click here](#)), he cited the threat to contract continuation legislation enacted two years ago by a group of Mayors as a reason the Assembly should consider this legislation. Parisi also disputed the assertion that the bill gives workers a right to strike, since it is unconstitutional for government to force workers to work against their will.

## **BILL INTRODUCTIONS**

### **Teacher, State Worker, Municipal Worker Pension Eligibility**

([S0875](#) *Cicccone, Senate Finance*)

([H5668](#) *Fellela, House Finance*)

These bills would allow teachers, state and municipal employees to retire upon the earlier of reaching age sixty (60) with thirty (30) years of service or the employee's retirement eligibility date under present state statutes.

### **State Employee Contract Continuation**

([S0887](#) *McCaffrey, Senate Labor*)

([H5402](#) *Vella-Wilkinson, House Labor*)

These bills would require that if state employee unions are engaged in contract negotiations and/or utilizing the dispute resolution process to adopt a successor contract, all the terms and conditions in the existing collective bargaining agreement shall continue to remain in effect, even after its expiration.

### **Public Higher Education Tuition - Immigration Status**

([H5238](#) *Diaz, House Education*)

This bill would create the "Rhode Island Student Success Act" which would identify those students who are exempt from paying nonresident tuition at public universities, colleges, or community colleges.

## **Commissioner of Education Gubernatorial Appointment**

([S0063 aa](#) Gallo, *Senate Judiciary*)

([H5423](#) O'Brien, *House State Government & Elections*)

These bills would require that the Secretary of the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS), the Secretary of Commerce of the Commerce Corporation and the Commissioners of Elementary and Secondary Education and Postsecondary Education be appointed subject to the approval of the Senate. Senate approval would also be required for most temporary appointments to these positions.

## **School Committee Agenda - Discussion Items**

([H5485](#) Diaz, *House State Government & Elections*)

This bill allow school committees to add item(s) to their agendas for the purposes of discussion only without having to publish notice of the additional item(s).

## **Safe Schools Act**

([S0073](#) Ruggiero, *Senate Judiciary*)

([H5555](#) Kazarian, *House Judiciary*)

These bills would prohibit the possession of firearms on school grounds except for peace officers, retired law enforcement officers, persons under contract to provide school security services, and unloaded firearms in locked containers or a locked rack on motor vehicles.

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