

The

SMITH HILL REPORT



PUBLISHED BY THE RHODE ISLAND FEDERATION OF TEACHERS & HEALTH PROFESSIONALS/AFT, AFL-CIO

February 4, 2022

RIFTHP Supports Right to Read Legislation

On Wednesday, February 2nd, in the House Education Committee, RIFTHP leaders testified in support of legislation that would provide a two year extension to comply with the Right to Read Act. The Act, among other provisions, requires teachers to either demonstrate awareness or proficiency in scientific reading instruction, depending on the school assignment. Currently, this requirement must be met by September 2023. [H7164](#) would extend the deadline to September 2025.

In addition, the bill exempts certain teachers with a Pre K-6 or Pre K-12 certificate who must “demonstrate proficiency in knowledge and practices of scientific reading and structured literacy instruction.” The proposed exemptions include those who are certified Reading Specialists, have a Master’s Degree in Reading, or have at least 15 years of teaching experience. The bill also limits the duration of professional development for those required to take the training to 24 hours.

RIFTHP President Frank Flynn testified in support of both the timeline extension and the enactment of reasonable exemptions. He said that an extension was justified because of the challenges schools face in dealing with the disruption caused by COVID. He also noted that other curricular changes have also required time for teacher professional development.

In addition to the extension, Flynn argued that the Assembly should enact certain exemptions to the proficiency requirement. He said *“The second area of relief we are seeking is to allow current teachers to demonstrate proficiency based on other means besides taking a new course. The Guidance Document issued by RIDE did not account for any other experience or criteria to demonstrate proficiency. Please note that this is guidance not regulation.”*

Duly certified teachers who possess master’s degrees from accredited colleges and universities, in Reading, Literacy or other related disciplines, or teachers who have earned a cert as a reading specialist and/or consultant have spent considerable time and money to attain these certs and are now deemed unqualified. How can someone getting an advanced degree from one of our colleges or universities which allows them to obtain a reading “specialist” certification from RIDE not be considered an expert by RIDE?”

Colleen Callahan, the RIFTHP Director of Professional Issues, also testified at the hearing. She described the extensive training that the Union has put together to comply with the Right to Read requirement. She outlined that courses approved by RIDE to meet the requirement entail 60-100 hours of teacher time. She noted to the committee that 5,000-6,000 teachers must meet the proficiency requirement that is provided by Districts at a cost between \$600 to \$1,900 per teacher.

The NEA/RI supported the bill and the RI School Committees Association raised concerns about the cost of the current law. The Superintendents Association and several Dyslexia advocates supported the extension but not adoption of the exemptions outlined in the bill. The House Education Committee held the legislation for further study.

RIFTHP Opposes Student Discipline Bill

The RIFTHP weighed in to oppose legislation filed by Rep. Grace Diaz and co-sponsored by Rep. Slater that would make it more difficult for school administrators to suspend students. The bill, [H7162](#), was heard in the House Education Committee on February 2nd. It would restrict out of school suspensions of secondary students to certain issues and limit any elementary school student suspension to those who are deemed a threat by a school psychologist or other mental health professional. The RIFTHP opposed the bill, arguing that school administrators and others in school districts are best equipped to make decisions on student discipline. The ACLU and Rhode Island Kids Count supported the bill. The legislation was held for further study by the Committee.

Additional RIFTHP Initiative Introduced

The RIFTHP is putting together a series of bills that it will work on this session. Among the initiatives of the RIFTHP are several bills that were introduced in prior years and a few new ideas. One RIFTHP initiative was introduced this past week:

School Employee Assault

Current state law provides that teachers and school administrators who are assaulted in the performance of their job and are out on leave do not have to use their own leave while out of work. The law requires the individual to apply for retirement benefits after being out on leave for a year. The law does not include other school employees, including paraprofessionals who may be involved in an assault at work. If absent from work, these school employees would have to use their own leave to supplement any workers compensation benefits provided to them. Legislation has been introduced to include all school employees under the teacher and administrator assault law so that all school employees do not have to use their own leave when absent due to an assault at work. The legislation, [H7303](#), has been introduced by Representative Robert Craven,

Chair of the House Judiciary Committee. The bill was introduced on February 2 and has been referred to the House Judiciary Committee. Representative Karen Alzate co-sponsored the legislation.

Bill Introductions

Charter School Lottery Process

[\(H7117\)](#) *Ajello, House Education*)

This bill would require district charter schools, independent charter schools, and mayoral academies to use an annual lottery process established pursuant to rules and regulations promulgated by the Department of Education, to select students who would be invited to enroll in a public charter school. The bill would also provide that parents and guardians of students could inform the sending public school district or the Department of Education of their intent to have or not have their child entered into the lottery. The bill would also provide that a student could choose to accept or reject the offer to enroll in the public charter school.

Virtual and Hybrid Education Study Commission

[\(H7118\)](#) *Casimiro, House Education*)

This bill would create a fifteen (15) member special legislative commission whose purpose it would be to make a comprehensive study on the effects and impact of hybrid and virtual learning on the achievement rates of children in grades K-12th, and provide recommendations to identify gaps and establish plans to address such issues, and who would report back to the House of Representatives no later than January 31, 2023, and whose life would expire on March 30, 2023. The Commission includes a member appointed by the RIFTHP.

Computer Science Curriculum

[\(H7119\)](#) *Lombardi, House Education*)

This bill would direct the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education to develop recommendations for a high school curriculum to prepare students for successful postsecondary education and careers in computer science. The bill would also direct the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education to consider the Council's recommendations and develop academic standards for a computer science high school curriculum. The courses in the computer science curriculum should, to the extent academically feasible, enable a student to utilize computer science courses to meet mathematics and science admission requirements at the state's colleges and universities.

Instruction on Mental Health

[\(H7120\)](#) *Lombardi, House Education*)

This bill would require the Department of Education to develop and make available for school use a mental

health curriculum. Schools would be required to provide four (4) hours of mental health instruction to seventh grade students.

Higher Education Non-discrimination - Vaccination Status

([H7121](#) *Perez, House Education*)

This bill would prohibit discrimination in postsecondary education of students who are granted medical or religious vaccine exemptions by a sponsoring university or college.

2% Service Credit

([H7124](#) *McNamara, House Finance*)

This bill increase the retirement allowance for teachers, state employees, and municipal workers in the Municipal Employees' Retirement System (MERS) or the state retirement system from 1% to 2% for each year of service. This bill would apply to a member's service on and after July 1, 2022.

\$300 million School Construction Bond

([H7125](#) *Potter, House Finance*)

This bill provide for a statewide voter referendum seeking approval of capital development bonds for direct funding for foundational level school housing aid and the school capital building authority fund in the amount of three hundred million dollars (\$300,000,000). This bill is also intended to protect the state's proprietary and financial interests on major school construction projects.

Parental Bill of Rights

([H7138](#) *Morgan, House Judiciary*)

This bill provide for a parents bill of rights preventing the state or any governmental entity from infringing on the fundamental rights of parents in the upbringing of their children. The bill would spell out the rights of parents with respect to the health, education and welfare of their minor children. Violations of the bill would result in civil, criminal and/or administrative penalties.

Student Suspension Restrictions - Restorative Justice

([H7161](#) *Diaz, House Education*)

This bill would allow for the out-of-school suspension of students in grade six (6) and above, who are found to be disruptive as defined by existing law or found in violation of school alcohol, drugs, or weapons' regulations. It would also authorize the imposition of an out-of-school suspension for students in any grade before the sixth grade, if they are found to have possessed a weapon or used, sold or possessed illegal drugs or if the school administration determines that the student's behavior presents a threat to the physical safety or health of others, that cannot be reduced or eliminated by an alternative intervention.

Student Suspension Restrictions

([H7162](#) *Diaz, House Education*)

This bill would allow schools to impose an out-of-school suspension of students in grades six (6) and above, if

they are found to be a threat to the physical safety or health of students, teachers, and administrators or violated school regulations, including alcohol, illegal drugs or weapons. Younger students may be issued an out-of-school suspension after consultation with a school psychologist or mental health professional.

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