

The

SMITH HILL REPORT



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Session Opens

The 2016 session of the Rhode Island General Assembly opened on Tuesday, January 5. Over the next two months, bills will be introduced and hearings on bills will begin in House and Senate Committees. The Governor is anticipated to submit her budget request on Tuesday, February 2. Shortly after the budget is introduced, hearings will be held on her spending proposals by the House Finance Committee.

The RIFTHP will continue to publish the Smith Hill Report, a weekly legislative newsletter highlighting important legislation and testimony. The newsletter is sent to local union leaders who then distribute it to union members. Those who want to receive this newsletter directly from the RIFTHP may do so by signing up using the link provided below.

Senate District 11

Former Rhode Island Senator Christopher Ottiano (R) resigned from his post after he took a leadership position with Neighborhood Health Plan of Rhode Island. District 11 encompasses portions of Bristol, Portsmouth and Tiverton. A special election was scheduled by the Secretary of State's office. A primary election was held in December and a special election was held on Tuesday, January 5. The winner of the special election was Republican candidate John Pagliarini Jr. He was sworn in on January 13, 2016.

Local Approval of Charter Schools

On January 13, 2016, the House HEW Committee heard testimony on legislation introduced by Rep. Pat Serpa that mirrored a bill that passed the House on a 62-11 vote last session. The bill, [H7051](#), would require city or town council approval of new district charter schools, independent charter schools and mayoral academies. Rep Serpa, a retired West Warwick teacher, spoke passionately about the interests of taxpayers served by her bill. On the House floor before the committee hearing, she offered a critique of a biased Op Ed piece that appeared in the Providence Journal. She recounted the story of a new mayoral academy proposed for West Warwick, Warwick and Coventry just after West Warwick completed its 5 year fiscal stability plan after being on the cusp of bankruptcy. The school, if approved, would have had devastating consequences on West Warwick finances. The bill does not impact existing charter schools or expansion of existing charter schools that have already been approved.

RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi testified in support of the legislation. He reminded the committee that the most recent charter school approval was done by the current Board of Education despite the opposition by the city/town councils and school committees of all three communities (Burrilville, North Smithfield and Woonsocket). Sean Doyle, a West Warwick teacher and local union President, provided more detail to the committee on the impact a mayoral academy charter would have had on his school district and how the local elected officials were largely kept in the dark about the proposal.

Also testifying in support of the bill was the Superintendents' Association, the Association of School Committees, the NEA/RI, the AFL-CIO, Lincoln School Committee member MaryAnn Roll, and AFSCME Council 94. Opposing the bill was the League of Charter Schools, RI-CAN, a corporate-funded charter advocacy group, the RI Mayoral Academy organization, and RIDE. RIDE argued that the legislation should not pass while the Assembly considers revisions to the funding formula. A parent of an Achievement First student also testified in opposition to the bill.

The Committee voted to hold the bill, and all other bills being heard that afternoon, for further study.

Financial Considerations of New Charter Approval

The House Finance Committee took testimony on Wednesday January 13, 2016 on legislation filed by Representative Jay O'Grady. His bill, [H7066](#), would require the Rhode Island Department of Education to make an affirmative finding that a new charter school would not have a detrimental impact on the finances or academic performance of sending districts prior to creating a new charter school. His legislation is identical to his bill last session, which passed the House on a 64-8 vote.

RIFTHP President Frank Flynn testified in support of the O'Grady legislation. He informed the Committee that last year, RIDE staff advised the Board of Education that it was not their responsibility to consider fiscal impact when voting on a new charter school application. Such a finding would be corrected with this legislation. President Flynn said "The loss of students to charter schools may have a significant impact on a school's finances particularly if the school is operating under a Fiscal Stabilization Plan authorized by the State of Rhode Island such as we currently have in West Warwick and Woonsocket."

Providence teacher and Providence Teacher Union Treasurer Alex Lucini also spoke at the hearing. The list of proponents and opponents was similar to those testifying on the Serpa legislation held the same evening.

Dyslexia Targeted Assistance and Teacher Professional Development

The House HEW Committee heard testimony on [H7052](#) on January 13. H7052 was sponsored by Rep. William O'Brien, a Providence teacher representing District 54 in North Providence. The bill would require school districts to provide assistance to those students who are identified with dyslexia. The bill passed the House last session on a 74-0 vote but was not taken up by the Senate.

RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi offered support for the bill. The bill provides for enhanced identification of dyslexia while calling on support for those identified students. Also testifying in support of the legislation were several

parents of dyslexic students and an attorney representing special education parents. A teacher at a private school also offered support of the bill. One parent noted that there were 28,000 students with dyslexia in Rhode Island. The NEA/RI supports the legislation. The Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) asked the bill to be put on hold while a Special House Commission looking into Dyslexia came up with recommendations.

The RIFTHP also testified on legislation by Rep. John Lombardi which would require RIDE to provide teachers with professional development related to reading disabilities and dyslexia. The bill, [H7055](#), would require certain teachers to get 2 hours of annual professional development every year.

RIFTHP lobbyist James Parisi testified in support of RIDE offering professional development opportunities, but questions the implication of a state law requirement of annual professional development without any funding to support the professional development. Parisi also noted the differences among communities on how teacher professional development is provided.