



House Committee on Finance
Chairman Marvin Abney

Re: Support for H8149 – Relating to Public Officers and Employees – Retirement System – Administration

May 7, 2024

Dear Chairman Abney and Members of the Committee,

The National Education Association Rhode Island (NEARI) strongly supports Rep. Edwards' bill H8149. We express our gratitude to Representative Edwards for introducing this bill and **we also advocate for the inclusion of teachers, specifically in 16-16-13 of RI General Laws.**

Pension reform, particularly legislation to amend the calculation from the highest five years of pay to the highest three years of pay, is NEARI's top legislative priority.

NEARI proudly represents 12,000 Rhode Island workers across various sectors, the majority of whom will be affected by the proposed changes in HB 8149. Our members consist of Public School Teachers, State Workers, Public Higher Education Workers, Education Support Professionals, and Municipal Workers.

These dedicated individuals serve students and the public in roles that have become increasingly more demanding and challenging. **They deserve a retirement that is fair and secure, reflecting their commitment.**

Throughout this process, NEARI has consistently testified that any improvements to the pension system should include all categories of members, including retirees. We acknowledge the various bills aimed at improving retiree pension benefits before you tonight, and we stand in support of these efforts.

While some pension reform was necessary to ensure the sustainability of the pension system for retirees and active members, the reforms implemented went too far and had unintended consequences. Active members are now required to work longer for significantly reduced benefits compared to those who retired before them. House Bill 8149 presents an opportunity for the first positive improvement to the pension system since 1986.

In selecting our legislative priority for pension reform for active members, NEARI leaders and members sought changes that are reasonable, viable, and sustainable.

We are committed to advocating for reforms that will benefit our members and ensure a secure future for all. **We sought a solution that would have a positive impact on all active members within the system, and H8149 accomplishes just that.** We are proud to have the support of our public sector colleagues in the AFL-CIO, who have also recognized the importance of this improvement.

Recruiting and retaining teachers, educational support staff, municipal, and state employees remains a significant challenge for us. While we appreciate the emergency certification measures and the ability for retirees to teach for a full school year that we have implemented, these are temporary fixes, not long-term solutions.

Without addressing the issues within the pension system, we will continue to face the same challenges and see individuals opt out of pursuing careers in education and public service. Moreover, current employees continue to leave in search of more secure retirement options to protect their future.

H8149 represents a crucial initial step towards pension reform and ensuring a more stable retirement for our members who play vital roles in our Ocean State communities.

We extend our gratitude to Representative Edwards for introducing this legislation. The decision before you now presents an opportunity to make a meaningful improvement to the pension system. The stakes are high, and we encourage you to pass H8149.

Sincerely,

Mary Barden, Executive Director
National Education Association Rhode Island