



## Education

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# In midst of recession is demand that education get rich

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Public money is drying up like prunes in scorching sun. Employment is down, so tax revenues are suffering. As a result, schools and districts are panicking about how they'll pay for the basics, never mind how they can beef up programs so kids meet the demanding standards set by both the federal government and their own states.

You'd think the [General Assembly](#) would be frantic to rewrite any outdated laws that siphon scarce resources away from maintaining and improving schools.

The Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council is certainly worried. So it asked both the Department of Education and the League of Cities and Towns what the legislature could do to save money. A summary of their answers are on page 8 of RIPEC's report, "Reductions in Local Aid Will Require Structural Changes for Local Governments and School Districts," available at [www.ripec.com](http://www.ripec.com).

The list includes significant pension reform, mandatory health-care co-pays and repealing the mandate that school nursing services be delivered by certified teachers. It asks to suspend the Caruolo act, which allows school districts to overspend their budgets and then sue their town for the money to cover the debt.

Each of these requests became separate bills submitted to the General Assembly. [Governor Carcieri](#) all but begged for their passage, to help municipalities and schools manage their shrinking funds.

But not one passed. The towns and schools are desperate. What were their State House representatives thinking?

Dan Beardsley, executive director of the League of Cities and Towns, explained how the priorities of the public sector have become seriously at odds with the priorities of the public. I got a little history lesson.

In 1937, the General Assembly passed the Rhode Island State Labor Relations Act, a version of the 1935 National Labor Relations Act, that provided private-sector employees with protection against private employers, and still does.

However, with very few modifications, the Rhode Island version became the umbrella law for four big collective-bargaining laws that passed in the 1960s. They covered firefighters in 1961; police in 1963; teachers in 1966 and municipal employees in 1967.

When states first passed their labor laws, most limited the scope of what could be bargained. Obvious issues such as salary, benefits, hours and grievance procedures were on the table. Then there were “permissible issues,” like mutual agreements that teachers should have a break room. But some subjects were clearly management rights, such as promotion, classroom assignment, class size, curriculum, many of which have budget implications.

After the 1960s, many states went back to their labor laws to limit, assertively, the scope of bargaining. Apparently, Rhode Island now has the broadest labor laws in the country. Virtually nothing is off the negotiating table.

In Rhode Island, Beardsley says, “Management [superintendents, school committees, town managers] wasn’t at the table when the legal mechanisms [collective bargaining laws] were created. And shame on them. They should have insisted on a place at the table. Or shame on labor leaders for not including them. Historically, the passage of those four labor laws in the 1960s drove the municipalities to create the Rhode Island League of Cities and Towns. Officials were stunned by the impact of having to negotiate subjects over which they had always had managerial control. No one has a problem with negotiating the obvious things. But now, management is negotiating about how many men are on a fire truck or where they are to be stationed. Everything is contractual.”

Rhode Island schools can’t merge two academic departments without being taken to court for unfair labor practice.

The General Assembly seems to feel that if management leaders bargained away their rights over the years, tough darts for them and the public. If districts or towns want those rights back, fine. Buy them back. Go back to the negotiating table, in each and every contract, in 39 cities and towns and 36 school districts.

At this rate, we’ll be begging, fighting and cutting services to kids into the next millennium.

Beardsley says, “If the (fiscal) bills don’t pass this year, then we need to rewrite the labor laws so individual budget articles won’t be necessary. We need a balanced system instead of one completely out of balance. The argument needs to be made that the current system is working for one party. It is not working for another.”

Sadly, that “other” party are the superintendents and school committees charged with looking out for the kids. In the short run, then, parents and those who care about education need to keep their eyes on getting those bills passed, just to preserve what’s left of school services.

But in the longer run, Rhode Island needs to cut the scope of bargaining way down, just to bread-and-butter issues, in order to save gobs of time, money, animosity and tsuris.

The General Assembly is letting kids take it in the neck.

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