



To: House Committee on Finance  
From: Erich Haslehurst  
Date: May 15, 2025  
Re: H5279 – RELATING TO EDUCATION -- TEACHERS RETIREMENT

Dear Chairman Abney and Members of the Finance Committee,

I am writing on behalf of the National Education Association Rhode Island and our 12,000 members to express our support for H5279, which proposes a common-sense update to existing statute: allowing a teacher who takes unpaid parental or medical leave during the school year to be credited with a year of service, provided they serve at least 135 school days, as introduced by Chairwoman Susan Donovan, for several reasons.

Too often, teachers—especially those early in their careers—find themselves needing extended leave due to childbirth or serious illness but have not yet accrued enough sick time to cover their absence. In many districts, new teachers are not yet eligible for participation in the sick leave bank, and even where sick banks are available, parental leave is frequently excluded from eligibility.

The practical effect is that many teachers—particularly new mothers or those with major health conditions—must take unpaid leave in order to care for themselves or their families. These are not isolated cases; they reflect a systemic issue in how we support educators through key life events.

Years down the line, this lack of service credit can result in a punitive outcome. Teachers must often return to work late in their careers for a handful of additional days, just to meet service time requirements for retirement eligibility. This creates unnecessary disruption for students and schools, and it unfairly penalizes dedicated educators for circumstances beyond their control.

H5279 offers a fair and reasonable solution. By setting a threshold of 135 days—equivalent to approximately three-quarters of the school year—this legislation acknowledges the professionalism and contribution of teachers who remain committed to their students despite facing personal or medical challenges. It also aligns with how service time is credited in many other professions and retirement systems. Of note, this is what the standard used to be, 135 days.

We believe that this bill sends a powerful message: that Rhode Island respects and supports its educators not just when they are in the classroom, but through all the seasons of life.

For these reasons we urge you to pass this important legislation.

Sincerely,

Erich Haslehurst  
National Education Association Rhode Island