

Burrillville pulls students from controversial charter school

Despite expansion plans, RISE Prep loses backing of second feeder town

By **STELLA LORENCE**
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WOONSOCKET — Burrillville Town Council members voted two weeks ago to stop sending students to the RISE Prep Mayoral Academy but it's unclear whether they will be able to do that and how it will affect the Woonsocket Education Department.

In the past two years, RISE Prep has gotten approval from the Rhode Island Department of Education to expand to a high school, which will accept its first freshman class next school year, and a second K-8 campus, both located in Woonsocket. The school would add about 100 new seats each year until all three campuses are fully enrolled with 940 new seats in fiscal year 2036.

When RIDE approved that expansion, North Smithfield Town Administrator Paul Zwolenski did not provide a letter of support for the proposal. As a

result, RIDE recommended that no new North Smithfield students be enrolled in the new elementary school and only those currently enrolled be allowed to attend the new high school. The town is still allowed to send new students to the flagship campus.

North Smithfield's diminished participation in the mayoral academy is different from Burrillville's decision to pull back, Woonsocket School Committee member Lynn Kapiskas said. However the legal implications are not yet clear, she said, since state law requires that at least two municipalities must enroll students at a mayoral academy.

"RISE classrooms will soon be filled with only students from Woonsocket," she said.

Burrillville's decision comes on the tail of RIDE's approval for RISE Prep to lift the cap on

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School

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Woonsocket students at its flagship campus. The current campus enrollment is capped at 50% for Woonsocket students and 50% for Burrillville and North Smithfield, but the other towns have fallen short of that threshold, leaving empty seats, while Woonsocket accrues a waitlist.

RIDE granted the approval over the strenuous objection of the Woonsocket School Committee, which noted in a fiscal impact statement submitted to the department that lifting the cap could cost the district up to \$15 million by the time all if the new RISE Prep campuses are fully enrolled with Woonsocket students.

Both Woonsocket's objection to the expansion and the lifted enrollment cap and Burrillville's decision to pull out stem from the same concern that sending students to RISE Prep siphons funding away from the municipality's traditional public schools. The state's funding formula for education aid has per-student aid "following" the student if they move out of district.

"When five students leave one of our classrooms to go to RISE, we cannot simply close the existing classroom where 25 students remain," Kapiskas said. "Woonsocket students are our students, whether they are part of the 5400-plus students attending our conventional schools or the 400-plus students attending RISE Mayoral Academy."

Woonsocket Education Department Finance Director Bray Peryea told the committee that Woonsocket currently sends about 360 students to RISE Prep and pays about \$1,200 in tuition to the mayoral academy. The cost rises, however, the following fiscal year when those students are officially removed from WED's enrollment numbers, lowering the state aid to the district by about \$15,000 per student.

Burrillville currently sends 75 students to RISE Prep, at a cost of about \$9,000 per student in state

aid, and is expecting to send \$4 next year, Burrillville Public Schools Superintendent Michael Sollitto told the Town Council.

"There is a disproportionate effect, I believe, a disadvantage to the town of Burrillville with regards to how many of our children are going to the RISE Academy," Council President Donald Fox said. "In looking at this it's become clear that I believe the council and in conjunction with the School Committee needs to take a stand and explore whatever legal action we need to to remove

ourselves from that agreement."

He clarified that current Burrillville students would be allowed to finish their education at RISE Prep, as would any siblings of

current students, including those who would be new students.

Follow Stella Lorence on Twitter @slorence3.

LOTTERY NUMBERS

Sunday's RI Daily
Mid-day: 7-9-6-4
Evening: n/a

Saturday's Powerball
12-13-33-50-52 PB 23

Sunday's Mass. Daily
Mid-day: 4-8-4-4
Evening: n/a

Saturday's Mass Cash
6-12-15-28-35

**CITY OF PAWTUCKET
TUESDAY, APRIL 2, 2024
DEMOCRATIC/REPUBLICAN PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY**

**STATE OF RHODE ISLAND, PROVIDENCE, SC
OFFICE OF THE BOARD OF CANVASSERS & REGISTRATIONS,
PAWTUCKET, RI.**

TUESDAY, APRIL 2, 2024

7:00 O'CLOCK A.M. IN THE FORENOON. SAID MEETINGS TO REMAIN

**CIUDAD DE PAWTUCKET
MARTES 2 DE ABRIL DE 2024
PRIMARIA PRESIDENCIAL
DEMOCRÁTICA/REPUBLICANA**

**ESTADO DE RHODE ISLAND, PROVIDENCE, SC
OFICINA DEL CONSEJO DE SELECCIÓN Y
REGISTRO, PAWTUCKET, RI.**