

For immediate release
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RIGOP celebrates teacher appreciation week by...attacking teachers

Cranston, R.I. – Today, the RI GOP, apparently prompted by Providence Journal reporter Katherine Gregg, filed an ethics complaint against full-time East Providence classroom teacher, part-time state senator, and National Education Association Rhode Island (NEARI) Vice President Valarie Lawson for supporting and voting for continuing contract legislation currently before the RI General Assembly.

NEARI Executive Director Robert A. Walsh Jr., asked to comment due to Lawson's union position, stated the following:

"It is sad that the beleaguered RI GOP would use the occasion of Teacher Appreciation Week to attack a hardworking classroom teacher. Like many Rhode Islanders, Val Lawson is active in her profession, her community, her union, and, in her case, she also serves as a newly-elected state senator.

"Val Lawson is a stickler for the rules. She attended the briefing for state senators conducted by the RI Ethics Commission and followed up with their executive director, Jason Gramitt, with questions on this topic. In fact, this matter was so clear-cut that neither the Ethics Commission staff nor Senate legal staff felt that she needed an opinion in writing.

"As to the specifics of this complaint, Sen. Lawson followed the two relevant rules to the letter. The class exception covers Sen. Lawson debating and voting on this bill, which equally impacts all public sector employees. While not relevant, it should be noted that a statewide NEARI vice president has no role in bargaining for NEARI's 75 local associations. Should the GOP efforts to change the existing rules prevail, one can question if anyone can serve in our part-time general assembly.

"The GOP acknowledges that Sen. Lawson is in compliance with the second relevant policy. When a NEARI employee was slated to testify before the Senate Labor Committee, she completed and submitted the appropriate recusal paperwork, and removed herself from the table as she was advised to do, because the NEARI lobbyist could be considered a business associate. For a similar reason, she requested not to serve on the Senate Education Committee where NEARI lobbyists more regularly appear.

"Obviously, we are extremely disappointed that the RI GOP would use the RI Ethics Commission for a political attack because they disagree with the underlying legislation. We are also shocked that the so-called paper-of-record's reporter turned this into an issue by tweeting out a comment before checking her notes, effectively making herself part of the story and virtually inviting the filing of this complaint.

"We fully expect the RI Ethics Commission will rule in this matter consistent with its current regulations."