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Representing Decolonizing UMaine--a faculty, staff, student and community group

Testimony for LD 1642, an Act to Strengthen the Teaching of Wabanaki Studies in Maine Schools

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and distinguished committee members,

I am Margo Lukens, Professor *emerita* of English, University of Maine.

I am representing Decolonizing UMaine--a faculty, staff, student and community group that works to counteract continuing oppression and marginalization of colonized people, particularly the Wabanaki peoples. I am here to speak in support of LD 1642.

Since 1992 at the University of Maine, I have been involved with creating and maintaining curriculum and programs to include Indigenous literature and cultural history, beginning with helping to establish Native American Studies and the Wabanaki Center at the University of Maine. The passage of LD 291 in the year 2001 was a hopeful moment, but we have seen that legislation passed without fiscal support can be an empty requirement. Two decades later, four organizations undertook a review of implementation of the Wabanaki studies requirement—Abbe Museum, the ACLU of Maine, Maine Indian Tribal State Commission, and the Wabanaki Alliance. The findings were published in the 2022 “Wabanaki Studies Law: 21 years after implementation.” As reported voluntarily by teachers, administrators, parents and students, there is still spotty and inadequate compliance with the requirement, despite earnest attempts and desire to do better. Too many of Maine’s residents have no knowledge of the four tribes in Maine, their continuance in traditional homelands that make up the State of Maine, nor of their lifeways and cultural traditions that have strongly shaped and named the landscape.

LD 1642 re-constitutes the Wabanaki Studies Commission as an effective representative body to provide guidance in this effort. The law asks the Department of Education to support teachers seeking teaching resources and to create opportunities for their professional development, and for inclusion of Wabanaki Studies in a variety of public school subjects. As a teacher of English myself, I know that it is artificial to confine learning about Wabanaki people and culture only to history or social studies courses; much important knowledge can be delivered through curriculum in science (where students might, for example, study river ecology); mathematics, where the geometric and algebraic aspects of traditional basketmaking could be studied; and language arts could include the study of Wabanaki traditional narratives

and contemporary poetry and fiction. Most importantly, the act asks for teacher preparation sufficient to fulfilling the requirement to teach Wabanaki studies. There are many ways that preparation might be achieved and recognized, but it is vital that Maine teachers enter the classroom with skills and information enough that they can confidently and appropriately bring knowledge about the people indigenous to Maine into Maine classrooms.

I urge the committee members to examine and support this proposed legislation, and I thank you for your attention to my testimony.

With all best wishes,

Margo Lukens