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Trenton  
LD 2001

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An Act to Establish the African American Studies Advisory Council and Require Funding for African American Studies

Testimony by Barbara D. Acosta, PhD

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan:

I am testifying in support of LD 2001 as a member of MUUSAN, the Maine Unitarian Universalist State Advocacy Network, which works to educate and organize for a more just society. As a Unitarian Universalist, I value the inherent worth and dignity of all people and have instilled this value into my personal and professional life.

I submitted testimony earlier this week to support LD 1642, An Act to Strengthen the Teaching of Wabanaki Studies in Maine. I urge you to support LD 2001 for similar reasons. As Gloria Ladson-Billings argues, we teach what we value. We cannot teach students about their heritage without also teaching the perspectives and histories of all of our people. This includes understanding how our state engaged in enslaving and oppressing Black people. It also includes the many contributions that African Americans have made and continue to make to this place that we all call home.

The history of Maine is intertwined with the histories of our diverse communities, including African Americans, many of whom were enslaved people who came to our state as part of an illegal slave trade that involved Maine-based shipping companies, merchants, investors and seamen. Today, our state enjoys the contributions of a growing and diverse population of African Americans, including those who have lived in Maine for generations as well as recent arrivals from Africa.

Before I retired in 2018, I taught graduate-level pre-service and in-service teachers for many years to prepare them to serve culturally, racially and linguistically diverse students. A majority of our teachers continue to identify as white, and few come into teaching with the background, knowledge and skills to teach students who are different from them, nor to teach about the histories of Black people.

Maine needs a well-implemented African American Studies program in accordance with the needs of our students; and teachers need more guidance on how to incorporate African American Studies into their teaching, as well as the resources to teach it.

LD 2001 would establish a permanent advisory commission as well as a task force that would develop a strategic plan to incorporate African American studies into the teacher certification process. It would also call for a full-time coordinator for African American Studies.

Thank you for your attention and for considering the many reasons to pass LD 2001.