

January 11, 2024

Dear Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, my name is Mareisa Weil, and I am a resident of Freedom, Maine. I am writing today in support of LD 2001, An Act to Establish the African American Studies Advisory Council and Require Funding for African American Studies.

I grew up in Vermont and have lived in Maine for the past 10 years. Two of the whitest states in the nation. My partner and I are raising our two children here in Maine. And from my personal experience and viewpoint, racism is an enduring problem and white supremacist views still have a strong foothold. We cannot sit back and expect these values and beliefs to go away on their own. We must actively teach our young people the truth about our history and how it impacts our present, and we need to equip our educators with the tools and resources to teach that truth and defend it against white supremacist backlash.

Monday is Martin Luther King, Jr Day. It wasn't until college and my adult life that I read Letter From Birmingham Jail, or learned how Dr. King spoke of "the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism and militarism." I never learned about the Tulsa or Rosewood Massacres until I was an adult, and then only through social media, to be honest. Earlier this week I was talking to my kids about Dr. King and how he fought not just against racism but also against poverty, materialism, and war, but that they might not hear much about those other things in school. I also told them that if they talk about Rosa Parks, they should know she wasn't a little old lady, she was my age! And part of a vast network of brave and dedicated activists fighting together to change the system and unjust laws. This is information that they should also be getting as part of their public school education, and not just on holidays and during Black History Month, but embedded in the curriculum all year round. I'll add that I believe we can trust younger children with a lot more complexity than we give them credit for, and our reluctance to talk about history, settler colonialism, and racism is more about our own discomfort and awkwardness than it is about their ability to understand.

By passing LD 2001 and investing in African American Studies, we can make a critical and desperately needed investment in countering racism and white supremacy. The more we can teach kids about the truth, the better prepared they will be to counter prejudice and bigotry when they encounter it. I urge you to vote unanimously ought to pass on LD 2001.

Thank you.