

Cynthia Cushing
Readfield
LD 1474

Testimony for LD 1474: An Act to Strengthen the Teaching of Wabanaki Studies in Maine Schools

To Senator Joseph Rafferty, Representative Kelly Murphy, and all honorable standing members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

My name is Cynthia Cushing and I am writing to express my strong support for LD 1474: An Act to Strengthen the Teaching of Wabanaki Studies in Maine Schools.

The Wabanaki are the Indigenous people of Maine, whose ancestral homelands encompass the territory we now call the Canadian Maritimes, Maine, northern New Hampshire, Vermont, and parts of Quebec. The term "Wabanaki" is an umbrella that encompasses the Mi'Kmaq, Maliseet, Passamaquoddy, Penobscot, and Abenaki nations – peoples who shared deep governmental, economic, familial, and social connections long before European arrival.

It is a painful truth that the history of European interaction with the Wabanaki includes acts of profound injustice. One such devastating example is the documented strategy of English military leaders, such as Lord Jeffrey Amherst, who advocated for and implemented the distribution of blankets infected with smallpox to Indigenous leaders under the guise of gifts. This deliberate act of biological warfare had catastrophic consequences for Wabanaki communities.

Growing up in Maine in the 1970s, I was never taught these crucial aspects of our shared history. Nor did I learn about the federally funded movement that forcibly removed Wabanaki children from their families and communities and placed them in non-Native homes, often with the misguided belief that this would offer them a better life. This practice inflicted deep wounds, severing children from their homelands, culture, and Wabanaki identity, with many never returning to their families.

While Maine law today, through LD 291 passed in 2001, mandates the teaching of Wabanaki Studies in all our schools, its implementation has been inconsistent. LD 1474 seeks to rectify this by expanding the ongoing process to create and provide quality Wabanaki studies resources for all schools and by ensuring the inclusion of this mandated curriculum within the parameters for essential instruction and graduation requirements.

This bill dedicates essential funding to establish a Wabanaki Studies Specialist position within the Maine Department of Education – a role that is filled by a Wabanaki citizen. This dedicated expertise will guarantee the meaningful integration of mandated Wabanaki Studies into the foundational curriculum and graduation requirements. Moreover, LD 1474 mandates that the State Board of Education implement rules requiring Wabanaki studies coursework for teacher certification, ensuring educators are equipped to teach this vital subject.

It is long past time that we teach the history of Maine truthfully and comprehensively, acknowledging both its triumphs and its tragedies. Ensuring that all Maine students learn about the rich history, culture, and contemporary experiences of the Wabanaki people is essential for fostering understanding, respect, and reconciliation.

For these reasons, I fully and enthusiastically support LD 1474. I extend my sincere gratitude to the bill's sponsors: Representative Osher of Orono; and cosponsors Senator Talbot Ross of Cumberland and Representatives Beck of South Portland, Dana of the Passamaquoddy Tribe, Speaker Fecteau of Biddeford, Mitchell of Cumberland, Sato of Gorham, as well as Senators President Daughtry of Cumberland, Hickman of Kennebec, and Moore of Washington.

Genuinely,

Cynthia Cushing, Readfield, Maine

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