

Testimony of Sarah Woodbury, Vice President of Policy and Advocacy, Defend Our Health
In Support of LD 1474 "An Act to Strengthen the Teaching of Wabanaki Studies in Maine
Schools"
April 22nd, 2025

Good morning, Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. My name is Sarah Woodbury, and I am the vice president of policy and advocacy at Defend Our Health. Defend Our Health fights for a world where everyone has access to clean air, clean drinking water, healthy homes and safe, climate-friendly products. Please accept this testimony in support of LD 1474, "An Act to Strengthen the Teaching of Wabanaki Studies in Maine Schools" which would provide funding to for a Wabanaki Studies specialist and funding for Wabanaki studies resources.

We are here as an environmental health organization to support LD 1474 because we understand that far too often, Maine school curriculum glosses over - or ignores outright - the history of our Indigenous communities. This omission robs all Maine students of a clear understanding of our richly complex heritage as a state. But underrepresentation in the classroom also compounds existing challenges to the Wabanaki communities themselves, including access to public health resources and contamination of culturally significant lands.

We desperately need a Wabanaki Studies curriculum. When Maine students grow up with a knowledge of where they live and who their neighbors are, our state will be better positioned to respect Wabanaki stewardship of Tribal resources, and hopefully we can stop degrading Tribal lands and waters. While the impacts of pollution are often disproportionately felt by Wabanaki communities, pollution knows no boundaries. A cleaner environment is good for all of us, and so is a well-designed, stakeholder-informed, place-based cultural education. Education, democracy, environment and health are all so clearly linked.

Twenty-four years ago, the Maine Legislature passed the Wabanaki Studies Law, which mandated that all public schools develop curriculum about Maine's Indigenous communities. This is the law of the land, yet most schools across the state have failed to deliver these materials to their students. LD 1474 builds on existing progress made towards the implementation of law by continuing funding for contracted Wabanaki advisors working with the Wabanaki Studies Specialist to create and implement professional development short-term courses for teachers. These courses must be made available to teachers throughout the state.

Imagine trying to teach Maine history with a blind eye towards our historic relations with Britain, France, Canada, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire, or by ignoring the contributions of the English and Acadian settlers in the development of the state. It would, of course, be impossible. Yet that is essentially what we do when we ignore the way our history and culture, our environment and our health are foundationally intertwined with those of our neighbors from the Maliseet Nation, the Passamaquoddy Nation, the Mi'kmaq Nation and the Penobscot Nation. We urge you to vote unanimously "Ought to Pass" on LD 1474.