



MAINE INDIAN TRIBAL-STATE COMMISSION

Testimony of the Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission

In Support of

L.D. 1474 – "An Act to Strengthen the Teaching of Wabanaki Studies in Maine Schools"

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

April 22, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and honorable Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs members. My name is Jill Tompkins. I am the Executive Director of the Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission ("MITSC") and a Penobscot Nation tribal citizen. Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of MITSC in support of LD 1474, "An Act to Strengthen the Teaching of Wabanaki Studies in Maine Schools." MITSC was statutorily created in 1980 as part of the Act to Implement the Maine Indian Claims Settlement Act ("Implementing Act"), 30 MRSA § 6201 et seq. MITSC is comprised of an equal number of members representing the State of Maine and the Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians, the Passamaquoddy Tribe, and the Penobscot Nation. Its primary responsibility is to continually review the effectiveness of the Act to Implement the Maine Indian Claims Settlement and the social, economic, and legal relationships between the represented tribes and the State.

MITSC is mandated to study the relationships between the sovereign governments within the State of Maine and make recommendations on improving those interactions. Throughout its 45 years of existence, MITSC has dedicated itself to providing education on tribal governments, the Settlement Act, and a wide range of issues of mutual concern to tribal and non-tribal citizens. MITSC signed up to staff an informational table at the Common Ground Fair this past summer. As I prepared to attend the Fair, "I thought no one is going to want to talk to us, and this is going to be a long and boring two days." I was mistaken. Dozens of people stopped by our table with questions

about the Wabanaki people and the current relations between the State and tribal governments. So many young Mainers stated that they had not learned anything in school about the tribal communities in Maine. This was particularly distressing because, in 2001, the State of Maine passed the Wabanaki Studies Law, which is intended to fill this educational gap. By enacting this mandatory law, Maine consciously acknowledged that knowledge of tribal governments, tribal lands, and cultural systems is a critical component of a Maine child's education. However, it was revealed in a 2021 study that more than two decades after its enactment, only one Maine school was in compliance with the Act. It also concluded that current teacher training and professional development are insufficient to equip educators to teach Wabanaki Studies.

LD 1474, "An Act to Strengthen the Teaching of Wabanaki Studies in Maine Schools," should be called "An Act to Finally Get Wabanaki Studies Taught in Maine Schools." Maine identified an educational need yet has neglected to meet its children's needs. This bill will go part-way to fill this vacuum. In 2022, Maine had 176,463 students enrolled in 569 schools in 192 school districts. Funding just one Wabanaki studies specialist to serve thousands of students is an exceedingly small request.

It's axiomatic that Wabanaki studies should be included in the Department of Education's content standards and learning performance indicators. The question shouldn't be whether Wabanaki Studies should be included but why this mandatory area of study has been omitted all this time. We must acknowledge the heroic job that Maine teachers are already doing. It is unfair not to give them the resources they need to include Wabanaki studies in their classrooms. This bill would provide short-term courses to help prepare them and advisors to guide their learning.

This bill would also require the completion of a Wabanaki studies component as part of teacher certification. As stated previously, Maine decided that Wabanaki studies is integral to a complete education and mandated its teaching. It is hard to imagine certifying a person to teach math without requiring them to have been educated in math and tested on their knowledge. Wabanaki studies should be on equal footing with other mandatory subject areas when it comes to teacher certification. It's been said, "If you test it, they will teach it." Wabanaki studies is not being taught, so including it in the certification process will support its future teaching.

We are presently standing on the ancestral territory of the Kennebec Tribe (Kwenebek(I), meaning "deep river." Wabanaki presence and history are inescapable if one spends any significant time in Maine. It is a shared history. However, there are very different perspectives. A columnist for the Kansas City Star for over 30 years, journalist Bill Vaughan once observed, "It might be a good idea if the various countries of the world would occasionally swap history books, just to see what other people are doing with the same set of facts." Finally including Wabanaki Studies in Maine classrooms will allow Wabanaki children to share their historical perspective and present-day experience as the indigenous people of this state.

Woli won (thank you) for the opportunity afforded to MITSC to provide this testimony. The Commission urges you to vote Ought to Pass on LD 1474. I am happy to answer any questions the Committee may have of me.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jill E. Tompkins". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Jill" being more prominent.

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