

Dear Chair Rafferty, Chair Murray, and distinguished members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today.

As a proud resident of Winthrop, I know firsthand the value of community. My family, rooted in Polish American and Vietnamese heritage, experienced both the warmth of this community and the sting of prejudice. During my early school years, I faced painful moments that lingered long after they occurred—being told my skin tone didn't belong, or that I was worth less than a dollar. These experiences shaped my childhood and the passion I carry forward into adulthood. My parents ultimately had to take me out of the school system, a decision made to protect me from an environment that failed to embrace diversity.

Maine's educational requirements are an important step in fostering an inclusive environment. Since 2001, we have mandated Native American Studies, and in 2021, we expanded this to include African American Studies and Holocaust Education. Now, it is time to extend this framework to encompass the rich histories of Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders. Currently, the contributions and experiences of AANHPI communities are neglected, leaving a significant void in our education system.

Educating our students on AANHPI history serves multiple critical purposes. First, it acts as a preventative measure against the alarming rise in anti-Asian American bullying and hate crimes since the onset of the pandemic. Knowledge is a powerful tool, and by teaching our youth about the challenges and triumphs faced by the AANHPI community, we nurture understanding and compassion that can counteract prejudice.

Second, integrating AANHPI history fosters a sense of belonging among AANHPI students within our classrooms. When students see themselves represented in the curriculum, it not only enhances their educational experience but also encourages pride in their heritage. Creating an inclusive atmosphere is vital for the mental health and well-being of all students, allowing them to thrive both academically and socially.

Moreover, American history is incomplete without acknowledging the significant roles played by AANHPIs throughout our nation's past. From fighting in the Civil War to participating in civil rights movements and helping to build our national parks, the contributions of AANHPIs are intertwined with the fabric of American identity. Recognizing these contributions is essential for fostering a sense of patriotism that is both comprehensive and accurate.

Incorporating Asian American history and culture into our classrooms is not just about representation; it is about empowering future generations to take pride in their diverse identities. As a leader in a human rights organization active in schools across the state, I firmly believe that a deeper understanding of Asian American history will further build community that stands against bullying, hate, and violence.

For these reasons, I urge you to favorably vote on LD 957. This bill is a crucial step forward in creating an educational landscape that truly reflects our diverse society. Let us work together to ensure that our classrooms are spaces of learning, understanding, and respect for all communities.

Thank you for your time and consideration.