

Oriana Farnham
Westbrook
LD 957

To the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee:

My name is Oriana Farnham. I'm a resident of Westbrook, Maine. I'm here in my personal capacity to testify in support of LD 957, An Act to Integrate Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander History into the Statewide System of Learning Results.

This bill is an important preventative measure against future anti-Asian hate in Maine. The root cause of anti-Asian hate in the U.S. is that Asian Americans are perceived to be perpetual "foreigners" in the U.S., as opposed to neighbors and fellow Americans. This is an urgent issue as hate crimes and bias incidents against Asian Americans has been on the rise since 2020, with 8 out of 10 Asian Americans reporting that they've experienced bullying either online or in-person because of their racial identity.

Education is the most recommended solution to combat anti-Asian racism. Integrating Asian history into existing American history curriculum offers two opportunities for students in Maine. All students will learn about American history, the positive and the negative, and hopefully will learn from the U.S.'s past errors in excluding, colonizing, and interning Asian people within and without the U.S. In addition, all students will have the opportunity to learn from Asian Americans' many contributions to American society, building a more inclusive view of Asians' place in our communities.

This bill is important to me, personally. I am part of the Vietnamese diaspora in the U.S. My mother immigrated to the Midwest with her family when she was six years old, after the fall of Saigon in the Vietnam War. I was raised by a big, vibrant family—my grandparents, mother, aunts and uncles, raised me to be proud of my Vietnamese culture. But outside of my family and our Vietnamese community in Ohio, the only messages I learned about Vietnam when I was growing up were in media about the Vietnam War. Most American media about the Vietnam War centers around the experiences of American soldiers drafted into the war, and Vietnamese people are either indistinct enemies or victims. My public school education in the U.S. gave me little more than that.

I went to Bowdoin College, and classes in the Asian Studies department were transformative for me. I had grown up observing the casual ways my family members were perceived by Americans to be outsiders or foreigners. In these classes, I learned that this comes from a long history of exclusion of Asians in the U.S. Learning about exclusionary immigration policies for Chinese immigrants, Japanese internment during WWII, and the murder of Vincent Chin showed me the many faces of anti-Asian sentiment in American history and how to identify that sentiment in the present. I also had the joy of reading Asian American literature, which told stories in which I saw myself and learned new things, and finally got to see Asians as protagonists in their own stories rather than victims, enemies, or outsiders.

I credit this education for helping me become the person I am today—an advocate for economic and racial justice in Maine, a civically engaged member of Westbrook local government, and a proud member of the Asian diaspora in the U.S. It's corny, but we say it for a reason—knowledge is power. Please vote in favor of LD 957 to give all students in Maine access to a well-rounded American history education. If passed, I think Maine will reap the benefits for years to come.