

Testimony of Amelia Neilson, resident of Arrowsic.

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

April 22, 2025

Representative Osher, Senator Talbot Ross, and Honorable Members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Amelia Neilson; I am a resident of Arrowsic, and I support LD 1474.

I am 30 years old, which means most of my school age years were after 2001, when LD 291 passed and required Maine schools teach Wabanaki studies. However, I know my education around Wabanaki history, culture, and current affairs was severely lacking. As a child, I understood the Wabanaki peoples as distant, almost mythical history. It's a damaging mindset that pervades Euro-American thinking. I've only recently begun to grapple with how Maine's present has been shaped by settler colonists' interactions with the Wabanaki, and the injustices committed on the Wabanaki peoples since the 1600s.

As someone in the field of environmental protection and land conservation, I am just beginning to realize the importance of understanding how this relationship has affected Maine's conservation landscape – both literal and figurative. Conservation professionals here in Maine are taking steps to address conservation's complicated legacy and to work with the Penobscot and Passamaquoddy, but I haven't found as much discussion in other circles. I also spent five years living and working in Minnesota, and I noticed there that discussions of Dakota, Lakota, and Anishinaabe history and current affairs are noticeably more prevalent in schools, workplaces, and daily life. With LD 1474, Maine has the opportunity to take a meaningful step in catching up to states like Minnesota and bring important conversations into folks' daily lives.

I believe it's necessary to pass LD 1474 to ensure that Indigenous studies instruction is implemented with the weight and specificity the subject deserves. This winter, I substitute taught in Brunswick and Portland middle and high schools. While there is more emphasis on Wabanaki studies than when I was a child, there's still a long way to go. Teachers need more support in implementing engaging, meaningful, and truthful curricula.

LD 1474's creation of a permanent Wabanaki Studies Specialist position and emphasis on Wabanaki advisors will help make sure children statewide get a solid foundation in Wabanaki studies. The subject is more than just history or a cursory mention of culture (birchbark canoes, for example, were mentioned in my classes, but there was no true understanding of their significance – for that I'd recommend the Wabanaki Windows podcast interview with James Francis and Butch Phillips!!). The subject encompasses civics (a desperately undertaught subject), current affairs, and environmental studies, for example, and most importantly can work to undo that harmful colonial mindset that relegates Wabanaki people to Long Ago.

Healing means seeing one another, hearing one another, and sitting with the discomfort of injustices. It means creating the space for Wabanaki voices to come to the fore. Children throughout Maine deserve to have the tools to grapple with complicated history and participate in that healing process.

Please vote Ought to Pass on LD 1474; thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,  
Amelia Neilson

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Arrowsic  
LD 1474

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