

savannah mirisola-sullivan
Portland
LD 785

Good Morning Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and Honorable Members of the Judiciary Committee. Thank you for your time. My name is Savannah Mirisola-Sullivan. I'm a resident of Portland, Maine, and a former Portland Public Schools teacher. I am here to share my support for LD 785, An Act to Advance Self-determination for Wabanaki Nations.

I have worked in public schools for nearly two decades. I believe deeply in every child's capacity to learn, grow, and thrive when their needs are met. Despite our country's overwhelming wealth of resources, schools are not funded equitably, and I've witnessed firsthand the effects of poverty on learning. Children living in poverty are more likely to experience trauma and stress, struggle with attendance, navigate health conditions, and less likely to have access to healthy food or quality sleep. Trauma and stress affect a brain's ability to process and retain new information, concentrate, regulate emotions, and access executive functioning, all making it more difficult to learn, engage, and feel safe in a school environment.

There is so much invisible labor in teaching. I've stuffed backpacks with snacks and fruit so that my students have food when they go home. I've helped families look for housing as they transition out of the shelter so that they can remain in our community. I've co-regulated with students navigating big feelings when their family members have lost jobs or been detained. So much of the invisible labor of trying to care for families within oppressive systems caused me to burn out, ultimately forcing me to step away from teaching. Teachers alone cannot and should not be responsible for meeting the basic needs of the families they serve. As communities, as a state, and as a country, we must make policy choices that ensure that children have what they need to grow and thrive, including housing, food, healthcare, and fully funded schools.

While Maine's overall childhood poverty rate is 15%, childhood poverty in Wabanaki communities ranges from 40-77%. Those statistics are real young people, and I can imagine what that looks like in the classroom. These staggering numbers are a direct result of the restrictions in the 1980 Maine Indian Claims Settlement Act, which blocked the Wabanaki Nations from accessing all of the federal self-determination policies that helped 570 other tribes create thousands of jobs and generate hundreds of millions of dollars in economic activity. While tribal income outside of Maine grew 61% since 1989, Wabanaki income grew only 9%. Children are bearing the brunt of these economic impacts. It's time to remove these barriers so that all students can thrive.

All children deserve to learn to their fullest potential, which starts with meeting their basic needs. LD 785 offers us an opportunity to pass a policy that moves children out of poverty by correcting the Maine Indian Claims Settlement Act to give Wabanaki Nations full access to the same rights of the other 570 federally recognized tribes. Thank you for the opportunity to share my experience with the Committee. I urge you to vote "Ought to pass" on LD 785 in support of teachers and Wabanaki students. Thank you.