



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

2 STATE HOUSE STATION
AUGUSTA, MAINE 04333-0002

(207) 287-1400

TTY: MAINE RELAY 711

Laurie Osher, PhD

13 Mayo Street

Orono, ME 04473

Phone: (207) 944-6743

Laurie.Osher@legislature.maine.gov

January 9, 2024

Testimony of Representative Laurie Osher presenting

LD 1642, An Act to Strengthen the Teaching of Wabanaki Studies in Maine Schools

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Good afternoon, Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and esteemed members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. I am Laurie Osher, and I represent House District 25 in Orono, which is located in the homeland of the Penobscot Nation. Thank you for the opportunity to present **LD 1642, An Act to Strengthen the Teaching of Wabanaki Studies in Maine Schools**.

We teach our students social studies and history because we recognize that, as citizens of this state and country, we must learn the context of our past and present in order to create a more just society and to make informed decisions about the future.

When I moved to Maine in 1999 for a research and teaching faculty job at the University of Maine, my teaching load included a course entitled "Soil and Water Quality". The development of the course curriculum was up to me. I was encouraged to share the science and include what I'd learned during my years of working as a Soil Scientist and Watershed Manager for the US Forest Service. Immediately, I recalled that in each of the three National Forests where I worked, the Forest Plans were developed without an understanding or appreciation for the indigenous people, their cultural traditions or knowledge of the natural resources. In each of those places, Forest Plans were being challenged because of the omissions related to that cultural blindness. In my job as a professor, it was essential that the students learning from me wouldn't make those same mistakes.

I developed the curriculum to include learning about the soil and water quality management practiced by the Penobscots and partnered with then-Director of the Penobscot Nation's Department of Natural Resources to create the lectures and hands-on learning opportunities,

including river sampling with the Penobscot DNR team. I also organized a group of University of Maine faculty members and staff who were working to integrate Wabanaki history and knowledge into our courses. We were mentored by tribal representatives and staff from the UMaine Wabanaki Center. We called our group a “Learning Circle”, and together we embarked on integrating Wabanaki Studies into courses in English, Math, History, Education.... and Soil and Water Quality.

We all believed then and continue to believe now, over 20 years later, that here in Maine, it is essential that we all learn about and from the Wabanaki people. They have lived here for thousands of years, they have managed the land, and they have created art and culture that is both distinct to their nations and is also interwoven with the history and culture of those who have joined them here in this place.

In 2001, the Honorable Donna Loring sponsored and the Legislature passed a visionary law requiring public schools to teach our students about the Wabanaki as part of Maine Studies. Our Learning Circle group was ecstatic. The law required K-12 instruction to include learning about Wabanaki tribal governments and their relationships with the state and other governments, as well as the history, culture, territories and economic systems of the Wabanaki. The law created the Wabanaki Studies Commission, and authorized that commission to meet through 2003.

Unfortunately, more than 20 years later, the teaching about our indigenous neighbors has not been effectively or consistently implemented in Maine’s schools. In the intervening years, Maine students have continued to graduate with little or no education about the Wabanaki Nations -- to the detriment of all our students. Our children graduate having learned a Maine Studies curriculum that leaves out the knowledge of the people indigenous to this place, and Wabanaki young people continue to experience the feeling of being erased from the narrative describing their own home and history.

To fully implement the 2001 law, educators and administrators needed better support and resources. I proposed LD 1642 with the goal of providing better support and resources. The original text of the bill was ambitious. It was created by working with a group that included some of the members of that Learning Circle I convened so many years ago. As with many comprehensive and ambitious ideas, it was grand and contained ideas that had costs that were more than some of the stakeholders were able to support. Since then, I have worked closely with those stakeholders to develop the amendment I am providing for your consideration today.

As amended, LD 1642 would reinstate the Wabanaki Studies Commission. Re-establishing the commission is a critical step to provide much-needed guidance about curriculum, oversight, training and other resources in order to ensure effective implementation of the 2001 law.

*Testimony of Rep. Laurie Osher, PhD, presenting LD 1642
January 9, 2024*

The proposed amendment requires the Department of Education to review Wabanaki studies curricula at a representative sample of Maine schools every five years. It directs the department to establish a teacher training program in Wabanaki studies so that educators have the tools they need. Finally, it also updates the language of the existing law to better reflect the Wabanaki Nations' status as independent, self-governing peoples who have lived for thousands of years on the land we now call Maine.

I am glad that the stakeholders who helped to develop the proposal before you are also here today to speak to LD 1642 and how we can finally live up to the promise of the original Wabanaki studies law. If you have any questions for me, I would be happy to answer them. Thank you for your consideration.