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**THE MAINE SENATE**  
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**Testimony of Senator Richard Bennett**  
**before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs**  
LD 1642, "An Act to Strengthen the Teaching of Wabanaki Studies in Maine Schools"  
January 9, 2024

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs: I am Senator Rick Bennett of Oxford, and I have the honor of serving 14 communities in Western Maine in the State Senate. I am pleased to cosponsor LD 1642, "An Act to Strengthen the Teaching of Wabanaki Studies in Maine Schools."

In 2001, the Maine State Legislature enacted a law that requires Maine students be taught the history, economic and political systems, and culture of the Wabanaki people. In late 2022—more than 20 years after the law took effect—an incredibly disappointing report was put together by the Wabanaki Alliance, the Abbe Museum, the ACLU, and the Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission, which showed that the vast majority of Maine schools are simply failing to cover all required areas of Wabanaki studies.

When the Legislature enacted this requirement in 2001, it was done for very good reasons. Since then, many other states have followed in Maine's footsteps. In recent years, new requirements to teach Native American history and culture have been instituted in Connecticut, Illinois, Minnesota, North Dakota, Oregon, and others. Despite the good reasoning, we did not give our communities the tools needed to implement these curricula.

The reimplementing of a permanent Wabanaki Studies Commission will help provide schools and teachers with the resources needed for success. We cannot continue to add more educational requirements without funding them. This bill would provide funding so that teachers can continue to develop their own education on the topic.

The report revealed that the schools that had the most success in teaching Wabanaki Studies were those that worked directly with Wabanaki experts, including Bangor, Calais, Houlton, Lewiston, Old Town, Portland, and Presque Isle. LD 1642 would enable the effective instruction of Wabanaki Studies to be realized in districts across the state. In the 1980s, my father wrote a textbook on Maine history. Recognizing how important the Wabanaki people are to the State of Maine's story, he enlisted a number of tribal members to write four chapters about our history from the Indian point of view. Learning this perspective is something missing from the education of most Maine students.

Wabanaki history is Maine history. If our students are not learning about the viewpoints of our indigenous neighbors, their perspectives will be severely warped. This will have dangerous ramifications in the years to come. If we don't know our past, how can we build a brighter future?

I want to thank Representative Osher for bringing forward this important legislation and urge the committee to vote "ought to pass."

Thank you. I would be happy to answer any questions.