



MAINE INDIAN TRIBAL-STATE COMMISSION

*Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission Testimony Supporting
LD 1642 “An Act to Strengthen the Teaching of Wabanaki Studies in Maine Schools”
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs*

January 9, 2024

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Jill Tompkins, and I am the Executive Director of the Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission (“MITSC”). Thank you for this opportunity to provide this testimony on behalf of MITSC in support of LD 1642, “An Act to Strengthen the Teaching of Wabanaki Studies in Maine Schools.” MITSC was statutorily created in 1980 as part of the Act to Implement the Maine Indian Claims Settlement Act (“Implementing Act”), 30 MRSA § 6201 et seq. MITSC is comprised of an equal number of members representing the State of Maine and the Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians, the Passamaquoddy Tribe, and the Penobscot Nation. Its responsibilities are to continually review the effectiveness of the Implementing Act and the social, economic, and legal relationships between the represented tribes and the State.

I. IN THE BEGINNING

On June 15, 2001, LD 291, “An Act to Require the Teaching of Maine Native American History and Culture in Maine’s Schools,” introduced by then Penobscot Nation Representative to the Maine Legislature Donna Loring, was enacted. Representative Loring was prompted to initiate the bill in response to the results of an informal survey conducted in a Portland donut shop that revealed that seven out of ten patrons believed that “there are no tribes in the State.”

Representative Loring decided that education had to be the key to understanding between Maine’s Native people and the rest of the population. The Wabanaki Studies Law, now codified at 20-A M.R.S. §4706(2), was intended to fill this educational gap. The law mandated that Maine Native American studies be a required component of Maine studies and required public schools to teach students in grades kindergarten to twelfth grade about the Wabanaki people and their history. The law specifically requires that instruction on the following topics be provided: (1) tribal governments and political systems and their relationship with local, state, national, and international governments, (2) Wabanaki cultural systems and the experience of tribal people in Maine throughout history, (3) Wabanaki territories, and (4) Wabanaki economic systems. *See* 20-MRSA §4706(2).

The Wabanaki Studies Law also established the Maine Native American History and Culture Commission to help prepare for including Maine Native American Studies in the required course in Maine studies. H.P. 255 – L.D. 291, Ch. 403, § 2. This Commission became known informally

Studies Law is not meaningfully enforced and that current teacher training and professional development are insufficient to equip educators to teach Wabanaki Studies.

LD 1642 contains several provisions that align with the study evaluators' recommendations for improved implementation, including:

- Reinstating the Wabanaki Studies Commission indefinitely and charging it with the responsibility to assist the Department of Education in identifying appropriate Wabanaki Studies materials and resources
- Including Wabanaki Studies in the review of content standards and Maine Learning results performance indicators
- Holding school districts accountable by the Department of Education reviewing their Wabanaki Studies curricula no less than every five years
- Mandating that the Department of Education establish a teacher institute in Wabanaki studies

The re-establishment of the Wabanaki Studies Commission, the inclusion of Wabanaki Studies in the review of content standards and performance indicators of learning results, and the requirement that the Department of Education engage in a review of school curricula no less than every five years will be particularly effective measures for monitoring compliance.

III. LD 1642- ADVANCING TOWARD FULL IMPLEMENTATION

With the enactment of the Wabanaki Studies Law in 2001, the State of Maine demonstrated that it realized the importance of including Wabanaki Studies into school curricula and teachers' education. The groundwork for including Wabanaki Studies in the Maine Studies curriculum has been laid. The failure to fully implement the law is mainly attributable to a lack of follow-up and oversight. LD 1642 will go a long way in improving accountability for compliance with the Wabanaki Studies Law. With the resurrection of the Wabanaki Studies Commission, culturally and educationally appropriate curricula, materials, and resources will be made available to educators. With the establishment of a Wabanaki training institute, educators will be better equipped to teach. Teachers and school administrators are currently overwhelmed. To be successful, the Department of Education needs additional staffing support to help meet its statutory obligation to teach Wabanaki Studies.

MITSC was intimately involved with the initial successful efforts to implement the Wabanaki Studies Law and drafting the early reports. LD 1642 will again require MITSC to provide staffing assistance to the Wabanaki Studies Commission. We are eager to pick up the mission, build on what was already accomplished in 2004, and help fulfill the complete vision for the Wabanaki Studies Law. As Representative Donna Loring said, the statute "was created because it was time for the majority culture to learn about Native people . . . It was [the] goal to make

[Wabanaki people] visible where we are invisible. Such knowledge is critical to understanding and overcoming longstanding inequities.”

Woli won (thank you) for the opportunity afforded to MITSC to provide this testimony.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jill E. Tompkins".

Jill E. Tompkins (*Penobscot*)
Executive Director
Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission
(207) 726-8555
jill@mitsc.org