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Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

**RE: Support of LD 1642, An Act to Strengthen the Teaching of Wabanaki Studies
in Maine Schools**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Amara Ifeji, and I am the Director of Policy with the Maine Environmental Education Association. I am here today on behalf of MEEA to testify in support of LD 1642.

MEEA is a nonprofit statewide professional network representing over 2000 Maine educators, both classroom teachers and community-based educators at libraries, museums, and science and nature centers. For 40 years, we have worked to enhance and amplify the efforts of individuals and organizations to build environmental awareness, appreciation, understanding, and action in Maine. We stand in solidarity with Wabanaki peoples who have stewarded these lands for over 10,000 years and whose traditional ecological knowledges (TEK) continue to deepen, expand, and challenge the field of environmental education to approach education in a more holistic, nature-based, interconnected, and interdisciplinary way. Hence, we are grateful for the Wabanaki Studies mandate signed into law by enacting LD 291 in 2001, which requires public schools to teach Wabanaki Studies.

Last year, MEEA completed our Census for Community-Based Environmental Learning. Nearly 1,000 informal and formal educators told us that their number one requested topical area of support is Wabanaki Studies. These findings support those indicated in a 2022 report by the Abbe Museum, Maine ACLU, Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission, and Wabanaki Alliance which surveyed the state of Wabanaki Studies in Maine. They found school districts have minimally incorporated Wabanaki Studies in their curriculum and a similar insufficiency in educator training and professional development. These educational gaps have left the vision of LD 291 largely unaccomplished.

LD 1642 represents a critical opportunity to meet the needs of Maine's educators and youth while centering the perspectives of the Wabanaki people. The bill would allow the state to fully realize the minimally implemented Wabanaki Studies law, primarily by reinstating the Wabanaki Studies Commission to oversee implementation, recommend curriculum and resources, and shape much-requested teacher training. The teacher education program established by this bill will facilitate opportunities for Maine students to connect with the place where they live and learn, and enable Indigenous students to see their cultures, communities, and histories reflected in their education.

MEEA urges the committee to support LD 1642. Thank you for the opportunity to comment, and I am available to answer questions at this time.