

Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Murphy, and members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Jill Tabbutt-Henry. I live in Portland. I am here today representing myself and my family, and I very strongly support LD 1202. Here's why.

My family goes back many generations in Maine. I grew up in Manchester. I got a bachelors degree in Community Health Education from [UMF] the University of Maine at Farmington. I taught family life education in junior high and high schools in the Augusta area for 4 years. Then I got a Master's in Public Health at New York University. One graduate semester in Kenya led to my pursuing international work, training doctors and nurses in developing countries in reproductive health counseling. I worked for 20 years in over 20 countries, many in Subsaharan Africa. Along the way, I married a Jamaican man. We had two children, and then divorced. We were living in Washington DC at the time, and I figured that, as a single mom, I needed to come home to Maine to be near my family. We settled in Portland, and my kids graduated from Portland schools in 2013 and 2015.

This context is important for me to explain some very hard lessons that I learned. I wasn't aware of racism around me in Maine as I was growing up. [Sure, my father performed in Blackface for the local grange minstrel shows, and Cony High School, just across the river there, had Blackface performers in their annual Chizzle Wizzle talent shows from 1900 to 1963. But for my family, for our community, the minstrel shows weren't "racist". They were just fun—and good music!]

My first real contact with Black people was in Africa, where I worked with health professionals in their own communities. From those connections, I thought I understood "Black people" pretty well. And then, raising my kids in Portland seemed okay for them. It wasn't until they finished high school and went out into "the world" that they started experiencing what Black people in the US, including Maine, have known all their lives—that racism is alive and well, baked into all of our institutions, our housing, our businesses. And that's when I realized that, in spite of being a history nerd in high school, I knew NOTHING about Black Americans—their lives, their history. More painfully, I realized that I had not adequately prepared my kids—or myself!--for biracial life in the U.S.

Then, in 2021 the Maine legislature passed a law requiring the teaching of African American history in the public schools. Too late for my kids, but wonderful! In 2022, I spoke to a local school superintendent about how that was going. He said they were waiting for guidance from the State Department of Education. Fair enough.

And here we are, three years later, with LD1202. I think you may have learned from the experience with passing the Wabanaki Studies Law in 2001, and nothing happening in the schools up to now. These additions to Maine's public education are both very much needed. If anything, I think a better understanding of American history and the role of minority groups is more important than ever to address the divisions within our country. [I say this from my experience growing up very white in a very white state, and trying to grasp what's happening around me from the perspective of my biracial children and Black family and friends.] But both will need a lot of guidance and support for local schools, especially in these times of cultural challenge and funding threats.

In closing, African American history is not just about the past—it's the foundation of a lot of the turmoil that we're experiencing today AND much of what "makes America great." But many white people are afraid to consider the harm caused to Black people in the past and afraid learning about this will make white children "uncomfortable." Well, that harm makes me MORE than "uncomfortable"! But looking away and pretending it didn't happen doesn't make the harm, or its after-effects, go away.

Finally, "separate but equal" has never worked. Please consider making "African American History" a part of the regular "American History" curriculum—not separate. That would be better for all of us!

I hope this curriculum will include the following key areas:

- > Emphasize the contributions of African Americans to commerce, science, education, politics, the arts, music, and sports.
- > Address the failure of Reconstruction and the transition into the "Jim Crow" era.
- > Look at the impact of the Reconstruction Amendments (13-15) on our government today, e.g. birthright citizenship, due process, voting rights and access, and the development of the for-profit prison industry.
- > Design programs for parents to attend before their kids take the class! And be prepared for the "opt out" reaction (before the Supreme Court right now).