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Senator, District 28

THE MAINE SENATE
132nd Legislature

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Augusta, Maine 04333

Testimony of Senator Rachel Talbot Ross introducing
**LD 1202, “An Act to Establish the African American Studies Advisory
Council and Provide Funding to Support African American Studies”**
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
April 22, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Rachel Talbot Ross. I represent Senate District 28, which includes part of my hometown of Portland and Peaks Island. I am here today to present LD 1202, “An Act to Establish the African American Studies Advisory Council and Provide Funding to Support African American Studies.”

This bill builds directly upon years of work undertaken by this Legislature to more fully integrate African American studies into our statewide education system. In 2021, the 130th Legislature passed LD 1664, which I sponsored. That law amended the system of learning results in Title 20-A to explicitly include African American studies alongside Maine studies, Maine Native American history, and the history of genocide. LD 1664 also directed the Department of Education to identify resources, convene an advisory group, support local curriculum audits, and develop exemplar instructional modules to facilitate implementation. It was a meaningful step forward, and I appreciate the broad bipartisan support it received.

Yet, implementation remains uneven and incomplete. The department's initial efforts following LD 1664 were valuable but limited in scope, lacking sustained structure and oversight. That is why, in the second session of the 131st Legislature, I introduced LD 2001 — a resolve to establish a formal African American and Wabanaki Studies Advisory Council and provide funding to support curriculum implementation. That bill received an “Ought to Pass as Amended” recommendation from this committee and passed both chambers on initial votes, but unfortunately died on the House table upon adjournment.

LD 1202 is a refined and strengthened version of those past efforts. It formally establishes the African American Studies Advisory Council in statute, with a carefully composed membership including legislators, educators, scholars, civil rights representatives, and experts in African American culture and history, particularly from Maine. The Council is tasked with supporting educators and school administrative units, identifying resources and materials, making recommendations to the Department of Education, and establishing a baseline measure of implementation through statewide sampling.

Importantly, LD 1202 also provides meaningful funding for implementation. It allocates \$1 million in one-time grants to support the expansion or creation of African American studies curricula across the state. It establishes a dedicated Interdisciplinary Instruction Specialist position within

the Department of Education to provide technical assistance and support for curriculum development.

Each of these individual bills you're hearing today have been written and informed by the community that they represent. As such, Rep. Osher, Rep. Sato and I have been working as a coalition to support the passage these bills individually.

Structurally, each of these three bills are requiring different infrastructure to support implementation, because each subject matter requires a different, incremental next step in the process. To merge the bills would be to undermine the logistical purpose of each bill. In the context of the budget, merging these bills, or any two of these bills, to lower the fiscal note would have the impact of compromising the true intention of each bill.

This work is critical. Without sustained investment, structure, and accountability, the inclusion of African American history in our education system risks remaining symbolic rather than substantive. A robust advisory council with broad representation and clear reporting responsibilities will ensure that this legislature's intent to provide meaningful instruction on African American history is realized not just in statute, but in classrooms.

As a child growing up in Portland, I was fortunate in so many ways, but one, in particular, was that I was blessed to have a father who was a history buff and therefore a consummate collector of articles, books, artifacts, photographs, recordings, scrapbooks and memorabilia. He filled our home with them and seized any opportunity to share his beloved materials with us as well as anyone who entered our home or expressed an interest. His focus was on the Black/African American experience.

He was curious about it all, even though, as an 8th generation African American Mainer, he grew up in a family that passed the oral and written history of their lives on from one generation to the next, and, like most African Americans living in the whitest state in the country, he was keenly aware of what was happening to Black people nationally.

But his quest to know more was born, in large part, by the lack of learning about this experience — this American experience — through the Bangor public education system when he was a student.

After several years, the materials he collected grew in such size and scope that he began getting requests to do presentations at schools, houses of worship, businesses, community gatherings, city/state events and conferences. He would load the materials in his VW van and travel the state, setting up small exhibits and taking every opportunity along the way to engage those he encountered. He particularly liked talking to students and working with educators on how best to talk about African American history and issues related to race. No one else was providing this resource, so, aided by his own research, the materials and stories he had collected became the only comprehensive account of Maine's African American experience. Subsequently, his devotion to documenting, preserving and teaching about this experience became one of the most loving gifts he could ever give to his children.

You see, my father is a proud Black man who drew strength from knowing the truth about the history and culture of his people — people who are indigenous to both the state and nation, as well as those of African descent. It shaped his identity and solidified the value he knew he had in the world.

Given the negative stereotypes and erroneous historical accounts of African Americans and Africans throughout the Diaspora, how else would his children learn the truth about the courage, sacrifice, brilliance, honor, creativity, struggle, resiliency, triumph and faith of a people of whom they were descendants? How would anyone else's children know it? How would allowing the perpetuation of this ugly narrative impact their aspirations and beliefs?

In 1995, he donated his personal papers — after having served as the first African American elected to the Maine State Legislature in 1972, serving three terms — and the collection he grew to the University of Southern Maine, where it was used to establish the African American Archives of Maine, now known as the African American Collection. He later co-authored a book, *Maine's Visible Black History*, to not only ensure that the African American experience was documented but that there was at least one account written by an African American in an authentic voice.

I tell you all of this because Maine children can go through their entire educational experience — kindergarten through college — in our public schools today with little exposure to this history. They know not of the presence of African Americans in Maine during the country's early colonial period or of their involvement in the abolition/anti-slavery movement, nor efforts to live, worship and work on Malaga Island. Our students are not learning about indigenous Americans, some of whom are described as "copper-colored people," who existed in the Americas long before the introduction of enslaved Africans. The absence of this history is not only detrimental to African American students but to all students.

This quintessential, uniquely American story is not included, to any measurable extent, in the curricular offerings in our public schools.

LD 1202 is an opportunity to take meaningful steps toward correcting this absence — and to give future generations of Maine students the opportunity to understand the full scope of our shared history.

We can do better. This is a story that must be corrected and made visible.

This effort should not be mistaken for ideological. In fact, it reflects our deepest civic principles. Our democracy only works if the people in it are educated, and education only works if it tells the truth.

The story of African Americans in this country is a story of resilience, resistance, and responsibility — a story of Americans who have fought, time and again, to hold this nation to its founding ideals of liberty and justice for all. From the patriots who fought in the American Revolution and the Civil War, to the organizers of the civil rights movement, to the workers, inventors, educators, and leaders here in Maine who built up our state, these stories are not separate from our history — they are our history.

To include them is not to divide us. It is to unify us — to say that we are strong enough as a state and as a nation to tell the whole truth. That we believe in the courage and maturity of our students to grapple with complexity, and that we want them to become engaged, informed citizens, not just in the voting booth, but in their communities.

Including African American history in our curriculum is not about guilt or grievance. It's about patriotism. It's about helping the next generation understand how far we've come and how much further we can go. It's about fulfilling the civic mission of public education — and making sure that every Maine student, no matter where they live, receives the same opportunity to learn.

LD 1202 helps us meet that obligation. It is rooted in Maine values — local control, fairness, historical pride, and educational quality. And it is grounded in American values — liberty, equality, and truth.

I respectfully urge the committee to vote Ought to Pass on LD 1202. Thank you for your time, and I welcome any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Rachel Talbot Ross

State Senator, District 28

Representing part of Portland and Peaks Island

Policy goals for **LD 2001: An Act to Establish the African American Studies Advisory Council and Require Funding for African American Studies**

	DoE content specialist	Stakeholder working group (DoE, SBOE, Higher Ed teaching programs)	Learning Results Advisory Council	Funding
DoE content specialist position with knowledge and expertise in AfAm standards and curriculum	X			X
Establish and fund advisory board with stipends to follow implementation of standards, local SAU curriculum support, and to make recommendations to DoE in relation to both professional learning and Learning Results standards review			X	X
Build inclusion of foundational AfAm teaching skills within teacher certification requirements	X	X	X	
With targeted funding, develop, and manage professional learning opportunities for teachers with focus on AfAm studies, including an annual professional learning institute.	X			X
Increase focus on AfAm studies within established DoE review of the Learning Results content standards	X		X	
Provide outreach to SAUs with support and technical assistance for curriculum development and implementation	X			X
Survey representative statewide sampling of SAU curricula and report biennially to DoE and legislature on the extent of AfAm curricular development	X		X	