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Testimony of Representative Laurie Osher presenting
**LD 1474, An Act to Strengthen the Teaching of Wabanaki Studies in
Maine Schools**

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Good afternoon, Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy and esteemed members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. I am Laurie Osher, and I represent House District 25 in Orono, which is located in the homeland of the Penobscot Nation. Thank you for the opportunity to present **LD 1474, An Act to Strengthen the Teaching of Wabanaki Studies in Maine Schools**.

We teach our students social studies and history because we recognize that, as citizens of this state and country, we must learn the context of our past and present in order to create a more just society and to make informed decisions about the future.

When I moved to Maine in 1999 for a research and teaching faculty job at the University of Maine, my teaching load included a course entitled "Soil and Water Quality". The development of the course curriculum was up to me. I was encouraged to share the science and include what I'd learned during my years of working as a Soil Scientist and Watershed Manager for the US Forest Service. Immediately, I recalled that in each of the three National Forests where I worked, the Forest Plans were developed without an understanding or appreciation for the indigenous people, their cultural traditions or their knowledge of the natural resources. In each of those places, Forest Plans were being challenged because of the omissions related to that cultural blindness. In my job as a professor, it was essential that the students learning from me wouldn't make those same mistakes.

I developed the curriculum to include learning about the soil and water quality management practiced by the Penobscots and partnered with the then-Director of the Penobscot Nation's

Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to create the lectures and hands-on learning opportunities, including river sampling with the Penobscot DNR team. I also organized a group of University of Maine faculty members and staff who were working to integrate Wabanaki history and knowledge into our courses. We were mentored by tribal representatives and staff from the UMaine Wabanaki Center. We called our group a “Learning Circle”, and together we embarked on integrating Wabanaki Studies into courses in English, Math, History, Education...and Soil and Water Quality.

We all believed then and continue to believe now, over 20 years later, that here in Maine, it is essential that we all learn about and from the Wabanaki people. They have lived here for thousands of years, they have managed the land, and they have created art and culture that is both distinct to their nations and is also interwoven with the history and culture of those who have joined them here in this place.

In 2001, the Honorable Donna Loring sponsored and the Legislature passed a visionary law requiring public schools to teach our students about the Wabanaki as part of Maine Studies. Our Learning Circle group was ecstatic. The law required K-12 instruction to include learning about Wabanaki tribal governments and their relationships with the state and other governments, as well as the history, culture, territories and economic systems of the Wabanaki. The law created the Wabanaki Studies Commission and authorized that commission to meet through 2003.

Unfortunately, more than 20 years later, the teaching about our indigenous neighbors has not been effectively or consistently implemented in Maine’s schools. In the intervening years, Maine students have continued to graduate with little or no education about the Wabanaki Nations -- to the detriment of all our students. Our children graduate having learned a Maine Studies curriculum that leaves out the knowledge of the people indigenous to this place, and Wabanaki young people continue to experience the feeling of being erased from the narrative describing their own home and history.

To fully implement the 2001 law, educators and administrators need better support and resources. LD 1474 would establish a Wabanaki studies specialist position at the Department of Education to support the inclusion of Wabanaki studies in the parameters for essential instruction and graduation requirements. It would require the department to provide funding, both for the work of the Wabanaki studies specialist and for contracted Wabanaki advisors, and to create a process for school districts to access funding to support implementation at the local level. Finally, it would create education requirements and resources for Maine teachers.

I want to take a moment to speak not only to this bill but also to the bills you are hearing today sponsored by Senator Rachel Talbot Ross and Representative Ellie Sato. Each of these bills has

been developed and informed by the community that it respectively represents, and I am glad to work in partnership with Senator Talbot Ross and Representative Sato to advance all three of the measures. Importantly, each of the measures requires different infrastructure to support implementation. As sponsors, we agree that merging our bills would undermine the goals of the individual legislation. It is my hope that you will see fit to advance each bill as proposed.

I am glad that the stakeholders who helped to develop the proposal before you are also here today to speak to LD 1474 and how we can finally live up to the promise of the original Wabanaki studies law. If you have any questions for me, I would be happy to answer them. Thank you for your consideration.