

TESTIMONY OF MICHAEL KEBEDE, ESQ.

Ought to Pass - LDs 187, 215, 1664

**An Act To Require Education about African-American
History and the History of Genocide**

**An Act To Require Instruction on the
History of Genocide and the Holocaust**

**An Act To Integrate African American Studies
into American History Education**

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
AND CULTURAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

May 10, 2021

Senator Daughtry, Representative Brennan, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, greetings. My name is Michael Kebede, and I am the Policy Counsel at the ACLU of Maine, a statewide organization committed to advancing and preserving civil rights and civil liberties in Maine. On behalf of our members, I write to urge the committee to support LDs 187, 215, 1664. These bills would help ensure that we as a society do not repeat the mistakes of the past, and that we repair their present-day reverberations.

The ACLU has long been committed to protecting the right to a quality education in our public schools. As enshrined in the Maine Constitution, “[a] general diffusion of the advantages of education [is] essential to the preservation of the rights and liberties of the people.” Me. Const. Art. VIII, Pt. First, § 1.

Educational mandates are an important part of guaranteeing a quality education to our state’s citizens. They are a necessary barrier between the mistakes of the past and similar mistakes in the future. They are also an important tool for exposing and beginning to heal the wounds of our past. They help instill an appropriate reverence for our rights and liberties.

In our 2017 study of the experience of immigrant students and students of color in Maine schools, we uncovered disturbing truths and learned important lessons.¹ We discovered that immigrants, students of color, LGBTQIA+ students, students with disabilities, and low-income students faced various forms of harassment and marginalization. Muslim students described other students pushing them in the hallways, calling them terrorists, and trying to pull off their headscarves.² Students of color described white students telling them to “go back to Mexico” or threatening to have them deported.³ One black student described students she didn’t know reaching out and tugging her hair as she walked through school hallways.⁴ Hateful speech, including racial epithets and derogatory terms for immigrants and sexual minorities, is common.⁵

The changes in curricula that these bills would bring about would mitigate some of these ills. Instruction in the history of genocide, slavery, and discrimination here and elsewhere would show students the worst of our past, and caution them against repeating our crimes. It would show them how the seeds of mass crimes can sprout in the schoolyard, under innocent auspices.

Undoubtedly, some teachers lack the training to teach effective lessons about the Holocaust, the genocide of Indigenous peoples, or African-American history. But other teachers will, perhaps with little or no assistance from the Maine Department of Education, work hard to obtain the necessary tools to teach effective lessons on those topics. These tools are not a secret: right here in Augusta, Maine, for example, the Holocaust and Human Rights Center offers educational material and model curricula on a number of relevant topics, categorized by grade-level appropriateness. Other organizations across the country provide similar materials suitable for Maine students. When teachers take advantage of these opportunities, their students will, ideally, go on to be the kinds of citizens who guard against mass crimes in a future Maine or wherever they settle and live. Even if not every student gets this privilege, at least some will. Our answer to this imperfect scenario should not be to make it harder to pass new mandates. Our answer to this scenario must be new training, and perhaps a more vigilant Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. If you reject bills like the ones before you today, then the risk is higher that we will have *no* students with an awareness of very grave mistakes of our species.

We urge you to vote *ought to pass*.

¹ Emma Findlen LeBlanc, *We Belong Here: Eliminating Inequity in Education for Immigrants and Students of Color in Maine*, ACLU Report, Oct. 3, 2017, at 5, available at <https://www.aclumaine.org/en/publications/report-we-belong-here>.

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*