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LD 1642

LD 1642 (HP 1052)

An Act to Strengthen the Teaching of Wabanaki Studies in Maine Testimony by  
Barbara D. Acosta, PhD

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan

I am testifying in support of LD 1642 as a member of MUUSAN, the Maine Unitarian Universalist State Advocacy Network, which works to educate and organize for a more just society. As a Unitarian Universalist, I value the inherent worth and dignity of all people and have instilled this value into my personal and professional life.

My family has been in Maine for more than five generations. I attended the College of the Atlantic in Bar Harbor, and went on to become an educational researcher with a specialty in multicultural, multilingual education. I have worked with students from over 160 different cultures, prepared in-service and pre-service teachers to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students, and advised state and local education agencies on best practices in the field. When I retired five years ago, I returned here to my home in Maine, on the ancestral lands of the Wabanaki.

The Wabanaki Studies Law (LD 291) that was passed in 2001 was a visionary attempt to teach students about the Wabanaki. But the law has never been fully implemented. Due in large part to a lack of support and resources, very few students have been given the opportunity to learn about our indigenous neighbors. Leaving Wabanaki studies out of our school curriculum erases our common history and fails to teach us the critical lessons of the past and how they affect our present.

LD 1642 would help remedy this by, in part, reinstating the Wabanaki Studies Commission that was originally formed in 2001. The Commission would guide oversight, make recommendations about curriculum and resources, help shape teacher training, and serve as an institutional structure ensuring the effective implementation of the 2001 law.

I urge you to support LD 1642 because Maine needs a well-implemented Wabanaki Studies program in accordance with current state law and with the needs of our students; and teachers need more guidance on how to incorporate Wabanaki Studies into their teaching, as well as the resources to teach it.

The history of Maine is intertwined with the histories of our diverse communities, including the Wabanaki and those whose ancestors arrived here from Great Britain, Europe, Africa and Asia. As Gloria Ladson-Billings argues, we teach what we value. We cannot teach students about their heritage without also teaching the perspectives and histories of all of our people. This includes understanding the colonization that led to the creation of the place we now call Maine, and the genocide, oppression, and attempted erasure of the Wabanaki. It also includes the many contributions that Wabanaki people have made and continue to make to this place that we all call home. Thank you for your attention and for considering the many reasons to pass LD 1642.