

TESTIMONY OF MATT BERNSTEIN

LD 1642 – Ought to Pass

An Act to Strengthen the Teaching of Wabanaki Studies in Maine Schools

Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

January 9, 2024

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Matt Bernstein, I am a resident of Portland and I teach social studies at Casco Bay High School. I am also the 2023 Maine Teacher of the Year. In this testimony, I am writing as a private citizen and not as a representative of any school, district, or organization.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in favor of LD #1642. I urge you to support this bill because I believe that strengthening the teaching of Wabanaki Studies across the state is the right thing to do and what is best for all Maine students.

In 2019, a student focus group at CBHS made recommendations for curricular shifts to the social studies department. One of the recommendations was to expand our existing Wabanaki Studies curriculum. Since then, along with my 9th grade teaching team, I have taught a two month learning expedition about Wabanaki Studies that includes history, cultural studies, current events, literature, art, and biology. This expedition culminates with our 9th grade students visiting local elementary schools to share their learning with younger students. Students regularly express that this learning expedition is their favorite part of the 9th grade curriculum. They also share that learning more about Wabanaki history and Wabanaki Studies is eye opening and makes them feel more informed about the place they call home and more equipped to take action to improve their communities. In a survey of this year's 9th graders, 97% of student respondents said they found the expedition interesting or very interesting and 94% said they would recommend or highly recommend the expedition to other students. Both from anecdotal evidence and data, the evidence clearly shows that students are eager to learn more Wabanaki Studies and respond positively to these learning experiences. Strengthening Wabanaki Studies is a valuable way to enhance the education of all Maine students.

Since 2020, I have also been fortunate to be a part of the Portland Public Schools Social Studies Vertical Content Team and, in particular, a member of the Wabanaki Studies sub-committee. In this role, I have collaborated with other teachers and leaders in the district and with a variety of Indigenous experts to help develop our PPS K-12 Wabanaki Studies curriculum and scope and sequence. Before becoming a teacher in Maine, I did not know much about Wabanaki history or Wabanaki peoples. Therefore, throughout this work, it has been important for me to further my own personal education in order to improve my ability to teach Wabanaki Studies. I have learned from a number of experts, many of whom are Wabanaki and many of whom have become guest speakers in my classroom and I am grateful for their leadership and expertise. I was also fortunate to be part of a Portland Public Schools summer institute in which we were hosted by leaders from Penobscot Nation on Sugar Island. This institute expanded my personal learning and included valuable insights and discussions into ways to successfully integrate Wabanaki Studies into our curriculum. I am continuously learning more and appreciate the lifelong learning process and I recognize that I have been very lucky to have such support in this process, especially from Wabanaki leaders and educators. This support has been integral to my implementation of Wabanaki Studies in my classroom and I find this bill does a great job of replicating this kind of support for teachers across the state. The fact that this bill identifies clear components of Wabanaki

Studies to be taught, creates a commission to support the development of Wabanaki Studies, and creates more opportunities for current and future teachers to learn how to effectively teach Wabanaki Studies through professional development and institutes, ensures that teachers will be supported throughout the process of deepening Wabanaki Studies. I am grateful that the bill not only establishes the importance of strengthening Wabanaki Studies, but also creates clear pathways and steps to make this a reality. Doing so is extremely valuable and it is a positive step towards strengthening our teaching force in Maine.

Finally, I think it is important to recognize that strengthening Wabanaki Studies is a morally and ethically right decision and leads to a stronger and healthier Maine. National SEED Project co-founder Emily Style refers to the importance of creating “windows and mirrors” in curriculum. This means that we create a curriculum that offers “windows” through which students can learn about cultures, histories, and experiences different from their own and “mirrors” through which students can see themselves reflected in the curriculum. To do this, we must teach Wabanaki Studies and we must teach it well. Strengthening Wabanaki Studies ensures that our Wabanaki students across the state see themselves reflected in their education and our students who are not Wabanaki have the opportunity to expand their understanding of the diverse cultures and communities of people in Maine. When we teach Wabanaki Studies, we are honest about our past, we recognize the deep contributions that Wabanaki communities have made and continue to make in Maine, and we allow our students to work with us to create a more just future for all people in Maine and for the lands and waters of our beautiful state.

For all these reasons, I think strengthening Wabanaki Studies would help improve education in Maine. I strongly urge the Committee to vote unanimously ought to pass.

Thank you for your time, for the opportunity to submit this testimony, and for considering this in your deliberations.