



To: Committee on Education

From: Elise Hartill, Maine Youth for Climate Justice

Date: January 9, 2024

Re: Testimony in favor of LD 1642, *An Act to Strengthen the Teaching of Wabanaki Studies in Maine Schools*

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and the honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Elise Hartill and I am writing as a representative of Maine Youth for Climate Justice (MYCJ), a coalition of over 400 youth from across the state who are fighting for bold climate action and a just transition to a livable future in Maine. I am writing in favor of LD 1642, *An Act to Strengthen the Teaching of Wabanaki Studies in Maine Schools*

LD 1642 would move us toward fully implementing Wabanaki Studies in Maine school curriculum as required by the 2001 Wabanaki Studies law ([LD291](#)). Among other things, the amended version of LD 1642 would reinstate 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.

Maine Youth believe that as a state, we must reckon with the full context of the past and present so that we can make the best decisions for our future. This includes understanding the colonization that led to what we now call the State of 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 in this place that we all call home.

Maine passed a visionary law in 2001 mandating public schools teach students about the Wabanaki, but this law has not been effectively implemented. Many students have graduated with little or no education about the Wabanaki Nations, and Wabanaki students continue to be erased from their own land's history. The State of Maine and the Department of Education have failed a whole generation of Maine students by not implementing this law. The Department of Education, State Legislature, and individual school districts have an obligation to effectively implement the 2001 law, but educators and administrators do not have adequate support and resources to do so.

The State Legislature must pass LD 1642, as amended, with the first step being the reestablishment of the Wabanaki Studies Commission. This will give the Department of Education, school administrators, and teachers consistent and expert guidance on what resources exist to teach Wabanaki Studies in accordance with existing law.

We believe passing LD 1642 is an important step towards righting these wrongs and creating a stronger generation of Maine students, better equipped to be changemakers in their communities. A core tenant at Maine Youth for Climate Justice is that a climate justice future cannot happen without indigenous sovereignty, and indigenous and youth leadership. The passage of this legislation is an important step to move us in the direction of systemic change and a stronger relationship between the State of Maine and our Wabanaki neighbors.

Truthful education about Indigenous Peoples improves outcomes for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Indigenous students are more connected to the material they're learning when they are accurately represented in it, leading to better educational outcomes and self-esteem. Non-Indigenous students are better prepared to be actively engaged citizens in our democracy when they learn accurate information about the state's past and present.

For the above reasons, our coalition, Maine Youth for Climate Justice, urges you to vote yes on LD 1642 as amended. Thank you.