

January 11, 2024

Esteemed members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

I am writing today to express my strong support for LD 2001, An Act to Establish the African American Studies Advisory Council and Require Funding for African American Studies. This bill is long overdue, but it is never too late to take steps toward truth and equity, and that is what this legislation has the potential to initiate.

As a young white person growing up in a rural northern place, I received a deeply skewed story about our country's history in school. I learned next to nothing about the foundational role that the labor of enslaved Black people played in the development of this nation – not just in the south -- and heard complete silence about the ingenuity and creativity of Black people that has shaped every facet of our society. I am still trying to fill in the gaps in my knowledge, because I believe that it is only by embracing the full truths of our history that we can possibly learn how to confront the many challenges of our time collaboratively and effectively. Growing Maine's teachers' capacity to teach more truthfully and inclusively will cultivate the kinds of leaders we desperately need to do this together.

I also know that not seeing oneself and one's people reflected in the world around you is deeply harmful and limits one's sense of what is possible. When African American students can go through their entire school careers hearing only passing mention of Black presence in Maine and learning the bare minimum about African American history and culture more broadly, they receive messages that they don't matter, that the lives and contributions of their ancestors and families are not valued. The harm of this invisibility is only compounded by other manifestations of marginalization and negative outcomes of systemic racism on the individual, family, and community levels. We must do better by Maine's Black students and this bill is one step in that direction.

We are living in exceptionally polarized times and school curricula have become the fulcrum of many larger political arguments. Our state's leaders must rise above the paralyzing morass of polarized politics and keep the focus on building and strengthening a participatory, democratic society here in this special place. School curricula that honors the fullness of our history and the plurality of our present is a key building block of such a society. I encourage you to pass LD 2001 so that better worlds are possible for future generations here.

Sincerely,

Erika Arthur

Freedom, ME