

TESTIMONY OF MATT BERNSTEIN

LD 2001 – Ought to Pass

**An Act to Establish the African American Studies Advisory Council
and Require Funding for African American Studies**

Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

January 11, 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 #2001. I urge you to support this bill because I believe that strengthening the teaching of African American Studies across the state is what is best for all Maine students.

In my career as a social studies teacher, I have taught a variety of African American history lessons and units. Students regularly ask for more African American Studies and these lessons and topics are often among the most engaging for students. I believe that this is because students recognize that African American history is American history and that it is impossible to capture a full and accurate history of the United States without a robust African American Studies curriculum. I also believe that all students benefit from learning African American Studies because it not only ensures that our African American students have the opportunity to see themselves reflected in their education, but it also deepens historical understanding for everyone and engages all students in a nuanced analysis of culture and current events. Therefore, I support actions and initiatives that will allow us to improve our teaching of African American Studies and I believe this bill clearly does that.

I appreciate that the bill offers tangible supports and guidance for teachers across the state. Providing funding, an advisory council, and teacher training will create more opportunities for current and future teachers to improve their teaching practice related to African American Studies. I am grateful that the bill not only establishes the importance of strengthening African American 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.

This bill will allow schools and teachers across the state to receive support that will allow all of us - from newer teachers to veteran teachers - to improve their teaching practice. Teaching is a practice of constant growth and the opportunity to receive expert support and funding cannot be missed. Our growth in the field of African American Studies will ensure that we are better serving all students across Maine and providing educational opportunities that will allow students to promote fairness and justice for everyone in Maine.

For all these reasons, I think strengthening African American 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.