



Permanent Commission RACIAL, INDIGENOUS & TRIBAL POPULATIONS

LD 2001 “An Act to Establish the African American Studies Advisory Council and Require Funding for African American Studies”

January 11, 2024

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and Honorable Members of the Joint Standing Committee On Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Rae Sage, and I am the Policy Coordinator for the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous, and Tribal Populations. The Permanent Commission’s role is to examine racial disparities across all systems and advise Maine State Government on ways to improve the status and outcomes of historically disadvantaged racial, Indigenous, and tribal populations.

I am here today to give testimony in support of the policy goals of LD 2001, in the understanding that accurate and culturally relevant African American Studies is a long overdue feature of statewide curriculum. Historical documents show that enslaved African people were present in Kittery as early as 1663.¹ Maine students of every race, background and zip code deserve an accurate, honest and quality education that introduces them to the diversity of this nation and prepares them to go anywhere they choose. Providing intentional resources for schools to teach African American Studies grants students and teachers a greater perspective on what it means to be a Mainer, American, and human being.

Maine law requires that African American Studies be included in the content standards.² Although the Department of Education has prepared revised content standards, as observed with the implementation of Wabanaki Studies, it is not enough to simply update the standards. Successful implementation requires intentional resources, including teacher training and a content specialist that provides curriculum support to educators and schools.

¹ Wall, Patricia Q. (2017). *Lives of Consequence: Blacks in Early Kittery & Berwick in the Massachusetts Province of Maine*. Portsmouth: Portsmouth Historical Society.

² 20-A MRSA §4706, as amended by PL 2001, Chapter 247

Because some Maine communities are homogeneous, it is easy to dismiss stories about identities that are not broadly represented at the local level. Current education programs around African American Studies are often disjointed from the lived reality of African American citizens. In this way, the current education model does little in terms of building community cross-culturally. To resolve this issue, this bill aims to create and fund an African American Studies Advisory Council within the Department of Education. Composed of teachers, scholars, and stakeholders, this advisory council will support educators, administrative units and the public by offering both online and on-site programming related to the state's African American history.

I do wish to note that the original version of LD 2001 housed this advisory council within the Permanent Commission; however, it is more appropriately housed within DoE (as the specialists in education). We are firmly in favor of providing DoE the resources to engage a dedicated African American Studies content specialist to lead this work (this approach has been discussed with the Sponsor and DoE).

African American Studies is an essential subject, deserving of a robust and consistent curriculum that benefits all students. In being taught accurate information about the past, African American Mainers are also empowered to understand all the ways that they too have deep relation to Maine. The understanding that we belong here, have roots here, have stories here and can grow here is transformative and greatly needed. Echoing the words of The Department of Education's 2020 Joint Statement, "We urge all Maine schools and educators to accept their role and responsibilities in examining and addressing the inequities that have long existed in our society and institutions."³

As a community, we can be prone to repeating harmful cycles when we do not take the time to understand the systemic issues under the surface. Comprehensive education can nourish minds and prevent racial tension and violence in the future. An education rooted in understanding our shared history is foundational to lasting societal change. Providing resources, solid guidance, and ensuring that our goals are met in teaching African American Studies is essential to making Maine a better place for all of us. Thank you very much for your time.

³ Joint Statement of Commitment and Support for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Maine Schools (December 2020)
<https://mainedoenews.net/2020/12/11/joint-statement-of-commitment-and-support-for-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-in-maine-schools/>