

1/22/2024

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and members of the Education Committee:

I write in support of LD 2001, An Act to Establish the African American Studies Advisory Council and Require Funding for African American Studies.

I have taught sociology courses in Maine's colleges and Universities for more than 2 decades. The importance of LD 2001 cannot be overstated. Maine students are too often under-educated on race as an element of personal identity and biography, and as a social, legal and political category. This lack of conceptual and historical information leaves them unprepared for college courses.

Teaching is extremely hard work. We are all exhausted. Now, more than ever, we need to fund support for teachers at every level, including curriculum development, professional development, and support for teaching about issues that are contested in many communities. Most of us need more time to read and understand the complexity of how racism shaped our fields of study and funding staff to support this work is essential to efficiency and implementation of our goals (so many of us truly wish to know more and do better at our work, and need guides to help us, in every field of study). Understanding the complexity of race is lifelong learning (I recently spent a day at the National Museum of African American History and Culture Museum in Washington, DC, again reminded that I don't know what I don't know). Support for this learning is essential.

Without more shared knowledge about race as a legal, historical, and identity category, we risk perpetuating stereotypes, perpetuating disinformation and distorted narratives, and limiting our ability to build a more flourishing Democracy. The benefits of learning about race and racism over time and across content areas are well documented in the literature (see this blog post for a partial review, or feel welcome to contact me for a more academically rigorous bibliography - <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/what-happens-when-american-children-learn-about-racism/>).

Public education is a central institution and is intended to train young people to critically examine information claims, to ask interesting and insightful questions that help us build new knowledge and solve problems. Without better educational support for teaching about race and racism, and incorporating previously missing voices into our curricula, we truncate the possibilities for full learning for future generations. Supporting learning within the education profession will yield great benefits for all of us and better prepare Maine students for higher education and their work in the world going forward.

Sincerely,

Kimberly Simmons, PhD
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