

TESTIMONY OF MICHAEL KEBEDE, ESQ.

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 members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, greetings. My name is Michael Kebede, and I am policy counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union of Maine, a statewide organization committed to advancing and preserving civil liberties guaranteed by the Maine and U.S. Constitutions through advocacy, education, and litigation. On behalf of our members, we urge you to support LD 2001.

Maine law requires that students in the state's public schools are taught African American studies. 20-A MRS §4706 *et seq.* Given the involvement of prominent Mainers in the slave trade, and the incalculable economic benefit the state has derived from the exploitation of African Americans, such a requirement is necessary to teach Maine students the truth about their state and their country.¹ African American studies is also necessary to help cure the alienation and reduced academic outcomes of the state's Black students. Studies show students who see themselves represented in curriculum demonstrate better outcomes.² Additionally, teaching the complete history of our state will give all students a shared understanding of our nation's past and how that past influences the present. This will give Maine students the resources they need to engage in conversations and with their communities to move our state forward together. Unfortunately, if the implementation of the state's similar

¹ See generally Atlantic Black Box, available at <https://atlanticblackbox.com/> (compiling data about Maine's involvement in slavery).

² McDougal, Serie. "The Africana Studies Effect: Creating Space and Viralizing Consciousness." *Journal of Negro Education*, vol. 90 no. 2, 2021, p. 158-172. Project MUSE muse.jhu.edu/article/820508. Black students' academic achievement improves in part because the pedagogy and curriculum in Africana studies increases their academic self-confidence by including their history and culture.

Wabanaki Studies requirement is any indication, Maine's schools have a long road ahead before achieving full compliance with the African American studies requirement.³ This bill is a prudent and well-tailored path to Maine schools' compliance with African American studies.

If enacted, this bill would establish the African American Studies Advisory Council to serve as a resource to educators, school administrative units, and the public by offering online and on-site programming related to the Maine's African American history. The advisory council would also advise the Department of Education on developing a process to study the implementation of African American studies throughout Maine schools. Crucially, this bill would also direct the department to fund teacher training programs in African American studies, and to fund other resources to assist school districts in implementing African American studies. Each of this bill's components is necessary to help the state meet its obligation to its students.

We urge you vote *ought to pass*.

³ Abbe Museum, ACLU of Maine, Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission, & Wabanaki Alliance, The Wabanaki Studies Law: 21 Years After Implementation, Oct. 10, 2022, *available at* <https://www.aclumaine.org/en/wabanakistudiesreport> (finding uneven and inadequate implementation of Maine's the Wabanaki Studies requirement).