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TESTIMONY OF MICHAEL KEBEDE, ESQ.

LD 1642 – Ought to Pass

**An Act to Strengthen the Teaching
of Wabanaki Studies in Maine Schools**

Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

January 9, 2024

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, good afternoon. 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 1642 as amended.

A landmark law signed on June 15, 2001, requires public and some private schools in Maine to teach students about Wabanaki territories, economic systems, cultural systems, governments, and political systems, as well as Wabanaki Nations' relationships with local, state, national, and international governments. This Wabanaki Studies law, codified at 20-A M.R.S. § 4706(2), is critical to overcoming stereotypes and ignorance about Indigenous peoples, which are harmful to Wabanaki and non-Native students alike. More than two decades after its enactment, on Indigenous People's Day of 2022, the ACLU of Maine, Wabanaki Alliance, Abbe Museum, and Maine Indian-Tribal State Commission (MITSC) released a report evaluating the successes, challenges, and future of this law.¹

The report shows the Wabanaki Studies law is not meaningfully enforced across the state. Despite some successes, schools have failed to consistently and appropriately include Wabanaki Studies in their curriculum. As a result, many students have graduated with little or no education about the Wabanaki Nations, and Wabanaki students continue to be erased from

¹ 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> [hereinafter Wabanaki Studies Report].

their own home's history. A major cause of these failures is insufficient teacher training and professional development opportunities. LD 1642 will help solve these problems and ensure all public school (and some private school) students in Maine are taught Wabanaki Studies.

If enacted, this bill would reestablish a Wabanaki Studies Commission, an independent body that will support teachers, schools, and the Department of Education in expanding and improving Wabanaki studies instruction in Maine's classrooms. This bill would also amend the statutes relating to required courses about Wabanaki Studies, including provisions relating to the substance of the courses. Finally, it would direct the Department of Education to establish and fund teacher education programs in Wabanaki Studies.

At a summit celebrating twenty years of the Wabanaki Studies law, the Honorable Donna Loring, who sponsored the original Wabanaki Studies law, explained that the trauma from attempted genocide and removing children from Wabanaki families runs deep and is suffered both by Native people and the governments who inflicted it.² "We fix it with truth and education about history, truth about current events. Truth must overcome the lies."³

LD 1642 will better connect Indigenous students to the material they are learning by accurately representing their histories, leading to better educational outcomes and self-esteem. Non-Indigenous students will be better prepared to actively engage in our democracy when they learn accurate information about the state's past and present. Only when all Maine students learn the truth about our common past and imperfect present can we have meaningful and informed conversations about our shared future. This bill is a necessary step toward reconciliation, repair, and a future that avoids the mistakes of our past.

We urge you vote *ought to pass*.

² *Id.* at 9.

³ Wabanaki Studies Report at 9.