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Testimony of Assistant House Majority Leader Rachel Talbot Ross presenting
**LD 1664, An Act To Integrate African American Studies into
American History Education**

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Rachel Talbot Ross. I represent House District 40 in Portland and serve as assistant House majority leader. Thank you for the opportunity to present **LD 1664, An Act To Integrate African American Studies into American History Education**.

As a child growing up in Portland, I was fortunate in so many ways, but one, in particular, was that I was blessed to have a father who was a history buff and therefore a consummate collector of articles, books, artifacts, photographs, recordings, scrapbooks and memorabilia. He filled our home with them and seized any opportunity to share his beloved materials with us as well as anyone who entered our home or expressed an interest. His focus was on the Black/African American experience.

He was curious about it all, even though, as an 8th generation African American Mainer, he grew up in a family that passed the oral and written history of their lives on from one generation to the next, and, like most African Americans living in the whitest state in the country, he was keenly aware of what was happening to Black people nationally.

But his quest to know more was born, in large part, by the lack of learning about this experience – this African experience – through the Bangor public education system when he was a student.

After several years, the materials he collected grew in such size and scope that he began getting requests to do presentations at schools, houses of worship, businesses, community gatherings, city/state events and conferences. He would load the materials in his VW van and travel the state, setting up small exhibits and taking every opportunity along the way to engage those he encountered. He particularly liked talking to students and working with educators on how best to talk about African American history and issues related to race. No one else was providing this resource, so, aided by his own research, the materials and stories he had collected became the only comprehensive account of Maine's African

American experience. Subsequently, his devotion to documenting, preserving and teaching about this experience became one of the most loving gifts he could ever give to his children.

You see, my father is a proud Black man who drew strength from knowing the truth about the history and culture of his people – people who are indigenous to both the state and nation, as well as those of African descent. It shaped his identity and solidified the value he knew he had in the world.

Given the negative stereotypes and erroneous historical accounts of African Americans and Africans throughout the Diaspora, how else would his children learn the truth about the courage, sacrifice, brilliance, honor, creativity, struggle, resiliency, triumph and faith of a people of whom they were descendants? How would anyone else's children know it? How would allowing the perpetuation of this ugly narrative impact their aspirations and beliefs?

In 1995, he donated his personal papers – after having served as the first African American elected to the Maine State Legislature in 1972, serving three terms – and the collection he grew to the University of Southern Maine, where it was used to establish the African American Archives of Maine, now known as the African American Collection. He later co-authored a book, *Maine's Visible Black History*, to not only ensure that the African American experience was documented but that there was at least one account written by an African American in an authentic voice.

I tell you all of this because Maine children can go through their entire educational experience – kindergarten through college – in our public schools today with little exposure to this history. They know not of the presence of African Americans in Maine during the country's early colonial period or of their involvement in the abolition/anti-slavery movement, nor efforts to live, worship and work on Malaga Island. Our students are not learning about indigenous Americans, some of whom are described as “copper-colored people,” who existed in the Americas long before the introduction of enslaved Africans. The absence of this history is not only detrimental to African American students but to all students.

This quintessential, uniquely American story is not included, to any measurable extent, in the curricular offerings in our public schools.

We can do better. This is a story that must be corrected and made visible.

Some of you will recall that this bill is the product of work I have been doing since I first came to the Legislature. In the 128th, I submitted a proposal that would have included African American history as mandated curriculum, similar to the mandate for teaching Wabanaki history. That bill met with opposition due to the mandate. During the 129th, we made an effort to adjust our approach so that we could move this forward, but we were unfortunately still working toward a solution when the Legislature adjourned due to the pandemic.

Since then, we have continued to work with historians and scholars of Maine and New England's African American history, public school students, teachers and our State Archivist, all of whom have been involved in developing the bill before you today. We have also consulted with the Maine Department of Education and the Maine Education Association. At this historic time and with everyone in agreement, we feel confident about taking this next step forward by passing LD 1664.

Specifically, this bill does the following:

1. LD 1664 requires the department to convene a volunteer advisory committee within 30 days of the effective date of this legislation. The committee will collect information and prepare materials, including exemplar modules, for teaching African American studies so that Maine's educators will have the tools they need;
2. It directs the department to develop a process by which local school districts can choose to audit their curricula to ensure equitable and accurate representation of African American voices, history and culture; and,
3. Finally, beginning in time for the 2023-2024 academic year, LD 1664 includes instruction on African American studies and Maine African American studies in the Maine Department of Education's required units of instruction on American history and Maine studies.

The bill also requires the department to report back to this committee on its progress toward these objectives no later than April 1, 2022.

According to research by the National Museum of African American History and Culture, an overwhelming majority of teachers nationwide recognize the importance of teaching Black history – yet perhaps only one or two lessons, a small percentage of total class time, are devoted to Black history when we teach U.S. history. Among the reasons cited for this are a lack of content knowledge, confidence, time and resources, as well as teachers' uncertainty around approaching difficult content based on how they perceive their students' maturity levels.

This measure is a crucial step toward addressing those barriers. According to the National Council for the Social Studies, a number of other states as well as some individual school districts are implementing similar efforts to promote the inclusion of African American history and culture in the classroom.

In a 2017 article from *Social Education*, the journal of the National Council for the Social Studies, Assistant Professor of Social Studies Education at the University of Missouri-Columbia LaGarrett J. King wrote¹:

¹ https://www.socialstudies.org/system/files/publications/articles/se_810117014.pdf

“The study of history requires learning about the identities of groups of people. History not only indicates where people have been, what they have been, where they are, and what they are; history also provides a blueprint for where they still must go and what they still must be. ...As was the case in the early twentieth century and the 1960s, Black history is needed to allow society to comprehend Blackness through the record of Black agency and advancement in the context of systemic notions of White supremacy and racism. Our teaching should center on how Black history improves our understanding of contemporary circumstances, and how it can stimulate us to improve our democracy.”

By providing curricular support and direction for teaching African American history and culture, including history specific to Maine and New England, we will give educators the means to share a more thorough, honest view of our heritage in order to better inform our shared future.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of this measure. I am happy to answer any question you may have for me.