

Raised Bill for No. HR6619

An Act Concerning The development of a Kindergarten to Eighth Grade Model Curriculum

Written testimony: Darlene Kascak March 16, 2021

- Learning more in-depth history about the state and the landscape
- The history of America did not begin with the arrival of Christopher Columbus, and all the Native Americans did not disappear after Thanksgiving.
- Native American history needs to be told truthfully.
- We believe that teaching students about Native American history and culture is an effective tool in battling harmful stereotypes and inappropriate behavior.
- Responsibly teaching about Thanksgiving without stereotypical feathered headdresses. Let students learn about the Wampanoag tribe and its culture both in the past and present day.
- Native Americans are written out of history after the 1900s, even though we are still here.
- There are many lost opportunities to teach about Indigenous cultures how our current Social Studies Curriculum Standards are written.

Greetings, Members of the Committee and everyone here today dedicated to positive change in our school system.

My name is Darlene Kascak. I am the Education Coordinator for the Institute for American Indian Studies Museum and Research Center and an enrolled member of the Schaghticoke Tribal Nation. In both of those positions, I have witnessed and experienced firsthand the results of what comes from not teaching children the true history of the state of Connecticut and the country that we live in today.

As a young student, I learned to distrust and question what they were teaching me in school. American history did not begin when Christopher Columbus laid claim to this land, nor did our local histories begin with the colonial settlement. As a Native child, I knew better. I knew that there was not a blank map when the Europeans came here; I knew that Indigenous people were here for thousands of years. I also knew that there were still hundreds of unique and complex Native societies from coast to coast, just as there are today. If we are to teach American history truthfully, we need to begin with teaching students about the 12,000-year history of the Indigenous people who lived here upon this land. Students need to know this history to understand the impact that colonialism had on those Indigenous cultures. We also need to complete the story by teaching them who and where Native people are today. Otherwise, the way it is taught, children get the impression that Native Americans only lived in the past and became extinct like the dinosaurs.

Although these conversations can be difficult, we should not avoid them. Rather, we should embrace them and approach them head-on by showing multiple perspectives on the historical events that happened in the past. Our children need to learn how to use their own critical thinking skills to formulate educated opinions as adults in the future. At our Native American museum, we see how showing a different perspective can facilitate discussions among students and their teachers regarding our state's history and its Indigenous people. These discussions can often lead to a realization about the similarities in their own histories and culture and how that makes them feel. This allows for a healthy airing of emotions, clearing of misunderstandings, and a newfound self-pride in sharing aspects about their culture with their classmates. Every one of us comes to this exact moment in time through the lives lived by our ancestors. Some of our ancestors - such as mine - have been here since time immemorial. Some of our ancestors traveled great distances to a land unknown to have a better life. In contrast, some of our ancestors were brought here against their will to be enslaved. Understanding and honoring the courage, strength, and resilience of all our ancestors' journeys through history to today helps build empathy and respect towards each other rather than dividing us apart.

Perhaps more importantly, these difficult conversations can help students to understand where they fit in. Connecticut classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse, with students of different religions, ethnicities, nationalities, skin colors, and even sexual and gender orientations. Diversity with what these children see in the classroom should be matched by diversity in what they learn, as unique perspectives and diversity are good for students of all ages. There can be no harm in taking in a different perspective, as it allows students to hear a story from all sides and come to their own conclusions.

With that diversity, it allows us to re-examine the words that we choose to use in everyday life and when discussing people from different backgrounds. Words and images that get thrown around loosely when talking about history- such as primitive and civilized- shape the way that people understand not only those who lived back then but their descendants today. We should not focus on "primitive" and "civilized," as it comes from one understanding of how a society should behave, and is a very colonial view. Rather we should focus on the different ways in which societies have functioned all around the world, including on the very landscape that these children interact with and live. They should be able to look out their window and imagine vibrant Native communities filled with people who lived and worked together in ways that perhaps are not so different and alien to them as they might have expected.

For example, women held positions of power in many Native societies in Connecticut. They were able to trade, be healers, lead communities, and make decisions regarding their own lives. Two-Spirit people- a traditional term used in Indigenous nations today to describe those who are part of the LGBT community- have always been honored for their ability to see life from multiple perspectives. Life and trade among these Connecticut groups were not based on commodity, as are our lives and trade today, but rather in a gift economy. Status was given to individuals based on what they gave to others. Resources from plants and animals taken from the earth were also thought of as gifts, with the understanding that they should be honored and a gift given in return. They thought about how their actions would affect future generations and used resources

sparingly and wisely. All these ideas can help shape students' minds to understand that there is more than one way to live and interact with each other and with the landscape around us.

Today's narrative in our curriculum standards begins with an overly simplistic story of cooperation with the coming of the Mayflower and the first Thanksgiving story. When that cooperation turns into disagreements, Indigenous people are generally pitted against the colonists and seen as the enemy in conflict with the United States' development. Once you get past the Louisiana Purchase, the Homestead Act, Westward Expansion, and the reservation system, everything seems to be settled and done. This story implies that the Indigenous people or "Indian Problem" was "dealt with" once they moved to their reservations. This is the narrative that is presented to students leading up to the 1900s.

I believe that there are many lost opportunities for learning by omitting what we at the museum called the "Hard History". Those in Connecticut would benefit by learning a little more about the Pequot War, King Philip's War, and The Treaty of Hartford. Native contributions in this country's history and to this country's philosophy are excluded, as school textbooks and curriculums only consider the written history of the winners: the English colonists who founded the original thirteen colonies. Yet history is so much more than what is written down- there are oral histories and living memories in Indigenous communities of their own intricate histories and interactions and their contributions. How many students, teachers, and parents know that the Iroquois Confederacy influenced our system of government? How many know that our state's name comes from an Algonkian word, the language of the people who have lived here for thousands of years? How many know that the oldest archaeological site in Connecticut was dated back to 12,500 years ago?

Perhaps most importantly, it brings into mind the famous quote, "those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it." – *George Santayana* We can never go back and undo the mistakes made in the past, but all that pain and suffering is for nothing if we do not learn from it. We owe it to our children, our state, and our country to do better. The future is wide and bright with promise, and it starts by helping those who will live in it to make it a vibrant and more inclusive place to be.

Thank you.

Darlene Kascak

Education Coordinator

The Institute for American Indian Studies

dkascak@iaismuseum.org

860 868-0518

