

Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation



Education Committee Public Hearing March 17, 2021

Testimony of Phyllip Thomas, Pequot Tribal Youth Council (Chairman) Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation

Concerning H.B. 6619 The Development of a Kindergarten to Eight Grade Model Curriculum

Kuweeqahsun (Good Morning) Nutusowees Naw Woquhs (My name is Seeing Fox)

My English name is Phyllip Thomas and I'm speaking before you today as the Chairman of the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Youth Council concerning House Bill 6619, which discusses the inclusion of Native American studies as a part of a newly established statewide model curriculum.

I'm a Pequot and Narragansett Native, and I have a liberal studies degree in Political Science and Economics from Pace University. I grew up in Mashantucket where my people have a Child Development Center but not an elementary school or a high school, so most of our youth attend Ledyard Public Schools or other schools throughout Southeastern Connecticut.

When I reminisce on my experience growing up in Ledyard Public Schools, it really wasn't the Native American history that I learned but the lack thereof, despite the fact that all of New London County was Pequot land before it was taken from us.

I'm here today to urge the Committee to take a step in the right direction toward the full inclusion of Indigenous people and our views—within Connecticut, generally, as well as within our public education system. To share an example of our views, Pequot people do not see the Treaty of Hartford of 1638 as a treaty at all.

Because my Pequot history isn't taught, most students in Connecticut do not understand how and why students like myself continue to be hurt by exclusion, misrepresentation and misunderstanding. The intergenerational trauma inherent within all Native Americans is a very real phenomenon and a difficult burden for Native students to carry. Yet, we don't have a choice, nor do we receive education in this subject through our public schools.

Perhaps all Connecticut students should watch the film at our museum called "The Witness" in order to help them better understand.

Excluding Pequot history from our public schools showed me, as a Native youth, that we don't matter to most people. Usually, we just try to fit in. To me, it felt like I was taking off a mask every time I came home from school.

Respectfully speaking, I don't understand why addressing this issue has taken so long, and we would urge the Committee to make the language stronger by instituting mandatory inclusion of a comprehensive Native American studies curriculum that also mandates course offerings for high school students. I agreed to speak today because I want to help create more pride in our Tribal Community among my younger relatives.

What we all need are schools that will work to create familiarity and bridges of understanding between Native and non-Native students. If this bill becomes law, the Connecticut public school system and student learning about Connecticut's tribal communities, culture, history and contributions can help to build those bridges faster and more effectively.

In closing, I want to share words from a great Native leader sharing wisdom about identity and leadership. Her name was Wilma Mankiller, and she said these two things:

"America would be a better place if leaders would do more long-term thinking."

And...

"An Indian is an Indian regardless of the degree of Indian blood or which little government card they do or do not possess."

Kutaputuyumuw (Thank you, all).