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Testimony on H.3 before the VT House Committee on Education
Chair Kathryn Webb, January 23, 2019 11 am

By Richard Holschuh, VT Commission on Native American Affairs



K'wlisp8zowi agakigamwinnoak m8wiwi! Nd'alamizi wji k'let8
pamgisgaak. Nd'elewizi Rich Holschuh ta nd'ai Wantastegok wji
Sokwakik ali Kwenitegok.

Good morning to you, the Education Committee! I am grateful for your
time today. I am called Rich Holschuh and I am of Brattleboro in the
south, on the Connecticut River

I speak as a voice for the Native, or indigenous, community, which - in
what is now called Vermont - is constituted primarily by the Abenaki
people, but certainly includes resident members of other Nations. The
charge of the VT Commission on Native American Affairs (VCNAA), of
which I am a member, is to advance the interests of all Native people in
the state, whether enrolled, not enrolled, or otherwise. We also
recognize that indigenous people (as a referent group) are connected
to places all over the Earth, and have been subject to the same
destructive effects of colonization, including displacement - some of
them to, and many of them, in the case of the Abenaki, from this land
called Vermont. Many other ethnic and social groups have since
encountered similar treatments from the dominant society.

*A significant difference among Native peoples and other ethnic minorities
and social groups:*

Indigeneity is a concept represented by the duality of a people and a
place. As a concept, it and they are inseparable. If there IS a separation,
the harm is essentially irreparable, and will manifest with innumerable,
well-known personal and social issues. To put it very simply, not until

2010 did the State of Vermont officially and finally recognize the Abenaki as the indigenous people of this land, and only after prolonged and adamant opposition. That is a small, but welcome beginning.

Later today, a Bill recognizing Indigenous Peoples' Day, in place of Columbus Day, will be introduced to the Vermont House, by Representative Brian Cina, with at least 2 dozen co-sponsors. The need for positive change continues.

As an ethnic group, indigenous people (the Abenaki, their allies, and their descendants) have been present in this land for over 10,000 years. Until very recently, this fact was disputed, obscured, ignored, or simply falsified, and so became the "Other" (*see the separate list – Document 2 - of official state history texts for graphic examples*). With this lack of inclusion, which is a lack of recognition, came a concurrent withholding of enfranchisement, to the point of exclusion and effectively elimination. Similarly, the more recent arrival or constituting of other disadvantaged ethnic and social groups has engendered comparable disparate treatment.

The consequent lack of representation in Vermont social and cultural educational curricula almost goes without saying, but it must be stated unequivocally, obviated by its glaring absence historically and, for the most part, contemporaneously. This formative absence necessarily carries through to the everyday social, economic, legal, and political realities of the State in due course. In a very literal sense, people do not know the true stories. As a matter of fact, they know the false stories.

The effect of this "not knowing" and this "disinformation" plays out in all (among others) of the previously documented examples, which have led directly to this particular Bill. Bias, exclusion, discrimination, marginalization, and disenfranchisement have been the shared experience, along with other ethnic and social groups, with the added – and by far not the least egregious – separation from their own homelands in a very real sense. I refer again to the concept of indigeneity.

Even so, within these many marginalized ethnic and social groups, the indigenous people of this country carry a disproportionate share of the

detrimental effects. They have the highest rates of suicide, alcoholism, school dropouts, incarceration, and violence against women, among others. This is the lived reality of this land's original people, at the hands of those who make policy and create the expectations.

Among the intents of the Bill under discussion is to address the findings of the Act 54 report on Racial Disparities in State Systems. The report was released in December 2017, just over a year ago, by the VT Attorney General and the Human Rights Commission. I testified for that report. I quote [Section 1(a)(3)] : It “found a surprising amount of coalescence around the most important issues” and “the primary over-arching theme was that we will be able to reduce racial disparities by changing the underlying culture of our state with regard to race.” One of the main suggestions for accomplishing this was to “teach children from an integrated curriculum that fairly represents both the contributions of People of Color (as well as indigenous people, women, people with disabilities, etc.), while fairly and accurately representing our history of oppression of these groups.”

Some points I wish to emphasize:

- Recognizing the previous experiences of indigenous peoples (both prior to and after the cultural impacts of ongoing colonization) and the drivers of those continuing challenges is a necessary part of learning how to nurture a more equitable society. Without understanding, there can be no change.
- Indigenous voices chosen for the Working Group and/or others conducting review and making curricular recommendations must be drawn from the Native community (vetted perhaps by the VCNA and tribal leadership), and not defaulted to a professed academic or professional expert. As Chief Don Stevens has said, “We speak for ourselves.”
- We recognize and embrace the reality that we share these social (or anti-social) impacts with many other ethnic and social groups, also the subject of this Bill, as our fellow human beings in a shared reality. We also recognize that the phrase “all our relations” encompasses all of Creation, with whom we are kindred, and that the destructive effects of separation that characterizes our modern society (and results directly in these social ills) has also

deeply affected the balance of beings on this Earth. This comprehensive understanding needs to be foundational in any educational approach toward equitable treatment.

- We see this “act relating to ethnic and social equity studies standards for public schools” as just a beginning, a move toward balance – an operative concept in indigenous life – and look forward to further constructive dialogue.

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Wantastegok wji Sokwakik

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