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H.645

Introduced by Representatives Cina of Burlington, Brumsted of Shelburne,  
Colburn of Burlington, Cordes of Lincoln, Dolan of Waitsfield,  
Elder of Starksboro, Houghton of Essex, Masland of Thetford,  
McCullough of Williston, Notte of Rutland City, Ode of  
Burlington, Rachelson of Burlington, Sims of Craftsbury, Small  
of Winooski, Surprenant of Barnard, Toleno of Brattleboro, and  
Vyhovsky of Essex

Referred to Committee on

Date:

Subject: Education; scholarship; VSAC; Abenaki language

Statement of purpose of bill as introduced: This bill proposes to create a  
scholarship program for people to learn the Abenaki language in existing  
postsecondary educational programs. It also proposes to create a pilot project  
to promote the development and expansion of community-based, year-round  
Abenaki language resources by providing grants to nonprofit organizations that  
currently offer Abenaki language courses.

An act relating to the creation of a scholarship program and pilot project  
grant program for the preservation of the Abenaki language

1 It is hereby enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Vermont:

2 Sec. 1. FINDINGS

3 The General Assembly finds that:

4 (1) Alnôbaôdwawôgan, the indigenous language of the Alnôbak  
5 (Abenaki people), is in danger of being completely lost due in part to the  
6 actions of the State of Vermont during its occupation of the unceded aboriginal  
7 Abenaki homelands of Ndakinna. According to UNESCO, there were an  
8 estimated 50 fluent speakers of the Abenaki language alive in 2006, and it is  
9 currently a critically endangered language. Without significant investment in  
10 language regeneration, Western Abenaki may no longer be spoken fluently by  
11 any living people after current generations pass away.

12 (2) Language is one of the ways that culture is preserved and transmitted  
13 across generations. The loss of the Abenaki language was a significant part of  
14 the erasure of indigenous culture that occurred as the result of the invasion and  
15 colonization of Abenaki territory by European traders and settlers.

16 (3) The State of Vermont has existed on the unceded aboriginal land of  
17 the Abenaki and Mohican its entire existence. Prior to Vermont self-declaring  
18 its occupation of the land in 1777, it is estimated that between 12,000 and  
19 16,000 Indigenous People were living in the region. Due to the fluidity of the  
20 Abenaki culture and the adaptability of a way of life rooted in subsistence on  
21 this land, the Abenaki people survived colonization and exist to this day in

1 Vermont despite enduring violence caused by the actions of the State of  
2 Vermont.

3 (4) As outlined in 2021 Acts and Resolves No. R-114, Vermont's State-  
4 sanctioned eugenics policies targeted Vermonters of Native American Indian  
5 heritage, including French-Indian and Abenaki families, and persons of mixed  
6 ethnicity and of French-Canadian heritage, as well as the poor and persons  
7 with disabilities, among others.

8 (5) The Vermont Eugenics Survey resulted in significant disruption of  
9 life for the people who were deemed undesirable by the English-speaking elite  
10 of Vermont. Vermont's effort to eliminate the use of traditional family  
11 languages by Abenaki and French-Indian people amplified generational trauma  
12 and disrupted the transmission of culture across generations, using the power  
13 of the State to support ethnocide.

14 (6) In the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, the Abenaki people demanded  
15 recognition and defended their aboriginal rights in the courts and advocated for  
16 changes in the executive and legislative policies of the State of Vermont  
17 toward the Abenaki people. State recognition was first granted by Governor  
18 Thomas Salmon in 1976, which included aboriginal hunting and fishing rights  
19 and established the first Indian Commission. However, this recognition was  
20 rescinded by Governor Richard Snelling. State recognition was finally  
21 restored through two bills in the Vermont Legislature in the 2000s. In 2010

1 Acts and Resolves No. 107, the General Assembly found that “state  
2 recognition confers official acknowledgment of the long-standing existence in  
3 Vermont of Native American Indians who predated European settlement and  
4 enhances dignity and pride in their heritage and community” and created the  
5 Vermont Commission on Native American Affairs “[in] order to recognize the  
6 historic and cultural contributions of Native Americans to Vermont, to protect  
7 and strengthen their heritage, and to address their needs in state policy,  
8 programs, and actions.”

9 (7) In 2019 Acts and Resolves No. 18, Vermont changed the State  
10 celebration of Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples’ Day to “aid in the  
11 cultural development of Vermont’s recognized tribes, while enabling all  
12 indigenous peoples in Vermont and elsewhere to move forward and formulate  
13 positive outcomes, from the history of colonization.”

14 (8) In 2020, Vermont created a free hunting and fishing license for  
15 certified citizens of Native American Indian tribes.

16 (9) In 2020, Vermont began to restore the use of the Abenaki language  
17 by adding Abenaki place names to State park signs.

18 (10) In 2021, the General Assembly issued Acts and Resolves No. R-  
19 114, a joint resolution sincerely apologizing and expressing sorrow and regret  
20 to all individual Vermonters and their families and descendants who were  
21 harmed as a result of State-sanctioned eugenics policies and practices. The

1 General Assembly resolved to continue work to “eradicate the lasting legacy of  
2 its prior actions by listening to and working with the affected individuals and  
3 communities.” The General Assembly also resolved to recognize that “further  
4 legislative action should be taken to address the continuing impact of State-  
5 sanctioned eugenics policies and related practices of disenfranchisement,  
6 ethnocide, and genocide.”

7 (11) The regeneration of the Abenaki language and the celebration of  
8 Abenaki culture would positively impact multiple social determinants of health  
9 for Abenaki people, including educational attainment, employment, race,  
10 ethnicity, sex, geography, and language preferences. Working in partnership  
11 with the Abenaki people to guarantee access to Abenaki language education  
12 would also contribute to the resolution of the structural conflict resulting from  
13 a social and community context perpetuated by the harmful actions of the State  
14 of Vermont.

15 (12) The General Assembly finds that supporting the work of the  
16 Nanawaldagik (the language keepers) to build community through providing  
17 access to Alnôbaôdwawôgan (Abenaki language) education is another  
18 important step toward reparation of the harm caused by the actions of the State  
19 of Vermont toward the Indigenous People of this land. In addition to  
20 acknowledging and mending the problems of our past, the General Assembly  
21 finds that the regeneration of the Alnôbaôdwawôgan (Abenaki language) and

1 the continued restoration of the Alnôbailowôwzowôgan (Abenaki culture)  
2 contributes greatly to the economic and social recovery from the pandemic for  
3 Alnôbak (Abenaki people) and other Vermonters, not only for the present  
4 generations but also for the future generations that dwell in Ndakinna.

5 Sec. 2. LEGISLATIVE INTENT

6 It is the intent of the General Assembly to engage with empowerment and in  
7 partnership with Nanawaldagik (the language keepers) and the Abenaki people  
8 to preserve and to restore the use of Alnôbaôdwawôgan (the Abenaki  
9 language) in Ndakinna (Vermont) across all of the aboriginal lands of the  
10 Wabanaki Confederacy and beyond. The General Assembly intends to explore  
11 ways to sustainably guarantee access to a wide range of options for learning  
12 the Abenaki language for all Abenaki people. In addition to the Abenaki  
13 people, all other Vermonters and all other Indigenous People of the Wabanaki  
14 Confederacy deserve access to learning the Abenaki language in order to  
15 support the Abenaki people in regenerating the use of the Abenaki language in  
16 Ndakinna. This act provides funding for a pilot project to work with the  
17 Abenaki language community to explore ways to expand Abenaki language  
18 education through existing language reclamation programs and to encourage  
19 the development of a wider range of options.

1 Sec. 3. 16 V.S.A. chapter 87, subchapter 4B is added to read:

2 Subchapter 4B. Abenaki Language Regeneration Scholarship Program

3 § 2858. ABENAKI LANGUAGE REGENERATION SCHOLARSHIP  
4 PROGRAM

5 (a) Definitions. As used in this section:

6 (1) “Eligible school” means an approved postsecondary education  
7 institution, as defined under section 2822 of this chapter, that is located in  
8 Vermont or an institution or organization offering certificate training or  
9 continuing education programs that is located in Vermont.

10 (2) “Eligible student” means an individual who satisfies the eligibility  
11 requirements under this section for a scholarship to learn the Abenaki  
12 language.

13 (3) “Program” means the Abenaki Language Regeneration Scholarship  
14 and Grant Program created under this section.

15 (b) Program creation. There is created the Abenaki Language Regeneration  
16 Scholarship and Grant Program to encourage the preservation and restoration  
17 of the Abenaki language in Vermont. The Program provides scholarships to  
18 eligible individuals as defined in subsection (a) of this section who wish to  
19 learn the Abenaki language.

20 (c) Administration of Program. The Program shall be administered by the  
21 Corporation. The Program provides scholarships to eligible individuals that

1 meet the eligibility requirements in subsection (d) of this section. The  
2 scholarship benefits provided under the Program shall be paid on behalf of the  
3 eligible individual by the Corporation, subject to the appropriation of funds by  
4 the General Assembly specifically for this purpose. The Corporation shall  
5 work with the Vermont Commission on Native American Affairs, Abenaki  
6 tribal governments, and indigenous-led organizations to ensure that Abenaki  
7 people from all communities are informed of the scholarship opportunities to  
8 the greatest extent possible.

9 (d) Eligibility for scholarships. To be eligible for a scholarship under the  
10 Program, an individual shall be accepted and enrolled, or have plans to enroll,  
11 in an Abenaki language program at an approved postsecondary education  
12 institution as defined in this chapter.

13 (e) Adoption of policies, procedures, and guidelines. The Corporation shall  
14 adopt policies, procedures, and guidelines that meet the legislative intent of  
15 this act and are necessary to implement the provisions of this section. The  
16 Corporation shall prioritize members of Abenaki communities when  
17 developing the policies, procedures, and guidelines.

18 (f) Reporting. On or before December 1 of each year, the Corporation shall  
19 report data and other relevant factors, including costs of the Program to date, to  
20 the House and Senate Committees on Education. The provisions of 2 V.S.A.

1 § 20(d) (expiration of required reports) shall not apply to the required report to  
2 be made under this subsection.

3 Sec. 4. APPROPRIATION FOR ABENAKI REGENERATION  
4 SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

5 The sum of \$250,000.00 is appropriated from the General Fund to the  
6 Corporation in fiscal year 2023 for the purpose of funding the Abenaki  
7 Language Regeneration Scholarship Program created under Sec. 3 of this act.

8 Sec. 5. ABENAKI LANGUAGE REGENERATION PILOT PROJECT AND  
9 REPORT

10 (a) Abenaki language regeneration pilot project. There is established a  
11 pilot project to promote the development of community-based, year-round  
12 Abenaki language resources by providing grants to eligible grant recipients as  
13 defined in subsection (b) of this section.

14 (b) Eligible grant recipients. As used in this section, “eligible grant  
15 recipient” means a nonprofit organization, or its designated fiscal sponsor, that  
16 is exempt from federal income tax under 26 U.S.C § 501(c)(3) that offers  
17 classes in the Abenaki language.

18 (c) Administration of pilot project. The pilot project shall be administered  
19 by the Agency of Education. Eligible grant recipients shall submit applications  
20 for this grant funding to the Agency of Education in a form developed by the  
21 Agency for this purpose on or before July 31, 2022. Applications shall be

1 reviewed within the context of the legislative intent of this act. If applications  
2 for grant funding exceed the funds appropriated for this purpose, the Agency  
3 shall prorate the grant awards. The Agency shall work with the Vermont  
4 Commission on Native American Affairs, Abenaki tribal governments, and  
5 indigenous-led organizations to ensure that Abenaki people from all  
6 communities are informed of the grant opportunities to the greatest extent  
7 possible.

8 (d) Use of funds. Grant recipients shall use the money awarded to them  
9 under the pilot project to fund current Abenaki language programs, explore  
10 ways to expand access to current Abenaki language programs, and explore the  
11 formation of new Abenaki language programs. Grant recipients shall work  
12 with the Vermont Commission on Native American Affairs, Abenaki tribal  
13 governments, and indigenous-led organizations to ensure that Abenaki people  
14 from all communities have access to language learning through pilot projects.  
15 Grant recipients shall demonstrate that pilot projects increase the overall  
16 number of Abenaki language learners across communities.

17 (e) Appropriations. The sum of \$250,000.00 is appropriated from the  
18 General Fund to the Agency of Education in fiscal year 2023 for the purpose of  
19 funding the pilot project established under this section.

1        (f) Report. On or before December 1, 2023, the Agency of Education, in  
2        consultation with the pilot project grant recipients, shall report to the House  
3        and Senate Committees on Education:

4                (1) the amount and recipient of each grant awarded;

5                (2) an itemized list of use of grant funds for each grant awarded; and

6                (3) recommendations to ensure the continued development,

7        sustainability, and funding of Abenaki language educational opportunities.

8        Sec. 6. EFFECTIVE DATE

9                This act shall take effect on passage.