

## Document 1

Written testimony on H.3 before the VT Senate Committee on Education  
Chair Philip Baruth, February 7, 2019

Given 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. My name is Rich Holschuh and I am from Brattleboro to the  
south, on the Connecticut River.*

As a member of the Vermont Commission on Native American Affairs, I offer a voice for the Native, or indigenous, community in what is now called Vermont, constituted primarily by the Abenaki people, but which certainly includes resident members of other Nations. The charge of the VT Commission on Native American Affairs (VCNAA) is to advance the interests of all Native people in the state. We also recognize that indigenous people (as a group) all over the Earth have been subject to the same marginalizing effects of colonization, including displacement – many of them, in the case of the Abenaki, from this land called Vermont. Likewise, many other ethnic and social groups have since encountered similar treatments from the dominant society.

*Please note 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 inherent and irreparable, and will manifest with innumerable, well-known personal and social issues. To put it 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.

In the House, a Bill recognizing Indigenous Peoples' Day, in place of Columbus Day, has been introduced by Representative Brian Cina, with 29 other 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. They ARE the original people of this place, a position that stands for itself and necessarily grounds and informs all that follows. Until very recently, this fact was disputed, obscured, ignored, or simply falsified, and so the Abenaki became the unacknowledged "Other" (*see the separate list - Document 2 - of official state history texts for graphic examples*). With this deliberate omission, which is dismissal, came a concurrent withholding of enfranchisement, to the point of exclusion and, effectively, elimination. Subsequently, the arrival or constituting of other disadvantaged ethnic and social groups has engendered similar disparate treatment.

The resultant lack of representation in Vermont's 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 false stories.

As a result of this misinformation - or in the vacuum of ignorance - bias, exclusion, discrimination, marginalization, and disenfranchisement have been the shared experience of the Abenaki, along with other ethnic and social groups, with the added - and by far not the least egregious - separation from their own homelands. I refer again to the concept of indigeneity and the very real consequences of its severing.

Within the many marginalized ethnic and social groups of our society, indigenous people carry a disproportionate share of 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. And here we are, considering responsive action to address those findings. The need for remediation is a long time coming: as long as Vermont has existed. I think we can all agree that it is long overdue and there is much restorative work to be done.

**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 the past, there can be no change for the future. This cannot be glossed over.
- Indigenous voices chosen for the constitution of the proposed 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 of Nulhegan Abenaki 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, who are also the subject of this Bill, as our fellow human beings in a shared reality. We also recognize that the Native phrase "all our relations" encompasses all of Creation, with whom we are literal 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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