

Wabanaki Studies Summer Institute 2026

“Rivers are not resources, they are kin,” Jennifer Neptune explained to an audience of twenty-six curriculum directors and teachers from across the state of Maine on the opening day of the Wabanaki Studies Summer Institute.

Jennifer is an accomplished Penobscot basketmaker and beadworker as well as a Registered Maine guide. Carrying on cultural traditions is what she does every day in her creative work. Explaining cultural traditions and their relationship to a Wabanaki worldview to educators is what she does in presentations like the one. A kinship view of rivers runs in opposition to an industrial view of rivers, and even to a recreational view of rivers. Holding a riverview requires not just a shift in thinking, but a shift in relationship. Wabanaki Studies invites both students and teachers to build relationships with rivers and the myriad life forms they nourish and support.

But a curriculum based in teaching relationship must also be developed in relationship, which is why the curriculum summer institute participants were learning about was created over the course of an eight-year collaboration between Wabanaki cultural educators and advisors and the Portland Public Schools. The result is a pre-K-12 curriculum which includes nearly 1,000 pages of detailed units, a series of custom documentary films, books by Wabanaki and other Indigenous authors, and artwork by Wabanaki artists. The curriculum in its entirety is the intellectual property not of the Portland Public Schools, but of the Wabanaki advisors who guided its development. This arrangement not only centers relationship, it also protects Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) from a wide range of extractive practices.

Though a state law passed in 2001 requires Wabanaki Studies to be taught in all Maine schools, there are few districts that are meeting the requirements of the law. In fact, the Portland Public Schools is the first district in the state to implement Wabanaki Studies, Pre-K-12. In order to uphold the district’s commitment both to respecting ICIP and to sharing the curriculum widely, Maine school districts can apply to use the curriculum. Applications are vetted, allowing Wabanaki advisors to continue to guide the process. Districts who are granted access must present a clear rationale and a detailed professional development plan. They are also required to send one teacher and one administrator to a multi-day summer institute.

Over the course of four days, institute participants heard from a variety of Wabanaki speakers, cultural educators, professors, and leaders, and from teachers in the Portland Public Schools. A central theme of the units they presented was how to respect and learn from rivers. Rivers and waterways define what is now called the state of Maine. They create its shape (in part) on maps, connect the many lakes of the state to its vast coast, and shape the worldview of the Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Wolostiquiyik/Maliseet, Mi’kmaq, and Abenaki people who have called this place home since time immemorial.

Learning in relationship to place is a central part of Wabanaki pedagogy and, as a result, a crucial part of the K-12 curriculum, which includes schoolyard relationship building activities as well as integrated fieldwork experiences for K-5 students. On a walk to the Presumpscot River,

institute participants learned about the glacial forces that shaped the river and the technologies of the people original to it. They also learned about the devastating impact of dams on river ecosystems. The treatment of sacred waterways as open sewers and industrial corridors has been repeated the world over. The key takeaway? Learn about a river near you, and you are learning the story of rivers everywhere. Develop a relationship with a river near you, and you are changing the story of rivers everywhere.

Wabanaki Studies may seem specific to this one small corner of the world, and it is, but it also isn't. Learning the 12,000+ year history of the original inhabitants of the land that I, and so many others, call home reshapes the relationship between people and place. Getting even a glimpse of a Wabanaki worldview leaves one's view of place changed for the better. Engage thousands of Maine students in a robust Wabanaki Studies curriculum and you shift the future of its rivers and communities.

—By Fiona Hopper

Fiona Hopper is the Social Studies Special Projects Coordinator for the Portland Public Schools. She has worked in public education in a variety of roles since 2004. In 2018, she began collaborating with Wabanaki advisors and Portland Public Schools teachers to create the first comprehensive, pre-K-12 Wabanaki Studies curriculum in the state of Maine. Currently, she is leading a similar initiative around local African American history.

The Wabanaki Studies Summer Institute was co-hosted by the Portland Public Schools and the Osher Map Library at the University of Southern Maine. A special thanks to Libby Bischof, Director of the Osher Map Library at the University of Southern Maine and Esther Ann (Passamaquoddy), Policy Associate at the Cutler Institute for their collaboration, fundraising, and willingness to join in this initiative.