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LD 974, Resolve, Directing the Department of Education to Convene a Stakeholder Group to Improve High School Graduation Rates and Review Policies Related to Graduation Rate Data

Topic: Improving Maine’s graduation rates, based on recommendations of the 2025 Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI) Report on Analysis of Maine’s High School Graduation Rates

Context

Resolve 2025, Chapter 75 directed the Department of Education (DOE) to convene a stakeholder group for two meetings to discuss strategies to improve Maine’s high school graduation rates, based on the recommendations of the 2025 report from the Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI).

The 2025 MEPRI Report on Analysis of Maine’s High School Graduation Rates (MEPRI Report) provided the following recommendations:

- The accessibility, quality, and reliability of Maine’s education data present a challenge to researchers engaging in this work.
 - Reconsider the policy on data suppression, which obscures data with a number less than 5.
 - Consider additional classifications for multi-lingual learner (MLL) students and special education students, to gain a more nuanced understanding of these sub-populations.
 - Consider requiring Maine schools to gather and report on more data to the state, including:
 - Students’ post-secondary plans;
 - District graduation requirements;
 - Upper-level course offerings, including AP course offerings.
 - Strengthen state and district data platforms for reporting education data to provide increased transparency and understanding for stakeholders.

This report will cover the following topics:

1. A brief description of the stakeholder group, its meetings, and its topics of discussion.
2. An overview of the Maine DOE’s data policies, what data is collected, and how it can be obtained.

3. An overview of strategies and initiatives utilized by the Maine DOE and Maine's school administrative units (SAUs) to support students through high school graduation and beyond.
4. Conclusions and recommendations from the stakeholder group.

Actions

As directed by Resolve 2025, Chapter 75 (LD 974), the Maine DOE convened a stakeholder group for two in-person meetings. In each meeting, there was representation from Maine's superintendents, principals, and educators, as well as from the Maine DOE's Data Team and the Office of School and Student Supports.

The group convened for two 3-hour meetings, held on October 17th and November 7th, 2025. Each meeting centered on one of the two overarching themes from LD 974: robust, accessible data, and promising interventions to bolster Maine's high school graduation rates.

The October 17th meeting focus was data. The group was joined by the MEPRI researchers who published the 2025 MEPRI Report on Analysis of Maine's High School Graduation Rates. MEPRI shared their methodology, findings, and recommendations for further action. Then, the Maine DOE's Data Team presented on their work in building a statewide longitudinal data system (SLDS), an ongoing priority for the Maine DOE, which mirrors many of the data-focused recommendations provided by MEPRI. This work has been ongoing, with a focus on collaborating with school leaders in Maine. Since MEPRI's central recommendations in their 2025 report focused on data management, this conversation was vital to the mission of the stakeholder group.

The November 7th meeting focus was on promising practices in bolstering Maine's high school graduation rates. This meeting was framed through a presentation by the Maine DOE's Office of School and Student Supports (OSSS), with robust participation and conversation among the stakeholders. An initial list of recommendations was generated at this meeting, which the stakeholder group refined over a period of weeks, asynchronously. These recommendations are included in the "Recommendations" section in this report.

Findings: Data

Summary Statement

The Maine DOE has undertaken significant work in the area of data management, specifically in building the statewide longitudinal data system (SLDS) and bringing it to fruition. The primary focus of this work is to support Maine's SAUs in utilizing the SLDS to make data-driven decisions for the benefit of their students. The Maine DOE has a robust data system, available to Maine's school leaders, as well as contracted researchers such as MEPRI. Data suppression is used for cohort sizes below an "n" of 5, in order to protect individual students from being identified.

Statewide Longitudinal Data System

The establishment of a Statewide Longitudinal Data System has been an ongoing priority of the Maine DOE. The goal is a longitudinal system where data is used in a way that supports the work of Maine DOE, SAUs and schools, and other state agencies, a central repository of Maine student data. Prior to the establishment of the SLDS, the data was available but only as spreadsheets; the new system allows for a more interactive experience that makes the data easier to understand and more accessible for all users, while still maintaining the capacity to download the information.

This system allows for greater efficiency and provides more in-depth information to SAUs and schools. Rather than SAUs having to pull together their own data from multiple sources in spreadsheets, which is time-consuming and prone to human error, the SLDS creates a series of internal dashboards to help them have all of these resources and data in one location. Through an SAU's data dashboard, each SAU can access unsuppressed data collected in one place for efficient access. One example of this is the Comprehensive Needs Assessment (CNA), a tremendous task that SAUs need to complete each year, often requiring many hours of work. Use of the SLDS has streamlined the process so that all the data is now available in a dashboard and ready for use. Future iterations will also have visualizations, so SAUs can better analyze trends and potential areas of need for their students.

The greatest priority for the Maine DOE Data Team is to collaborate with SAUs on their data needs, helping them craft sound policy based on student realities measured by this data. An example of this is the graduation dashboard. This tool allows SAUs and schools to review the aggregate numbers of students, drill down to examine the groups of students showing gains year over year, while highlighting groups of students that need additional support. The dashboards allow for a high level of customization, so that SAUs can conduct deep analysis of progress year over year and plan for the future.

Data Suppression Policy

One concern that arose from the MEPRI report was regarding the Maine DOE's data suppression policy. The Maine DOE's data policies are based on federal and state laws, such as the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), state regulations, and Maine statutes. Since the purpose of these federal and state laws is to protect the personally identifiable information of students, it is essential that Maine's policies on data suppression are stout enough to meet that requirement. The Data Policies are published on the Maine DOE website and are linked in the "References" section of this report.

Compared to our neighbors in New England, Maine has the lowest suppression threshold, a student group size of less than 5. Regional data suppression policies are illustrated in Table 1, below, showing that student data is suppressed in most other New England states when the n-size is twice as many students. Maine's unique landscape of small, rural schools and local control is a significant factor in MEPRI's recommendations. Maine simply has more SAUs with a cohort size necessitating suppression than other New England states.

Table 1:

State	Minimum N-Size	Source / Policy Reference
Maine (DOE)	5	Maine DOE Public Suppression Policy (2021, PDF)
Connecticut (CSDE)	5	EdSight Data Suppression Rules (PDF)
Rhode Island (RIDE)	10	Special Education 618 Data Collections Rhode Island Assessment Data Portal User's Guide
Vermont (AOE)	11	VT Agency of Education – Testimony on Student Data Privacy (2022)
Massachusetts (ESE/DOE)	10 for performance 6 for demographic	Researcher's Guide to MA Educational Data (2016)
New Hampshire (NHDOE)	11	NHDOE Accountability Technical Manual (ESSA)

Findings: Promising Practices to Bolster Maine's Graduation Rates

Summary Statement:

As discussion turned towards promising practices regarding bolstering Maine's graduation rates, a few clear trends emerged:

- Student belonging, engagement, and support
- Addressing chronic absenteeism
- Educator support and professional development
- Providing direct, additional supports to targeted vulnerable populations, as highlighted in MEPRI's report

Student Belonging, Engagement, and Support

Positive student-adult relationships are a significant predictor of student success. Therefore, it is vital that schools provide authentic opportunities for student engagement. Frameworks such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and Building Assets, Reducing Risk (BARR), and initiatives including advisory periods focus on school climates that celebrate and support student achievement beyond academics and athletics, which are all important strategies for strengthening a school's graduation rate.

BARR is a student engagement framework that involves K-12 coaching and training and has an established history of raising student math and reading scores, increasing teacher satisfaction and retention, decreasing chronic absenteeism, and decreasing student disciplinary incidents and suspensions. The BARR system uses eight interlocking strategies that build intentional relationships and utilizes real-time data to enable schools to achieve concrete academic, and non-academic outcomes for every student. The focus of BARR is not just for some students but all students. Teachers reported increased collaboration, satisfaction, and their ability to use data effectively. School culture and climate were improved. Today, BARR operates in nearly 500 schools nationwide and works in all grade levels, K-12, including in more than 100 schools in Maine. The Maine schools who are using BARR have collected data showing increased attendance, reduced behavioral issues, and reduced course failures (one course failure in 9th grade is a well-documented predictor for dropping out).

Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS) is a multi-tiered approach to supporting the social, emotional, and behavioral development of students in K-12 settings. The purpose of PBIS is to improve the social, emotional, and academic outcomes for all students, including students with disabilities and students from underrepresented groups. While PBIS has long been used in Maine's elementary schools, more middle and high schools have shown interest in the model.

In recent years, there has been a significant investment in developing and celebrating alternative pathways to graduation. Students are eager for hands-on, relevant learning that explicitly ties classroom learning to real-world application.

For example, Career and Technical Education (CTE) has grown in popularity as the 27 centers and regions in the state have established new programs and expanded access to others. In the 2025-26 school year, more than 11,000 students have enrolled in CTE programs, which is a 30% increase since 2018. CTE provides Maine students from all backgrounds with the opportunity for relevant and challenging applied learning, enhancing their occupational, personal, and academic success while preparing them to meet the needs of the Maine workforce. CTE offers in-depth training as well as middle and high school exploration into career pathways for all students. All Maine SAUs are connected to a CTE and can utilize these engaging and effective programs to promote student engagement and persistence through graduation.

In the last five years, Extended Learning Opportunities (ELOs) have expanded to 38 Maine DOE-supported programs in 13 counties. ELOs are experiences outside of the traditional classroom, with an emphasis on community-based career exploration, which may be credit-bearing. ELOs are hands-on, and students can earn elective or core credit. These programs include paid work experiences, expanded educational opportunities in rural Maine, skills development, and increased engagement of otherwise disengaged youth. These programs are effective in promoting student engagement and sense of belonging in their community.

Yet another promising innovation in Maine is outdoor education. Outdoor education is organized learning that happens outside and allows students to interact with the natural environment. With support from existing partners in environmental, nature-based education, as well as from educators using outdoor education throughout the state, the Maine DOE is working to grow and expand the use of outdoor education, and to provide Maine SAUs with promising practices to utilize these high-engagement strategies with their students. To this effect, the Maine Outdoor Learning Initiative (MOLI) is a statewide effort to connect Maine's young people to the outdoors through engaging, hands-on learning opportunities.

Addressing Chronic Absenteeism

Increased rates of chronic absenteeism have been a national trend in schools since COVID, and one that Maine schools have endeavored to tackle in a comprehensive, compassionate way. Chronic absenteeism is defined as a student missing 10% or more of their days enrolled, regardless of whether those days were excused or unexcused. Since a COVID-era high, Maine's statewide chronic absenteeism rate has declined considerably, however nearly a quarter of Maine students are considered to be "chronically absent."

Table 2:

	Chronically Absent Students	Total Students	Chronic Absenteeism Rate (%)
2024-25	40,414	167,922	24.07%
2023-24	40,897	169,680	24.1%
2022-23	46,007	171,622	26.81%
2021-22	53,257	171,220	31.1%

In response to this trend, the Maine DOE established a transformative collaboration, the Maine Engagement and Attendance Center (MEAC). MEAC involves representatives from across Maine DOE offices as well as external partners such as Count ME In. Since its establishment in 2024, MEAC has created and disseminated the Attendance Toolkit to Maine SAUs and hosts regular Office Hour sessions to help support districts in promoting increased school attendance. More information on MEAC can be located here: <https://www.maine.gov/doe/meac>.

Educator Support and Professional Development

A critical finding of the stakeholder group was that the personnel charged with supporting vulnerable student populations were sometimes over-extended in their capacity, tasked with “wearing too many hats” at once.

Similarly, when effective interventions are identified and adopted, all school staff must be provided with training in order to implement that intervention with fidelity. When tackling core issues like chronic absenteeism, student engagement and belonging, and increasing the high school graduation rate, it is not enough for training to only be provided to professional teaching staff. All school staff, including bus drivers, nutrition staff, educational technicians, and front office staff, all have roles to play in promoting student engagement in school. While some Maine schools are able to absorb these professional development demands into their plans and budgets, this does constitute a significant burden for many of Maine’s SAUs.

Supporting Vulnerable Populations

As noted in the MEPRI report, long-term, population-level demographic changes in Maine have significantly impacted Maine’s schools. With greater incidences of homeless youth, higher numbers of children experiencing the stressors of poverty, and a higher special education identification rate, it is clear that Maine’s youth are arriving at school with greater challenges than Maine’s students from a decade or more ago. When these societal pressures arrive at the school doors, Maine’s school staff meet these children with open hearts and skilled targeted interventions. However, all schools have limited resources and numerous worthwhile investments to make, and Maine’s most vulnerable students often reside in SAUs that have fewer local resources available to them.

Strong investment in statewide initiatives can help to support vulnerable student populations and help to ameliorate some of the societal challenges that Maine students face. However, with each added intervention, there must be staff who are trained and have the capacity to execute the intervention, build a trusting relationship with the impacted students, and monitor their progress. Additionally, funding must be stable, ongoing, and great enough to meet the need. With each new initiative, when the interest and need greatly outsize the material and financial constraints of the initiatives, trust with educators is reduced.

The “Buffet” of Options

Given Maine’s local control of public schools and the vast diversity of school size, demographics, and need, it is important to emphasize that there is no single intervention that will serve all of Maine’s SAUs. What works in Lubec may not work in Kittery, and what works in Portland may not work in Skowhegan. Therefore, it is important that, at the statewide level, we provide an array of options that allow SAUs enough flexibility to meet their needs, and that the Maine DOE continues to provide guidance and technical assistance so that SAUs are knowledgeable about all of the options, and can choose interventions that best fit their community’s needs.

Interventions and strategies discussed in this stakeholder group and report include:

- Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey (MIYHS)
- Building Assets, Reducing Risk (BARR)
- Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS)
- Career and Technical Education (CTE)
- Extended Learning Opportunities (ELO)
- Maine Outdoor Learning Initiative (MOLI)
- School-Based Health Centers
- Community School Model
- Maine DOE Attendance Toolkit
- Maine Engagement and Attendance Center (MEAC)
- Count ME In
- Restorative Practices

Recommendations and Conclusions

Policy Recommendations

- Amend the definition of “drop-out” in Title 20-A §5102 to ensure that students who complete their high school education through Adult Education are not considered drop-outs.
- To utilize the 6-year graduation rate as the primary measure for high school graduation, which would allow for students with disabilities and disrupted education to be more accurately counted in a school’s graduation rate, in line with Title 20-A §6214.

Student-Focused Recommendations

- For the Legislature and the Maine DOE to continue supporting interventions with strong evidence of success, such as those described in the “Findings” section.

Staff-Focused Recommendations

- As the Legislature considers changes to the Essential Programs and Services model (EPS), consider increased funding for roles such as school counselors and social workers, as these positions often get tasked with required administrative duties, on top of regular, student-facing duties.

Data and Communications Recommendations

- For the Maine DOE to continue enhancing its Data Dashboard through the continuation of the Statewide Longitudinal Data System (SLDS), and to promote its use through its various communications channels.
 - For the Maine DOE to continue partnering directly with school leaders at Maine’s SAUs to support the implementation of the SLDS.
- For the Maine DOE to effectively communicate data regarding student performance and graduation rates to stakeholders and communities.

References

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