

MEPRI Report on Analysis of Maine's High School Graduation Rates



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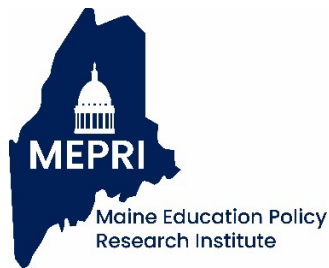
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Overview of the Study

Why was this study conducted? The Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI) conducted the study presented in this report at the request of the Maine State Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. The purpose of the study was two-fold: 1) to compile available data on high school graduation rates for Maine students, disaggregating the data for a variety of student subgroups to explore patterns over time; and 2) to describe the Maine State Diploma Program and how often it has been used. Examining graduation rates can help us better understand how well prepared students are for post-secondary education and work, and provide one indicator of how well high schools are helping students to meet those goals.

What do you need to know to put this study into context? High school graduation remains an important rite of passage in Maine and elsewhere. More importantly, it is deemed a critical gateway for post-secondary work, higher education or other training. Maine pursued the goal of proficiency-based high school diplomas briefly from 2012 to 2018. The state specifies minimum requirements for high school graduation in terms of the number of years of coursework in different subject areas and local school systems may choose to exceed those minimum standards.

What did we learn from this study? This study covered multiple topics related to high school graduation policy and trends: high school graduation rates, alternative pathways for high school completion, minimum state standards for high school graduation, and discusses some specific challenges related to accessing and using Maine education data. The study also describes various national efforts and indicators for measuring and reporting on school performance and education quality. We summarize key findings below for each of these topics.

Statewide High School Graduation Rates (MEPRI examined data from 2012 to 2022)

- Maine's statewide high school graduation rate was 86% in spring 2022 which is consistent with the national average of 87%.
- The national rate rose steadily from 2012 (80%) to 2019 (87%). In the first year of the pandemic, there was a slight dip and then it returned to 87%.
- Maine's statewide four-year graduation rate has slowly trended upward from 85% in 2013 to 87% in 2019 and 2020, then went to 86% in 2021 and 2022.
- The six-year graduation rate went from 88% in 2013 to 90% in 2020, indicating more students are taking longer to graduate.
- There was a wide variation in graduation rates across high schools in the state and across years for the same schools.
- Some alternative schools had very low graduation rates, with only about a third of the cohort graduating.

- Statewide, Maine high schools with larger cohorts (101 or more students in the graduating cohort) appear to have higher graduation rates than schools with smaller graduating cohorts.
- While larger high schools in Maine had more stable graduation rates from 2012-2022, schools with a high concentration of multilingual learners had larger variation in graduation rates.
- Virtual schools such as the Maine Connections Academy and Maine Virtual Academy reported upward trends in graduation rates.
- Maine Department of Education (MDOE) policy requires the state to suppress data in instances where the student count is five or fewer, and sometimes more, to protect the privacy of individual students. This policy affects the data reported for smaller high schools in particular, given their smaller student cohorts. Data suppression means that the actual graduation rates for some high schools are not publicly reported in some years, although a statewide graduation rate is available. Readers are cautioned about this limitation regarding school-level graduation rates.

Graduation Rates for Subgroups

- Nationwide, there has been an increase in the percentage of low-income students (70%-81%), English Language Learners (57%-72%) and students with disabilities (59%-71%) graduating from high school from 2011 to 2022.
- Most of the student subgroups we examined with Maine data have considerably lower graduation rates than the total student population.
- **Economic Disadvantage.** Since 2012, there was an almost fifty percent increase in the number of economically disadvantaged high school students in Maine, and this group made up 46% of the 2022 graduating cohort. The graduation rate for Maine's economically disadvantaged students was 78% in 2022 compared to a graduation rate of 93% for non-economically disadvantaged students.
- **Homeless and Foster Care.** There has also been a doubling in the number of homeless students from 2012 to 2022. Homeless students made up 3.5% of the 2022 graduation cohort. The graduation rates for homeless students (59%) and students in foster care (57%) are significantly below the statewide rate for all students (86%).
- **Military-connected.** Students that have guardians or parents in the military accounted for 1% of the 2022 cohort and graduated at similar rates as all students did statewide.
- **Special Education.** Maine has seen an increase in the number of students in special education since 2012 at the same time when there has been a decline in the number of students overall. The percentage of students in the graduating cohort who receive special education services rose from 15% to 21% by 2020; this was the highest percentage in the nation. Graduation rates for this subgroup rose from 68% in 2012 to 73% in 2022, and were lower than the statewide graduation rates for those years (84% and 86%).

- **Multilingual Learner.** The number of multilingual learners in the graduating cohort almost doubled between 2012 and 2022. In 2022, multilingual learners comprised three percent of the graduating cohort. The graduation rates for multilingual learners varied from 70% to 81% and are lower than the statewide rates for all students.
- **Race.** In Maine, the percentage of White students declined from 94% in 2012 to 87% in 2022. Graduation rates for American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander were suppressed for Maine students. Graduation rates for Black or African American and Hispanic or Latino students were lower than rates for White students or the statewide rates for all students. Asian students had higher graduation rates than White students or the statewide rates for all students.
- **Gender.** Since 2012, the graduation rates of both males and females have increased by four percentage points. Maine follows the national trend of males having lower high school graduation rates than females. In 2022, 84% of males graduated compared to 89% of females.

State Standards for High School Graduation

- Maine's graduation standards are outlined in statute, which specifies the number of years of coursework students must complete to be eligible for high school graduation. Local school systems may choose to set standards that exceed the state's minimum requirements.
- The Education Commission of the States compared minimum graduation standards across the nation. Maine has among the lowest graduation standards of the 46 states that specify standards for graduation. Maine's minimum requirement for two years of math, science and social studies for high school graduation are lower than other states that require more years in these subjects. Maine does not specify coursework time for physical education, health, world languages or technology which some other states do require (ECS, 2023).
- Maine's minimum standards for high school graduation requiring at least two years of coursework in math are not aligned with the state's public universities' admissions requirements. Both the University of Maine and the University of Southern Maine require a minimum of three years of math coursework for admissions. Massachusetts and Rhode Island found similar misalignment between their state standards for graduation and college admissions, and Rhode Island revised their minimum state standards.

Pathways for High School Completion

- **Maine State Diploma.** The Maine Department of Education may issue a Maine State Diploma for students who experience a significant interruption in their education. There is an application process and criteria for eligibility. This provision has existed for over a decade. The number of Maine State Diplomas granted prior to September 2021 was less than three dozen. By contrast, just after the pandemic, 214 Maine State Diplomas were

awarded in 2021-22, 421 in 2022-23 and 384 in 2023-24, with the vast majority (96% or more) being related to the pandemic disruption to education. The pandemic provision will expire in September 2026.

- **Alternative Completion Pathways.** For adults who do not complete high school but wish to do so, there are two options in Maine: 1) Students can obtain educational support and work toward a diploma through an adult education program in their school district, or 2) students can take the HiSET test which replaced the General Education Diploma (GED) test in Maine.
- **Seal of Biliteracy.** Since 2011, Maine has offered a Seal of Biliteracy to high school graduates who demonstrate proficiency in English and an additional language. It is a nationally recognized seal that appears on the diploma and transcript. In 2023, the MDOE awarded the seal to 490 students in 39 different schools. Based on the states' student demographic data, this program appears to be underutilized and could be awarded to a larger number of students.
- **International Baccalaureate.** The International Baccalaureate is an international program started in 1968 that uses a specific curriculum for high school students electing this option. Currently the program is offered in only four Maine high schools.

Measuring and Reporting on Education Quality

- With the goal of increased transparency and accountability, governmental and non-governmental organizations nationally aim to make education data more easily available for stakeholders.
- Federal law through the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) requires school districts and states to publicly report a variety of education data and school information each year (that does not identify individual students). Yet, many states fall short of making these required data easily available and usable. A recent national review of states' ESSA report cards found many instances of missing data for most states, and gave a low rating of "fair" for the usability of Maine's educational data. Virginia and Ohio were noted as exemplars for their clear communication of education data (Polikoff, 2024). The Maine Department of Education has been working to improve the data shared on its webpages, including the ESSA-mandated reporting. In the meantime, there is still considerable education data missing or not yet publicly available.
- Various national organizations collect and report education data across states and schools, using a variety of measures and indicators, and some rate school performance. Some of these organizations include: the Grad Partnerships, US News, and GreatSchools.
- Students' ability to take Advanced Placement courses is dependent on the school they attend. This factor produces high variation in access to advanced courses across content areas and in student participation rates for AP courses across high schools in the state.

- Standardized tests like the ACT or SAT are less useful as measures of students' academic achievement and readiness for college as participation rates for these tests have declined in recent years, and some higher education institutions no longer require these tests for admission.
- Post-secondary outcomes for students are also difficult to collect and track as one indicator of high school quality and students' preparation for jobs or further education. Massachusetts collects and shares aggregate data on students' post-secondary plans by school district. This information about Maine high schools and students is not publicly available.

Challenges with Maine Education Data

- Stakeholders in Maine need to be able to easily access, interpret and reliably use the state's education data to assess educational progress, gaps and needs, but there are many problems with the state's education data. Missing data and data suppression create significant gaps in the education data that make the data less reliable and useable to inform decision making. A lack of general reporting and well-designed and maintained data platforms are additional problems that limit access, transparency and accountability for educational outcomes.
- While local high schools publish the names of individual high school graduates each year, graduation rates reported by the MDOE for many small schools across the state are suppressed to protect the privacy of students who do not graduate. Almost a third of all high school graduation rates were suppressed during the ten-year period examined for this report, and 82% of graduation rates were suppressed for small high schools. The lack of data reported makes it difficult to know what the real graduation rates are for some schools, and reduces transparency for school accountability.
- The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data are reported by each state's education agency. Because the Maine Department of Education is the sole source of some education data for Maine, issues with data quality impact national analysis of data. In reviewing NCES data, Maine was the only state that had duplicate data for two consecutive years for one data table.
- Data displayed on the MDOE website for multilingual learners indicated that over 1,500 students in two districts of 5,000 students were not proficient in English. This is equivalent to 30% of students in those two districts. According to NCES data, less than seven percent of children in these two districts come from homes where English is not spoken proficiently. These two sources of data show conflicting information.

What did we conclude overall from this study? Policymakers, educators, parents and researchers all need reliable information to assess the performance of schools and quality of education statewide and at the local level. Yet, it can be challenging to access and interpret publicly available data, particularly in Maine. Much of the high school graduation data is

suppressed for privacy by the state, making it difficult to determine the actual graduation rates. This problem exists with other types of Maine education data as well.

Some suggestions to improve the accuracy and usefulness of the state's education data include the following:

- Given the large gaps or missing data in the state's education data, the state should re-examine policy and practice on data suppression to see if more data can safely be reported for better tracking of educational progress.
- The state uses different definitions of multilingual learners that cause confusion in data reporting. A more clear and consistent definition should be adopted.
- Given the wide variation in English proficiency for multilingual learners and ELL students, the state could create more sub-categories for these groups to disaggregate data for reporting and more informative data.
- Similarly, students in special education have very different learning abilities, so breaking this group into mild versus severe or other sub-categories to disaggregate data for reporting would provide more informative data.
- Maine does not currently report students' post-secondary plans as other states do. This information would provide data to track changes in students' aspirations over time.
- The state does not report high school graduation requirements by district. Collecting and reporting this information would help us to understand what portion of Maine high schools have graduation requirements that exceed the state's minimum requirements.
- The Maine Department of Education and school district should continue their efforts to improve their data platforms to make more data readily accessible, in ways that communicate clearly. Robust and reliable data platforms are needed and must be maintained to meet federal reporting requirements for education data and also increase transparency for stakeholders.

Introduction

The Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI) conducted the study presented in this report at the request of the Maine State Legislature’s Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. The purpose of the study was two-fold: 1) to compile available data on high school graduation rates for Maine students, disaggregating the data for a variety of student subgroups to explore patterns over time; and 2) to describe the Maine State Diploma Program and how often it has been used. Examining graduation rates can help us better understand how well prepared students are for post-secondary education and work, and provide one indicator of how well Maine high schools are helping students to meet those goals. In addition to examining the two central topics, MEPRI also researched high school graduation requirements for Maine and other states. This study also provides useful insights into the challenges of accessing and using Maine’s statewide education data.

Background Context

Driving through Maine in June, one may see light posts and digital signs bearing pictures and names of the town’s high school graduates. Families post yard signs with pictures of their recent high school graduates. Local schools are an important source of community pride in Maine, with high school graduation being a widely celebrated occasion and public recognition of individual students’ accomplishments. In all parts of the country, graduation from high school continues to be a milestone event.

More importantly, high school graduation opens career doors and allows access to higher education. Recent labor statistics from 2022 show that high school graduates earn 25% more in wages than non-graduates (McLaren, 2024a). Increasingly, high school graduation is viewed not as an end goal or terminal education degree, but as preparation for post-secondary training that can take the form of certification, military enlistment or enrollment in post-secondary education.

In Maine and most states, state statutes specify the minimum requirements for high school graduation. Local school districts determine their own curriculum in Maine and can go beyond the state’s minimum standards for high school graduation if they wish. Given the strong tradition of local control in Maine, there is variability in both curricula and graduation requirements across the state’s school districts, creating very different kinds of educational opportunity to learn for students. Beginning in 2012, Maine attempted significant policy change regarding how high school diplomas were to be awarded, preparing to implement and require

proficiency-based diplomas. But the shift proved unpopular and logistically challenging, and the goal was ultimately reversed in 2018 (Barnum, 2018). Current law sets minimum requirements in terms of the number of years for coursework by subject area for high school graduation. Alternative pathways and other options for completing high school are also available and described in this report.

Organization of the Report

In the sections that follow, we first describe our research methods for this study. We then present findings from our in-depth, statewide and disaggregated analysis of publicly available data on student high school graduation rates. We describe how Maine's statewide high school graduation rate compares to other states and the nation. We then report findings from our analysis of the data on graduation rates for specific student sub-groups.

This report also considers the broader topic of educational opportunities that support well-prepared high school graduates. Specifically, we describe state standards specifying the minimum requirements for high school graduation in Maine (for example, how many years of coursework are required in different subject areas), and how Maine's state standards compare with other states.

To address the second part of the study, we discuss the Maine State Diploma Program (an alternative program for students who have had their education interrupted), and we describe the criteria for that option and how it's been used. We also describe other pathways for high school completion.

Another section of the report describes various national efforts to measure and report on school performance and education quality. Throughout the report, we describe our steps to access publicly available data on high school graduation rates and other education data from the Maine Department of Education (MDOE) website, and outline the specific challenges related to the accessibility, quality and reliability of that data. This study illustrates many of the recurring challenges we and other researchers have had related to state education data in the past several years.

The report concludes with a brief summary of key findings, implications and some recommendations related to improving access, quality and reliability of state education data.

Research Methods

We used digital databases to search for research literature and media reports using key words. We describe what we learned from the literature throughout the report, where relevant to the topic being discussed. We also examined relevant policies on high school graduation including statutes, administrative rules and decisions by the Commissioner of Education. Additionally, we accessed general information from Maine Department of Education webpages (e.g., MDOE, 2024a).

To facilitate a comprehensive analysis of high school graduation rates and patterns across Maine school districts, we retrieved the Longitudinal Graduation Report data from the MDOE Data Warehouse as of December 12, 2024 (MDOE, 2024a). This dataset encompasses a rich collection of information spanning the years 2012 to 2022, providing both school-level and state-level data on students' graduation rates in the state of Maine. Appendix A explains the process we used to obtain data on high school graduation rates from the MDOE Data Warehouse. Special Education data and Multilingual Learner (English language learner) data were also obtained. We consulted the ESSA section of the MDOE Data Warehouse several times.

Graduation data were analyzed by the size of the graduating student cohort. High schools were grouped into categories based on their typical graduating cohort size for longitudinal (ten-year) analysis. Results were collected in tables and graphs for this report. Appendix B provides a table with statewide high school graduation rates for students graduating in four, five and six years from 2013-2022. Trends in size and graduation rates of sub-groups were noted. Appendix C includes tables and graphs that break down the graduation rates for specific student subgroups from 2012-2022.

Additional data on special education students and district demographics were obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2024b, 2024c) website. Data for the NCES website are supplied by each state's education agency (NCES, 2024a).

Information on the Maine State Diploma program was obtained through an interview in fall 2024 with a staff member working within that area in the MDOE and through a review of related information from documents and webpages.

Findings from the Study

High School Graduation Rates for Maine and US

There are different approaches to estimating high school graduation rates, as not all students graduate within four years. Nationally, the most common one is the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACRG), which is the number of students who graduate in four years. The number of ninth graders is adjusted to account for students transferring in and out of a school. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) adopted the ACGR in 2010 and compiles data reported by each state's education agency. The most recent compilation includes data from spring 2022. The national four-year graduation rate was 87% and the national median was 86%. Maine's statewide high school graduation rate was similar at 86% (NCES, 2023). The national rate rose steadily from 2012 (80%) to 2019 (87%). In the first year of the pandemic, there was a slight dip and then it returned to 87% (Modan, 2024).

The four-year high school graduation rates do not reflect the fact that a significant number of young adults complete high school with an equivalent credential. Therefore, the number of high school completers is actually higher. A second common approach to estimating high school graduation rates includes students who graduate in five or six years, or obtain an equivalent credential such as a GED. According to a recent Current Population Survey using this measurement approach, the high school completion rate rose from 89% in 2007 to 93.3% in 2017 for 18-24 year olds who had left high school. States in the Northeast had a completion rate of 94.9% in 2017 (McFarland et al., 2020).

Analysis of Maine's High School Graduation Data: Findings and Challenges

In this section of the report, we examine publicly available data on high school graduation rates in Maine. Maine statute (Title 20A, Section 5031) requires that the Maine Department of Education (MDOE) provide four-, five- and six-year adjusted cohort graduation rates for each publicly-supported secondary school (Maine State Legislature, 2011). MDOE is also required to provide data on the Maine State diploma and high school equivalence diplomas. There are also federal reporting laws on graduation data where states report data for student subgroups. The federal *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) requires every state and district to make available on their website a "report card" showing key state, district and school information including graduation rates (USDOE, 2018).

We examined high school graduation data from the Longitudinal Graduation Report obtained from the MDOE Data Warehouse (MDOE, 2024a), including data from 2012 to 2022. In the subsections, which follow, we discuss the key findings for statewide graduation rates for students graduating in four, five or six years, and for students in specific subgroups. While most of the student subgroups examined with Maine statewide data have considerably lower graduation rates than the total student population, there has been a nationwide increase in the percentage of low-income students (70%-81%), English Language Learners (57%-72%) and students with disabilities (59%-71%) graduating from high school from 2011 to 2022 (The Grad Partnership, 2024).

In addition to the discussion of findings below, more information and data tables can be found in the appendices. Appendix A shows how we accessed Maine's graduation data. Appendix B provides a table with statewide high school graduation rates for students graduating in four, five and six years from 2013-2022. Appendix C includes tables and graphs that break down the graduation rates for specific student subgroups from 2012-2022.

Four-, Five- and Six-year Graduation Rates

Maine reports statewide data on graduation at four, five and six years after entry to high school. Cohort data are referred to by the four-year graduation date. Maine statute (Title 20A, Section 5031) articulates the goal to achieve a 90% graduation rate statewide by the year 2015-2016 (Maine State Legislature, 2011), but the four-year graduation rate has fallen just short of that goal. The graduation rate at four years has slowly trended upward from 85% in 2013 to 87% in 2019 and 2020, then went to 86% in 2021 and 2022. The six-year graduation rate went from 88% in 2013 to 90% in 2020, which is the last year the data are available. Appendix B presents a table with data for all years examined in this study, comparing four-, five- and six-year graduation rates.

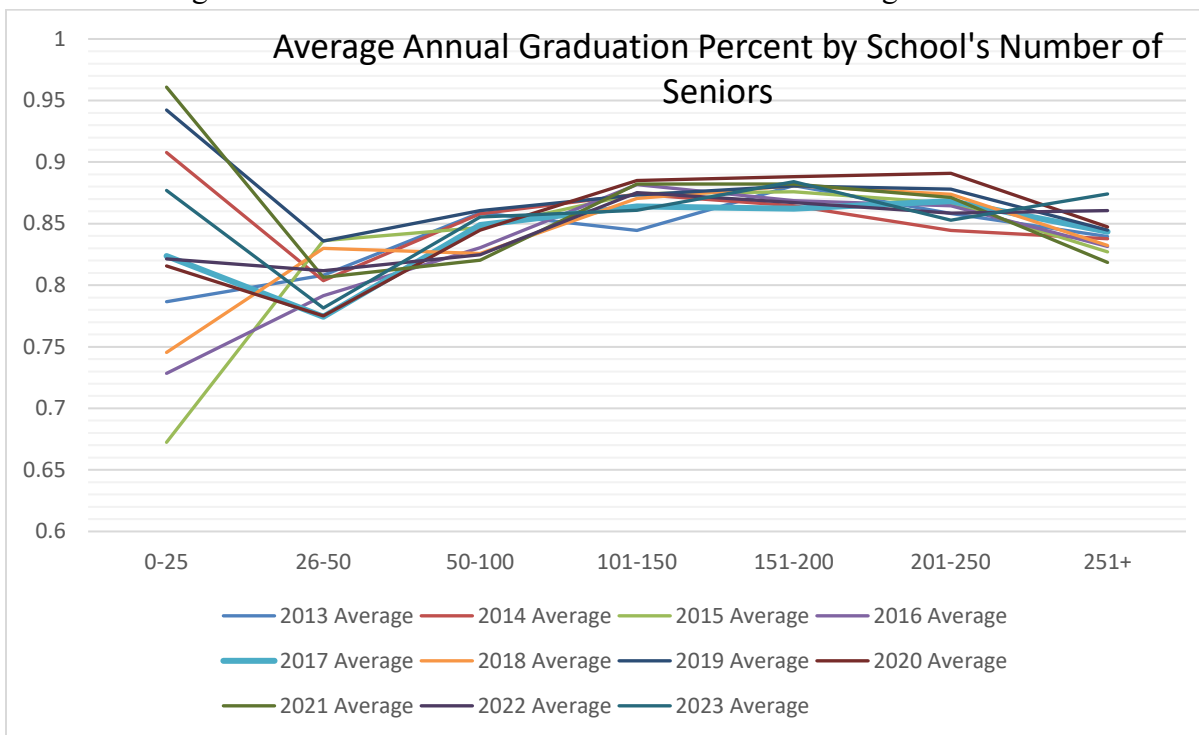
School-Level Data

School-level data on high school graduation rates were also examined. While the statewide high school graduation rate for Maine was 86% in 2021 and 2022, there was a wide variation in graduation rates across high schools in the state. In some years, some schools had 100% graduation rates, but lower rates in other years. There were public high schools with graduation rates of only two-thirds of the students, but most of these schools had higher

graduation rates in other years. Some alternative schools had very low graduation rates, with only about a third of the cohort graduating.

Maine has a wide variation in high school enrollment size with most schools being small. Graduation rates were examined by graduating cohort size to explore if there were any differences by enrollment/ cohort size. The smallest schools had 0-25 students and 26-50 students in a graduating cohort. Medium-sized schools had 51-100, 101-150, and 151-200 students in a graduating cohort. The largest schools had 201-250 and over 251 students in a graduating cohort. When we graphed the data for each year separately, a pattern emerged: as schools and their graduating cohorts became larger, the graduation rate increased over time and then plateaued just below 90%. Overall, schools with larger cohorts (101 or more students in the graduating cohort) appear to have higher graduation rates than schools with smaller graduating cohorts.

Figure 1. Graduation Rate Based on Schools' Graduating Cohort Size



At the school level, high school graduation trends varied considerably by the schools' graduating cohort size. Mid-sized schools consistently demonstrated the greatest stability in graduation rates over the decade spanning spring 2013 to spring 2022, while graduation rates for small-sized schools (0–25 and 26–50 students in the graduating cohort) exhibited the highest

levels of year-to-year instability. One contributing factor that may help explain the high variation across years for smaller schools is that MDOE suppressed the data from the smallest schools 82% of the time. These very small schools also reported graduation rates of 100% eleven percent of the time. State policy requires the state to suppress data in instances where the student count is five or fewer, and sometimes more, to protect the privacy of individual students. This policy affects the data reported for smaller high schools with small graduating cohorts. This means that data reported may show 100% of a student cohort graduating in some years, but suppressed data in other years where at least one student did not graduate. Some of the small schools were alternative schools with very low graduation rates (e.g., 33%) reported for years that data were not suppressed. Given the fact that data are frequently suppressed for smaller schools, the graduation rates that are publicly available are more reflective of the number of schools reporting data rather than the actual graduation rates. Due to the practice of data suppression, we cannot know the actual graduation rates for some high schools when data were suppressed. **Overall, our analysis found that a significant portion of graduation rates for some high schools are not available due to data suppression at the state level. In fact, almost a third of all high school graduation rates statewide were suppressed in the ten-year period examined in this report, and 82% were suppressed for the smaller high schools. This high rate of data suppression poses significant challenges for accurate data interpretation and public accountability.** The lack of complete data reduces transparency in reporting the performance of some high schools. Table 1 below shows that smaller schools with smaller graduating cohort sizes had higher portions of their graduation data suppressed than larger schools.

Table 1. Graduation Data Reporting and Suppression

Students in School Cohort	Number of Observations	Percentage Suppressed Data	Percentage Data Reported as 100%	Percentage Data reported as less than 100%
0-25	348	82%	11%	7%
26-50	261	43%	3%	54%
51-100	384	19%	2%	79%
101-150	270	13%	2%	84%
151-200	202	5%	0%	95%
201-250	89	1%	0%	99%
251 plus	88	0%	0%	100%
Statewide	1642	32%	4%	65%

Larger schools generally exhibited more stable graduation rates over time. This pattern was particularly consistent among mid-sized and large schools. However, an exception was observed for schools in the largest size category (251–300 students in the graduating cohort), where fluctuations in graduation rates were more pronounced. The schools in this category were examined. It was noted that several of these larger high schools were in districts with a high percentage of multilingual learners, which could contribute to unstable and lower graduation rates for those schools. On the MDOE’s multilingual dashboard, Lewiston and Portland school districts each identified over 1,500 multilingual students who were not proficient in English. Combining data on multilingual learners and school enrollment data from the National Center for Education Statistics, we found that 30% of all students in these two large districts were identified as multilingual learners. The NCES site indicates that less than seven percent of children in these districts come from homes where “English is spoken less than well” (NCES, 2024e, 2024f). This is higher than the state-reported average, but well below the numbers reported on the state’s multilingual ESSA dashboard, indicating conflicting data reports.

We also identified high schools with trends of both increasing and decreasing graduation rates over time that warranted further investigation. For instance, virtual schools such as the Maine Connections Academy and Maine Virtual Academy reported upward trends in graduation rates, possibly reflecting the growing accessibility and effectiveness of virtual education models since the COVID-10 pandemic. Conversely, some schools exhibited downward trends for graduation rates, raising questions about the underlying causes.

Graduation Rates for Students with Challenging Home Situations

The MEPRI workplan for this project called for analysis of high school graduation rates over time that includes both statewide trends and disaggregated results for particular student subgroups. Some of the subgroups include students who are living in challenging situations that could impact their education trajectory, pose interruptions to their education and/ or negatively impact their graduation rates. In this subsection, we present findings that include students in the following subgroups: economically disadvantaged, homeless, migrant, foster care, and children of military members.

While the total number of Maine students has decreased since 2012, there was an almost fifty percent increase in the number of economically disadvantaged high school students. Students from economically disadvantaged homes made up 46% of the 2022 graduating cohort,

which is a large portion—nearly half of all students graduating in spring 2022. The high percentage of economically disadvantaged students in Maine does have a negative impact on the state’s overall graduation rate. The graduation rate for Maine’s economically disadvantaged students was 78% in 2022 compared to a graduation rate of 93% for non-economically disadvantaged students. The combined rate for all students is 86%. This disparity raises concerns about the potential for high school completion for students attending small schools that primarily serve students from economically disadvantaged homes.

There has also been a doubling in the number of homeless students from 2012 to 2022, which creates a small negative impact on the state’s overall graduation rate. Homeless students made up 3.5% of the 2022 graduation cohort. The graduation rates for homeless students (59%), and students in foster care (57%) are significantly below the statewide average for all students (86%). Data for migrant students were presumably suppressed by the MDOE in six of the years between 2012 and 2022. In 2013, 2105, and 2016, data indicate that 100% of migrant students graduated. About two-thirds of migrant students in 2020 (68%) and 2021(62%) graduated.

One subgroup in challenging home circumstances that we examined did not show a lower rate of high school graduation. Students that have guardians or parents in the military accounted for 1% of the 2022 cohort and graduated at similar rates as all students did statewide. Data for military-connected students were only reported for the most recent three years. Table 2 below presents graduation rates for selected years for various student subgroups with challenging home circumstances, where data are available. Data for additional years for these subgroups can be found in Appendix C, including several data tables and a graph (Figure C1) depicting graduation rates for these student subgroups over a ten-year period.

Table 2. Graduation Rates for Students from Challenging Home Situations

	2012	2017	2022
Economically Disadvantaged			
Graduation rate	81%	76%	78%
Cohort Count	4578	5553	6373
Percentage of students	30%	39%	46%
Homeless Students			
Graduation rate	63%	58%	59%
Cohort Count	228	329	481
Percentage of students	1.5%	2.3%	3.5%

Migrant Students			
Graduation rate	*	*	*
Cohort Count	8	16	10
Percentage of students	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%
Foster Care			
Graduation rate			57%
Cohort Count			82
Percentage of students			0.6%
Military Connected	2012	2017	2022
Graduation rate			87%
Cohort Count			141
Percentage of students			1.0%
All Students	84%	86%	86%

* Suppressed Data

Blank cell indicates no data.

Graduation Rates for Special Education Students

Another student subgroup we examined in the graduation data was special education. Graduation rates of special education students include all students with an individual education plan (IEP). Maine has seen an increase in the number of students with an IEP since 2012 at the same time when there has been a decline in the number of students overall. The percentage of students in the graduating cohort who receive special education services rose from 15% to 20% from 2012 to 2022. Compared with the rest of the nation, Maine had the highest percentage of students with IEPs in the graduating cohort in 2020, at 20.8% (NCES, 2024c; The Grad Partnership, 2024).

Nationwide, the graduation rate for students with IEPs rose during the pandemic by over three percent (The Grad Partnership, 2024). Maine also showed a two to three percent increase in graduation rates (71% to 73%) during the pandemic. This may be related to a policy change in 2021, which allowed special education students to remain in public schools until they turn 22 years old. Prior to 2021, they were under the same age requirements as other students. Maine provides public education to those who are age nineteen or younger at the start of the school year who have not earned a high school diploma (MDOE, 2021). Nationally, 95% of students with disabilities are in regular schools. In Maine, a slightly higher percentage of students with disabilities (96.5%) are in regular schools (MDOE, 2024h). Nationally, about two-thirds of students with disabilities in regular schools spend 80% or more of their time in regular or general

education classrooms (NCES, 2024b). In Maine, a smaller percentage of students with disabilities (55%) than the national rate spend 80% or more of their time in regular classrooms (MDOE, 2024h). Table 3 presents data on graduation rates for Maine’s special education subgroup for selected years. Appendix C includes data for the ten years examined for this study.

Table 3. Graduation Rates for Students Receiving Special Education Services

	2012	2017	2022
Graduation rate	68%	69%	73%
Cohort Count	2361	2486	2714
Percentage of students	15%	17%	20%
All Students	84%	86%	86%

Graduation Rates for Multilingual Learners

Maine’s graduation rate data report one annual set of values for “English Language Learner.” However, the data definition includes two categories of English language learner. One category is for students identified as an “English language learner” at some point in their high school years (grade 9 to 12); the other category is for students who have ever been identified as an English language learner, at any grade (MDOE, 2024a, 2024i). The MDOE reported multilingual learner exit rates ranging from 8.8% to 20.6% between 2017 and 2023 (MDOE, 2024i). It is unclear if the reported graduation rate includes students who have reached proficiency in English and “exited” from needing English language learning supports prior to ninth grade.

Studies document that ELLs often do not reach English proficiency until later in their academic careers, typically by the 11th grade (Slama, 2012). Breaking the multilingual subgroup of students into categories by language proficiency and/ or other factors may be useful for examining different education outcomes. One urban district found that former ELL students (those who became proficient in English by ninth grade and no longer needed supports) had higher graduation rates, higher GPAs, higher SAT scores, and higher college enrollment higher than the district average. Late-arriving ELL students (those still learning English in high school), had similar GPAs and graduation rates to the district average even though their SAT scores were lower. By contrast, long-term ELL students had lower GPAs, lower SAT scores and lower

college going rates than the district average. Long-term ELL students with an IEP had similar performance to other students (non-ELL) with an IEP (De la Torre et al., 2024).

Statewide, there is an increasing number of multilingual learners in Maine schools. The number of multilingual learners in the graduating cohort almost doubled between 2012 and 2022. In 2022, multilingual learners comprised three percent of the graduating cohort. The graduation rates for multilingual learners are lower than the statewide rates for all students and show year-to-year variation from 70% to 81% that does not trend in a specific direction. Table 4 presents the graduation rates for selected years for multilingual learners. Appendix C includes a data table with all years examined by this study.

Table 4. Graduation Rates of Multilingual Learners

	2012	2017	2022
Graduation rate	75%	80%	70%
Cohort Count	251	522	422
Percentage of students	1.6%	3.7%	3.0%
All Students	84%	86%	86%

Graduation Rates by Race

Federal law for data reporting requires that graduation rates be reported by students’ race. In Maine, the percentage of White students declined from 94% in 2012 to 87% in 2022. Graduation rates for American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander were suppressed for Maine students. As indicated earlier in our discussion of small school graduation data, the policy for data suppression helps to ensure privacy with education data for individual students, but results in missing data that prevents our ability to obtain a complete and accurate picture of high school graduation rates for high schools and the state as a whole. Graduation rates for Black or African American and Hispanic or Latino students were lower than rates for White students or the statewide average for all students. Asian students had higher graduation rates than White students or the statewide rates for all students. Table 5 presents these data for selected years. Additional years of data are included in Appendix C, including a table and a graph depicting the high school graduation rates by race over a ten-year period.

Table 5. Graduation Rates by Reported Race

	2012	2017	2022
White			
Graduation rate	85%	86%	87%
Cohort Count	14461	12822	12243
Percentage of students	94%	90%	88%
Black or African American			
Graduation rate	71%	82%	81%
Cohort Count	390	467	570
Percentage of students	2.5%	3.3%	4.1%
Hispanic or Latino			
Graduation rate	*	88%	76%
Cohort Count	9	231	355
Percentage of students	0.1%	1.6%	2.6%
Two or more races			
Graduation rate	69%	79%	84%
Cohort Count	171	389	358
Percentage of students	1.1%	2.7%	2.6%
Asian			
Graduation rate	86%	91%	92%
Cohort Count	216	256	238
Percentage of students	1.4%	1.8%	1.7%
American Indian or Alaska Native			
Graduation rate	71%	69%	*
Cohort Count	113	91	106
Percentage of students	0.7%	0.6%	0.8%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander			
Graduation rate	*	100%	*
Cohort Count	13	8	16
Percentage of students	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%
All Students	84%	86%	86%

Graduation Rates by Gender

Maine follows the national trend of males having lower high school graduation rates than females. Since 2012, the graduation rates of both males and females have increased by four percentage points. Table 6 presents comparisons by gender for three selected years, with additional years provided in Appendix C.

Table 6. Graduation Rates by Reported Gender

	2012	2017	2022
Female			
Graduation rate	87%	88%	89%
Cohort Count	7340	6844	6652
Percentage of students	48%	48%	48%
Male			
Graduation rate	82%	84%	84%
Cohort Count	8033	7420	7232
Percentage of students	52%	52%	52%
All Students	84%	86%	86%

High School Graduation Standards for Maine and Other States

Most states set minimum standards for high school graduation. Maine’s graduation standards are outlined in statute, which specifies the number of years of coursework students must complete to be eligible for high school graduation (MDOE, 2019; Maine State Legislature, 2019). Some Maine school districts have higher standards to graduate that exceed the state’s minimum requirements (MDOE, 2024e). We describe Maine’s policy on graduation standards here and compare that with national trends. We also compare the minimum requirements for high school graduation with the minimum requirements for admission to state universities in Maine and other neighboring states.

The Education Commission of the States (ECS) compared the minimum graduation standards across states. Some states such as Massachusetts do not have state specific standards. Of the 46 states with specific standards, most require three or four years each of English/ language, mathematics, science and social studies. Maine has among the lowest graduation standards of states with standards. While Maine requires four years of English/ language arts, Maine is only one of three states requiring only two years of math (California and Montana are the other two). Maine is one of eight states requiring only two years of social studies, and Maine is one of seven states that require only two years of science. In addition to the core subjects, Maine requires one year of fine arts. Other states have requirements for physical education, health, world languages or career and technical education requirements, but Maine does not specify requirements for these areas (ECS, 2023).

Looking beyond high school graduation, access to higher education is complicated when a state’s high school graduation standards do not align with minimum admissions standards for

the public university (Atwell et al., 2023), which is the case for Maine. The University of Maine requires that college applicants have at least four years of English, three years of math, two years of science with lab components, two years of social studies, and two years of a world language, and has additional requirements for certain programs (University of Maine, 2024). The University of Southern Maine requires a minimum of four years of English, three years of math, two years of science with lab components, and two years of social science (University of Southern Maine, 2024). By contrast, state policy only requires two years of math and does not require world language coursework for high school graduation (MDOE, 2024e).

Looking at two other states in the region, colleges in the University of Massachusetts system have higher requirements than the University of Maine: four years of English, four years of math, three years of natural sciences with lab work, two years of social sciences, and two years of the same world language. A Boston Globe study of Massachusetts schools found three-quarters of school districts had high school graduation criteria that were lower than the UMass college admission criteria, in math, science and world language (McLaren 2024). A recent audit of high school transcripts found that about half of Rhode Island high school graduates did not meet the minimum admission criteria for admission to that state's public universities, and the state enacted stricter graduation standards. Rhode Island is also helping high schools add courses in financial literacy, civics and computer science that they feel will help students be more prepared for career paths that may or may not involve attending college (Lehrer-Small, 2023). Gaining admission to college does not guarantee graduation. Looking across the US, Atwell and colleagues (2023) concluded that: "Only 60 percent of students who enroll in two- or four-year college or universities earned a degree within six years. The most likely outcome for community college students and students with low test scores entering four-year institutions is leaving without a degree or credential."

Requiring students to pass a state test to graduate from high school was most common in 2012, when 25 states required students to pass a test to graduate. In 2023, there were only eight states requiring an exam to graduate and several of those were contemplating dropping this requirement (Barnum, 2023). Massachusetts recently passed a ballot measure to eliminate their state graduation testing requirement (MCAS) this past November. While the requirement to pass a specific test to graduate has been dropped by many states, several states now require students to pass specific assessments to graduate. In 2023, thirty-four states required students to complete

specific assessments to graduate (ECS, 2023). Maine does not have a test or assessment requirement for high school graduation.

Some states allow schools to voluntarily adopt a form of proficiency-based degrees to meet the state graduation requirements. The idea behind this approach is to ensure that students graduating from high school have the desired skills and knowledge to be ready for work and college. As we indicated earlier in this report, Maine announced a requirement in 2012 to move toward proficiency-based high school diplomas but later repealed that requirement in 2018. Some school districts have continued using portions of the proficiency-based degree requirements (Barnum, 2018; MDOE, 2024e; Stanford, 2024).

Alternative Pathways for Students

While our charge from the legislature was to describe the Maine State diploma option, we also include information describing other options for students seeking to complete high school in this section of the report.

Maine State Diploma

For students who meet Maine’s state requirements for high school graduation but not their local district requirements due to a significant interruption in their education, there is a Maine State Diploma issued by the Maine Department of Education. There are specific criteria for education disruption: being homeless, in foster care, absences of over ten days due to unplanned hospitalization or placement in a youth detention center, being in three different schools in a calendar year or being an immigrant or migrant student (MDOE, 2024f). In 2020, the COVID pandemic was identified as an education disruption, but this recent provision will expire in 2026 (MDOE, 2024f). In addition to having their education interrupted, students must have completed their fourth year of high school education to be eligible for a Maine Diploma. The program is not intended as a pathway to early graduation.

While there is an application form for students or their guardians to complete, school districts make most referrals on students’ behalf. School districts look at an individual’s situation and recommend students who qualify for a Maine Diploma. According to MDOE staff, the department conducted significant outreach efforts to schools to inform school personnel of this option since the start of the pandemic. This has included presentations and meetings with superintendents and other stakeholders, priority notices from the MDOE as well as hundreds of phone calls. The number of Maine Diplomas granted prior to September 2021 was less than three

dozen. By contrast, just after the pandemic in the 2021-22 school year, 214 Maine Diplomas were awarded (96% pandemic related). In the most recent two years, a high number of diplomas have been awarded: 421 in 2022-23 (98% pandemic-related) and 384 in 2023-24 (97% pandemic-related) based on data shared by the MDOE.

Alternative Pathways for High School Completion

For adults who do not complete high school but wish to do so, there are two options in Maine. Students can obtain educational support and work toward a diploma through an adult education program in their school district. Another option is to take the HiSET test, which replaced the General Education Diploma (GED) test in Maine. Other states still offer the GED test.

Seal of Biliteracy

Maine offers a Seal of Biliteracy to high school graduates who demonstrate proficiency in English and an additional language. It is a seal that appears on the diploma and transcript. This recognition of language proficiency was first awarded in 2011. Per the national Seal of Biliteracy website, all fifty states offer this additional recognition (Seal of Biliteracy, 2024), while on the Education Commission of the States' website only thirteen states note this option (ECS, 2024). In the fall of 2018, the Maine Department of Education began awarding the Seal of Biliteracy. In 2023, the MDOE awarded the seal to 490 students in 39 different schools. Within this group, twenty students spoke three or more languages and there were 31 different languages represented in total for these high school graduates (MDOE, 2024b). There were 321 graduates who were identified in the graduating class of 2023 as multilingual learners. However, we found that only 79 Maine high school graduates who were multilingual learners received the Seal of Biliteracy. (MDOE, 2024a). The seal of biliteracy appears to be under-utilized as less than a third of multilingual learners who graduate high school earn this seal.

International Baccalaureate Program

The International Baccalaureate Program (IB) was begun in 1968. Like the Seal of Biliteracy, the IB is a national program that has consistent standards from state to state. It is offered in 3,811 schools worldwide. The goal is to develop students with an international mindset. There is an IB curriculum. In addition to in-school assessment, students take essay tests that are graded outside of their school. Research indicates that IB students feel more prepared to do college-level work than students who took AP classes and they may be more likely to attend

“upper-tier-universities.” The IB program is currently only offered in four Maine high schools. Three of these high schools are in southern Maine and one is in rural Northern Maine (International Baccalaureate Program, 2024).

Measuring and Reporting on Education Quality

A variety of stakeholders—policymakers, educators, parents and researchers all seek reliable information to assess the performance of schools and quality of education statewide and at the local level. Yet, as we describe in this report, it can be challenging to access and interpret publicly available education data in Maine. With the goal of increased transparency and accountability, some governmental and non-governmental organizations nationally aim to make education data more easily available for stakeholders. However, the problem of missing data and data suppression makes it very difficult to draw conclusions or make decisions from the data that are reported. We describe some of these national efforts and the indicators they use to attempt to measure school performance and education quality.

ESSA Mandated Reporting

The federal guidelines for state report cards, as outlined in *A Parent Guide to State and Local Report Cards*, provide a framework intended to increase transparency, accessibility and accountability in reporting educational data. These guidelines, mandated by the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), focus on information about the performance and resources of schools and districts. Districts and schools are encouraged to share the ESSA report cards by providing web links, smartphone apps and printed copies (USDOE, 2018; Polikoff et al., 2024).

The ESSA report cards must include results from statewide assessments in reading, math and science, assessment participation rates across demographic subgroups, alternate assessment results for students with cognitive disabilities, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores, and high school graduation rates. These measures allow for comparative analysis across schools, districts and states. States must provide four-year graduation rates for all students and specific subgroups, with the option to include extended graduation rates and post-secondary enrollment statistics where available. In addition to other types of education data, the ESSA report card should provide a “clear and brief description of the state accountability system” detailing the state's accountability framework, performance indicators, and the identification of schools requiring improvement. These report cards must adhere to accessibility standards ensuring that they are comprehensible and available to a diverse audience, including individuals

with disabilities and non-English speakers. States and districts are encouraged to supplement the required data with additional information that parents and others may find helpful (USDOE, 2018).

A comprehensive fifty-state review of states' ESSA report cards was undertaken in the spring and summer of 2024 by a national group. Maine was one of three states to receive a score of zero out of a total twenty-one points. Maine's ESSA website was rated as "fair" for usability. Longitudinal data are missing from all but seven states' ESSA report cards. These researchers identified Virginia's and Ohio's ESSA report cards as exemplars, and noted the use of clear visualizations and guides (Polikoff, 2024).

In fall 2024, the MDOE began an overhaul their ESSA mandated reporting on their website. This work is on going and data are routinely being added or removed from that website. Although NAEP results and other testing scores were available for some schools last fall, they were not available later in the year. In December 2024, attempts to view data by individual schools resulted in the message that data were "not available."

School Rating Sites

Some non-governmental groups seek to pull together various kinds of educational performance data to assess school quality overall. We examined the data measures used by several groups that report school quality ratings and comparisons.

All of the rating systems that we examined use Advanced Placement (AP) course data as one of several high school quality measures. College Board data show that there is uneven access to AP courses across Maine high schools. In Maine, 58% of high schools offer at least five AP courses either in person or virtually, and at least one STEM AP course is offered in 69% of Maine high schools. These percentages have been stable over the past four years. While the percentage of schools offering AP courses was higher than the national average, the percentage of students in grades 9 to 12 taking at least one AP course in Maine has declined from 18% to 15% over the past four years and was lower than the national average of 19% for 2022-23 (Najarro & Tomko, 2024; College Board, 2024)

The Grad Partnership is an alliance of nine organizations focused on improving educational outcomes. The GreatSchools website lists an overall rating for individual schools (Great Schools, 2024). Each rating shows a graduation rate, number of graduates who go onto college or a vocational program, the percentage of graduates who return for a second year of

college or vocational training, the number of AP courses offered, AP course participation, and dual enrollment participation for students taking early college courses for credit (Great Schools, 2024).

US News uses six indicators to rate schools with graduating classes of 15 or more students. Forty percent of their scoring is based on college readiness and college curriculum breadth. This group also considers AP course participation, course grades or scores on International Baccalaureate exams. Maine and Oklahoma did not grant US News permission to use their AP course scores. State assessment scores are used for half of the overall rating score by US News. They are adjusted for key demographic variables and separately analyzed for underserved students. Graduation rates accounted for ten percent of the overall rating (Morse et al., 2024).

GreatSchools includes early college or dual enrollment program data in their school rankings. These high school programs have been rapidly growing nationwide. The Maine state legislature provides funding for Maine high school students to take courses through the University of Maine system, Maine Community College and Maine Maritime Academy courses (MDOE, 2024g). Students in some Maine Career Technical Education (CTE) centers can take dual enrollment courses onsite at their CTE site or at a participating college campus for college credit (Bridge Academy, 2024). In 2021, 8.8% of Maine high school students were in a dual enrollment program and they are utilized in 67% of Maine high schools. The national average for dual enrollment program participation is 9.8% of students (The Grad Partnership, 2024).

At least six states analyze their on-track ninth grade status. In these states the percentage of ninth graders that were deemed on track increased from 2019-2022 by several percentage points. The Grad Partnership noted that some schools had chronic absenteeism (missing more than 10% of school days) rates of over 40% of students, and added this metric to their ratings in 2024 (The Grad Partnership, 2024). In 2022, Maine's statewide rate of chronic absenteeism of 38.5% was above the national average of 35.1%. In 69% of high schools, more than a third of the students were chronically absent. One-fifth of high schools had more than half of their students chronically absent (The Grad Partnership, 2024).

High School Course Offerings

Students in different Maine schools may not have the same opportunities to take courses that prepare them for some careers. In a nationwide survey of schools, it was found that 25% of

schools in low-income areas did not offer algebra in eighth grade while half of the schools in the wealthiest area offered eighth-grade algebra to all students. Passing algebra in eighth grade allows students to take more advanced math courses in high school. Those who take more advanced math classes are more likely to graduate from college and have higher incomes (Barshay, 2024). Statewide information on advanced courses available in Maine high schools is not available. As noted earlier in this section, almost a third of Maine high schools (31%) do not offer at least one STEM AP course (Najarro & Tomko, 2024; College Board, 2024). Likewise, the availability of foreign language courses in Maine high schools that meet university admission standards is unknown.

Standardized Tests to Measure College Readiness

Results from standardized academic tests such as the ACT or SAT can be used as one indicator of students' college readiness. However, district and school-level data are not publicly available for these tests. Many colleges are no longer requiring these tests but are encouraging them. In states where test taking is optional, the participation rate for these tests is a partial indicator of intent to attend college. Maine had 100% participation for the SAT in 2018, when it was used as a state assessment. During the pandemic, the percentage of Maine's graduating seniors taking the SAT dropped to 29%. In 2023, 38% of Maine's graduating seniors took the SAT with an average score of 1,080 out of 1,600 possible points (NCES, 2024d). Nationally 51% of students took the SAT with an average score of 1,028. Only two percent of Maine graduating high school students in 2024 took the ACT. The average Maine score, 25 out of 36, was similar to the average score in other states with less than five percent of students taking the test (ACT, 2024).

Post-secondary Outcomes

Post-secondary outcomes are increasingly being used to evaluate schools. This reporting is encouraged but not mandated under ESSA. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education shares aggregate data on students' post-secondary plans for each district (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2024). The National Student Clearinghouse releases student-specific college enrollment data three times a year to states. It is not known if Maine shares this information with school districts (Robles & Schmitz, 2025). The Council of Chief State School Officers is working with the military to create a verified data source for schools to track the outcomes of students who enlist in the military. Both

Kansas and Texas tie some school funding to post-secondary outcomes such as pursuit of an associate's degree, technical certification, enrollment in a four-year degree program or enlistment in the military (Blad, 2024). This information for Maine high schools and students is not publicly available.

Conclusion and Implications

We summarize conclusions from our analysis of Maine's high school graduation data, our inquiry into the Maine State Diploma program, and research into minimum statewide requirements for high school graduation across the nation. We discuss some policy implications and ideas for improving students' educational opportunities related to the broad findings of this study. We end with thoughts about the current status and quality of Maine's education data and include specific recommendations to strengthen the availability, reliability, and usefulness of education data for informing education policy decisions.

Maine's High School Graduation Rates

Maine's statewide high school graduation rate is consistent with the national average. Maine's graduation rate has followed the national trend with a steady increase prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, then dipping slightly during the pandemic, but returning to pre-pandemic rates since. There is wide variation in graduation rates across Maine high schools, and even for individual schools across years. High schools with larger graduating cohorts of students (101 students or more) appear to have higher graduation rates than small schools. While local high schools publish the names of high school graduates each year, graduation rates reported by the MDOE for many small schools across the state are suppressed to protect the privacy of students who do not graduate. Due to the high level of data suppression (a third of all high school graduation rates statewide and 82% of graduation rates in small schools), the actual graduation rates for some high schools are not publicly reported in some years, although a statewide rate is reported by the MDOE.

The number of students in specific sub-groups who have lower graduation rates than the state average is increasing. Almost half of Maine students come from economically disadvantaged homes. The discrepancy between graduation rates for students from economically disadvantaged homes and those who are not is an area of concern. This may indicate that schools serving primarily economically disadvantaged students are not adequately engaging and retaining them. One in five students in the graduating cohort is classified as a special education

student; this is the highest rate in the nation. While the percentage of students who are homeless (3.5%) and the percentage of multilingual students (3.0%) is small, there has been a doubling of the size of both groups over the past ten years. Asian and White students continue to have higher graduation rates than Black, Hispanic or Latino students. Graduation rates for Indigenous groups are suppressed and not reported. Female students have a somewhat higher graduation rate than male students. Overall, the graduation rates show some areas of positive improvement, but some continuing gaps for most of the student subgroups we examined, indicating that students are not equally prepared for work or study after high school.

Maine State Diploma Program

High school students have various options to complete their secondary education. The Maine State Diploma, issued by the MDOE, is only offered in special circumstances when a student's education has been significantly interrupted. A higher number of students obtained a state diploma during the pandemic, but the number of students typically using this program has been very low. Students who don't complete high school can enroll in their district's adult education program or take the HiSET test to complete high school.

Some other academic options for students include the Seal of Biliteracy, also awarded by the MDOE, and the International Baccalaureate program. Given the growing number of multilingual learners in Maine, more students could be eligible for the Seal of Biliteracy and receive this distinction on their diploma and transcript. The International Baccalaureate program is currently only offered in four Maine high schools and could be expanded to students in other regions of the state. It is not clear what obstacles exist that limit participation in that program.

State Policies on High School Graduation Standards

According to a recent national review conducted by the Education Commission of the States (ECS, 2023), Maine's standards for graduation are among the lowest in the nation. Specifically, Maine only requires two years of math, science and social studies to graduate from high school, while other states require more years. It is unknown how many Maine school districts have graduation requirements that exceed the state's minimum standards. That is a question calling for further research and data. Further, Maine's minimum graduation standards for math are currently lower than the minimum requirements for admission to the University of Maine or the University of Southern Maine. Other New England states are examining the misalignment between their state standards for high school graduation and admissions

requirements for their state universities. Maine should follow Rhode Island’s lead and revisit state policy to ensure high school students have the guidance and courses they need to be well prepared for admission to the state’s university system if they choose to pursue that goal. Further, the state should collect and track standards for high school graduation at the district level.

Accessibility, Quality and Reliability of Maine’s Education Data

A recurring theme in reviewing Maine’s graduation data and other education and school performance data is the lack of complete data and/or data of questionable reliability. The problems stem partly from missing data as well as the practice of data suppression, particularly for smaller schools. A lack of a well-developed and maintained infrastructure or online platforms to clearly communicate data with the public is another contributing factor.

In arguing for retention of the MCAS exam in Massachusetts, Will Austin said, “No gap can be detected, no intervention can be successfully implemented without access to accurate, reliable data” (Austin, 2024). When there is a lack of reliable data, policymakers, parents and other stakeholders cannot determine if their schools are providing an inferior, adequate, or excellent education. While the ease of accessing data is improving as MDOE is working to make the ESSA dashboard more usable, there are significant issues that limit data use. As mentioned above, the graduation rates for many of Maine’s high schools, particularly the smaller schools, are suppressed by the MDOE, so the actual graduation rates are not publicly reported for those schools in some years. US News noted that Maine is one of few states that does not provide data to them. We found that the NCES data submitted by Maine was identical in 2020-21 and 2021-22 for all subgroup graduation rates (NCES, 2023). On the graduation rate data index, there are two different definitions of multilingual learners and it is not clear which of these two groups are included in the data reported. The multilingual learner data for Portland and Lewiston schools indicate that over 30% of the students in these districts are multilingual learners who are not yet proficient in English. However, the NCES website indicates that less than seven percent of children come from homes where “English is spoken less than well” (NCES, 2024e, 2024f). These are just a few examples of some areas where we found discrepant data or missing data that are not reliable for decision making.

We offer some specific suggestions to improve the accuracy and usefulness of data:

- Maine may want to re-examine policy and practice on data suppression. While some

student counts may need to be suppressed to maintain privacy for individual students, the current level of data suppression is so extensive in small schools that it poses a serious obstacle for assessing school and statewide educational performance.

- A consistent definition for students who are identified as multilingual learners should be adopted to be more clear about which students are included in data reports. Further, multilingual and ELL students have widely varying levels of English proficiency and disaggregating this varied group into further subgroups for the purpose of data reporting would be more informative. Similarly, students in special education with IEPs have very different learning abilities, so breaking that group into mild versus severe disability or other categories for the purpose of reporting graduation rates and other educational outcomes would improve the usefulness of the data.
- Maine does not currently report students' post-secondary plans as some other states do. While not a perfect indicator, this information would provide a measure of students' aspirations for work or study after high school.
- The state does not report high school graduation requirements by district so it is unclear what portion of high schools across the state may have standards that exceed the state's minimum standards, or minimum college admissions standards in the state. Maine currently has a lower state standard for math coursework in high school than required for admission to the University of Maine, but we do not know how many school districts had standards that align with the state's university system.
- There is currently a lack of statewide data on the availability of upper-level STEM courses across Maine school districts, and many students lack access to Advanced Placement (AP) courses in their school districts. Students' ability to attend a university of their choosing depends on their ability to access the courses required for admission in high school. Collecting and reporting these data would be informative.
- Efforts to improve both state and district platforms for reporting education data must continue and be strengthened both to meet federal reporting requirements but also to increase transparency for stakeholders and our confidence in the data to make decisions.

Recently, the results of the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) from 2024 have drawn serious attention from the media, policymakers and the public (Daly, 2025;

Pendharkar, 2025). The results indicate a trend of ongoing decline or stagnant levels of achievement for fourth and eighth grade students in reading and mathematics across the US. Maine’s results were the lowest since the state began participating in 1992. Yet, Maine’s state assessment results seem to show contradictory results, and a majority of students meeting proficiency levels. Recent MEPRI studies have documented the lack of reading curricula and guidance for elementary grades in many districts and the use of ineffective instructional approaches and materials for reading in a majority of districts across the state (Lech et al., 2024). Teachers and school leaders have strong concerns about high levels of student absenteeism, behavioral problems that disrupt the school day and difficulty getting kids to work at grade level (Lech et al., 2024; Wilkinson et al., 2025). The evidence is clear—Maine and other states need robust and reliable systems and data to track student and school performance in order to identify where supports and change are needed.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Locating Maine's High School Graduation Data

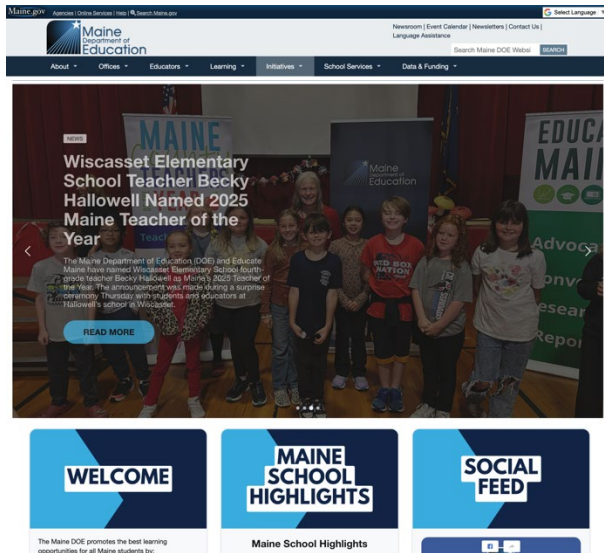
Appendix B: Maine's High School Graduation Rates for 2013-2022

Appendix C: High School Graduation Rates for Student Sub-groups 2012-2022

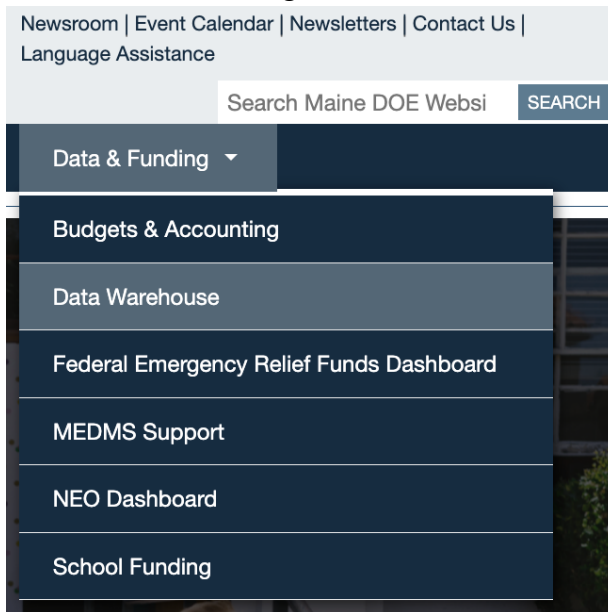
Appendix A: Locating Maine’s High School Graduation Data

The following instructions and screenshots provide a demonstration for accessing Maine’s high school graduation data.

Step 1. Get on browser and go to the landing page of Maine Department of Education.



Step 2. Hover to the horizontal tool bar on the top of the webpage to the drop-down menu called Data & Funding. Select Data Warehouse in the drop-down menu.



Step 3. Scroll down to the middle of the page and find STUDENT DATA section. Locate the subsection titled Graduation, and click on it.



Year-to-year student data by statewide, SAU, and school levels.

Assessment - Student outcome data on state-level assessments.
[ESSA Dashboard](#) | [Maine Assessment Legacy Data](#)

Behavior - Total incidents of in/out of school suspensions and expulsions within each school year for incidents involving violence, weapons, drugs, alcohol, or other behaviors.

Bullying - Total number of bullying incidents reported each school year.

Career & Technical Education
[Consolidated Annual Report \(CAR\)](#) - The U.S. Department of Education expects each state to provide yearly reports to show how Perkins funds are being used.
[Perkins Collaborative Resource Network \(PCRN\) Maine State Profile](#) - Contains related historical information and many reports that have been submitted to the federal government.

Chronic Absenteeism - Percentage of students enrolled in elementary and secondary education for at least 10 days and have missed 10% or more of their days enrolled, whether absences were excused or unexcused.
[\[2018 - 2021 Report\]](#) [\[2022 - 2023 Report\]](#)

Emergency Relief Funding - Statewide and SAU allocations, reimbursements, and remaining funds for the CARES, CRRSA, and ARP federal emergency relief funds.

English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)
[Comprehensive Multilingual Data Dashboard](#) -

Enrollment - Total Student enrollment as of October 1 of each school year, including demographic and categorical enrollments of students.

Federal Reports
[Federal Office of Special Education Programs](#)
[Annual report to Congress](#)
[Part B, C, & 619 Data](#)
[EdFacts Data Files](#)
[Per Pupil Expenditures](#)

Graduation - Graduation rates of 4, 5, and 6-year high school cohorts based on first enrollment in a Maine high school.

Military Affiliation - Student counts with military affiliation by affiliation type and SAU.

Restraint & Seclusion - Total number of Restraint & Seclusion incidents each school year.

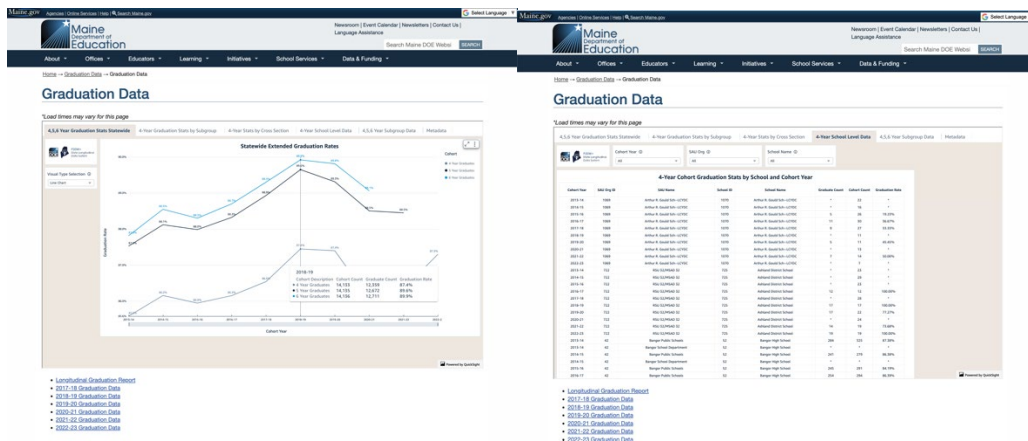
School Finance - Tuition, expenditures, and subsidy reports.

School Nutrition - Historical nutrition data, including participation rates in Free/Reduced lunch.

Special Education - Students with Disabilities by rate, including race, disability, educational environment, age, ELL, gender, Least Restrictive Environment, etc.

Truancy - Total reported truancies statewide and truancy rate.
[\[Truancy Data\]](#) [\[Legislative Report\]](#)

Step 4. Click on each tab to locate the data visualization in respective tabs, including 4,5,6 Year Graduation Stats Statewide, 4-Year Stats by Subgroups, 4-year Stats by Cross Section, 4-Year School Level Data, 4,5,6 Year Subgroup Data, and Metadata.



Appendix B. Maine's High School Graduation Rates for 2013-2022

Statewide graduation rates for four-year, five-year and six-year graduates.

		4-Year Graduate Cohort	5-Year Graduate Cohort	6-Year Graduate Cohort
2013	Cohort Count	14955	14955	14951
	Graduate Count	12751	13078	13120
	Graduation Rate	85%	87%	88%
2014	Cohort Count	14477	14479	14479
	Graduate Count	12390	12673	12715
	Graduation Rate	86%	88%	88%
2015	Cohort Count	14397	14395	14383
	Graduate Count	12404	12685	12736
	Graduation Rate	86%	88%	89%
2016	Cohort Count	14509	14508	14507
	Graduate Count	12470	12765	12810
	Graduation Rate	86%	88%	88%
2017	Cohort Count	14264	14261	14258
	Graduate Count	12289	12596	12647
	Graduation Rate	86%	88%	89%
2018	Cohort Count	14127	14114	14116
	Graduate Count	12226	12552	12606
	Graduation Rate	87%	89%	89%
2019	Cohort Count	14133	14134	14136
	Graduate Count	12359	12672	12711
	Graduation Rate	87%	90%	90%
2020	Cohort Count	13833	13829	13822
	Graduate Count	12090	12352	12414
	Graduation Rate	87%	89%	90%
2021	Cohort Count	13820	13789	n/a
	Graduate Count	11895	12203	n/a
	Graduation Rate	86%	88%	
2022	Cohort Count	13886	n/a	n/a
	Graduate Count	11961	n/a	n/a
	Graduation Rate	86%		

Appendix C: High School Graduation Rates for Subgroups 2012-2022

Table C1. Students with Challenging Home Situations

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Economically Disadvantaged											
Graduation rate	81%	78%	77%	76%	75%	76%	76%	78%	79%	77%	78%
Cohort Count	4578	5262	5372	5560	5558	5553	5491	5378	6555	6432	6373
Percentage of students	30%	35%	37%	39%	38%	39%	39%	38%	47%	47%	46%
Homeless Students											
Graduation rate	63%	55%	57%	58%	61%	58%	58%	63%	62%	56%	59%
Cohort Count	228	254	283	272	306	329	277	317	484	455	481
Percentage of students	1.5%	1.7%	2.0%	1.9%	2.1%	2.3%	2.0%	2.2%	3.5%	3.3%	3.5%
Migrant Students											
Graduation rate	*	100%	*	100%	100%	*	*	*	68%	62%	*
Cohort Count	8	5	11	7	15	16	9	14	25	21	10
Percentage of students	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.2%	0.2%	0.1%
Foster Care											
Graduation rate							59%	42%	53%	59%	57%
Cohort Count							51	48	53	75	82
Percentage of students							0.4%	0.3%	0.4%	0.5%	0.6%
Military Connected											
Graduation rate							*	94%	91%	88%	87%
Cohort Count							44	88	128	130	141
Percentage of students							0.3%	0.6%	0.9%	0.9%	1.0%
All Students	84%	85%	86%	86%	86%	86%	87%	87%	87%	86%	86%

Table C2. Students with Disabilities (with IEPs)

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Graduation rate	68%	68%	70%	71%	70%	69%	71%	71%	74%	73%	73%
Cohort Count	2361	2388	2361	2413	2396	2486	2347	2247	2878	2748	2714
Percentage of students	15%	16%	16%	17%	17%	17%	17%	16%	21%	20%	20%

Table C3. Multilingual Learners (English Language Learners)

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Graduation rate	75%	73%	76%	81%	76%	80%	77%	81%	81%	76%	70%
Cohort Count	251	350	353	371	480	522	524	530	503	430	422
Percentage of students	1.6%	2.3%	2.4%	2.6%	3.3%	3.7%	3.7%	3.8%	3.6%	3.1%	3.0%
All Students	84%	85%	86%	86%	86%	86%	87%	87%	87%	86%	86%

Table C4. Gender

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Female											
Graduation rate	87%	88%	88%	89%	88%	88%	89%	90%	90%	89%	89%
Cohort Count	7340	7259	7135	6886	7095	6844	6838	6768	6750	6716	6652
Percentage of students	48%	49%	49%	48%	49%	48%	48%	48%	49%	49%	48%
Male											
Graduation rate	82%	83%	83%	84%	84%	84%	84%	86%	85%	84%	84%
Cohort Count	8033	7696	7342	7511	7414	7420	7289	7365	7083	7104	7232
Percentage of students	52%	51%	51%	52%	51%	52%	52%	52%	51%	51%	52%
All Students	84%	85%	86%	86%	86%	86%	87%	87%	87%	86%	86%

Figure C1. Graduation Rates for Student Subgroups Over 10 Year Period



Table C6. Race

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
White											
Graduation rate	85%	86%	86%	87%	87%	86%	87%	88%	88%	87%	87%
Cohort Count	14461	13980	13423	13124	13152	12822	12771	12691	12355	12319	12243
Percentage of students	94%	93%	93%	91%	91%	90%	90%	90%	89%	89%	88%
Black or African American											
Graduation rate	71%	74%	78%	80%	76%	82%	78%	80%	83%	76%	81%
Cohort Count	390	373	437	442	422	467	502	483	526	527	570
Percentage of students	2.5%	2.5%	3.0%	3.1%	2.9%	3.3%	3.6%	3.4%	3.8%	3.8%	4.1%
Hispanic or Latino											
Graduation rate	*		*	77%	82%	88%	83%	82%	82%	77%	76%
Cohort Count	9		*	220	256	231	248	296	310	321	355
Percentage of students	0.1%	0.0%		1.5%	1.8%	1.6%	1.8%	2.1%	2.2%	2.3%	2.6%
Two or more races											
Graduation rate	69%	68%	69%	75%	75%	79%	78%	83%	82%	82%	84%
Cohort Count	171	248	241	325	336	389	259	252	261	279	358
Percentage of students	1.1%	1.7%	1.7%	2.3%	2.3%	2.7%	1.8%	1.8%	1.9%	2.0%	2.6%
Asian											
Graduation rate	86%	94%	94%	91%	92%	91%	93%	94%	95%	91%	92%
Cohort Count	216	234	252	196	248	256	240	279	250	252	238
Percentage of students	1.4%	1.6%	1.7%	1.4%	1.7%	1.8%	1.7%	2.0%	1.8%	1.8%	1.7%
American Indian or Alaska Native											
Graduation rate	71%	*	79%	*	*	69%	*	*	*	*	*
Cohort Count	113	105	109	80	84	91	89	113	115	115	106
Percentage of students	0.7%	0.7%	0.8%	0.6%	0.6%	0.6%	0.6%	0.8%	0.8%	0.8%	0.8%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander											
Graduation rate	*	*	*	*	*	100%	*	*	*	*	*
Cohort Count	13	15	*	10	11	8	18	19	16	7	16
Percentage of students	0.1%	0.1%		0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%
All Students	84%	85%	86%	86%	86%	86%	87%	87%	87%	86%	86%

Figure C2. Graduation Rates by Racial Subgroups Over Ten Year Period

