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Report calls for boost in state aid for small schools

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The size of a school does not necessarily determine the success of its students.

That is the conclusion of a report by the Maine Education Policy Research Institute. The institute recommended Tuesday that state aid to some of the state's smallest and most far-flung schools be increased for the next three years.

The institute, at the University of Southern Maine, was asked by the Legislature last year to figure out whether size makes a difference in whether a school is effective, based on cost and students' performance.

The Legislature is trying to develop a new formula to fund rural and island schools with enrollments of 200 or less. There are 40 such schools across the state.

The institute was asked to recommend how to fund small schools.

"It does not matter whether there are 100 or 125 students, they still have to heat the building," said David Silvernail, the institute's director, explaining why it takes more money to run a small school than a large school.

The report was heavily anticipated by the Maine Small School Coalition and School Administrative District 37, based in Mars Hill. Advocates for small schools marched in relay over five days to attend a hearing Tuesday before the Legislature's Education and Cultural Affairs Committee.

Among the report's conclusions:

About one in five of Maine's public schools is "high-performing" - characterized by higher state achievement test scores and SAT scores, higher graduation rates and lower dropout rates and other factors.

The cost of operating a high-performing small school is greater for lower grades.

Limited available data suggests that high-performing schools are focused on academics and professional development.

The report recommended that the state develop a long-range policy to address the effects that declining enrollments and shrinking schools have on academic performance.

The report also recommended increasing, by as much as 13 percent, the amount of money the state's smallest elementary schools receive from the state.

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FULL REPORT

Read the full report on schools at MaineToday.com