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Some 93 percent of Maine teachers report that paperwork gets in the way of teaching.

Pay for those same teachers is tied largely to experience and educational level, not student performance.

And instructors have no chance to work at independently run public charter schools.

Those measures help rank Maine seventh from the bottom in the United States when it comes to fostering education reform, according to a report released Monday.

Massachusetts placed first and Kansas last in the state-by-state report card prepared by the left-leaning Center for American Progress, the right-leaning American Enterprise Institute and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

"None of the states do particularly well," said Ulrich Boser, a senior fellow at the Washington, D.C.-based Center for American Progress and the report's lead researcher. "When one looks across Maine, you see a lot of room for improvement."

Maine earns its highest marks, "B" grades, for programs that prepare students for college and for its teacher hiring and evaluation practices.

The state earns a "C" in the finance category and for ease of removing ineffective teachers.

The report assigns Maine "D" grades in the school management, data and technology categories.

"It is a call to action to the states, but this is not telling the states you need to do 'x' and you need to do 'y' and you need to do 'z,'" Boser said. "We need to reform our education system."

And that largely involves streamlining a bureaucracy that handicaps principals and teachers who want to try new things, said Steve Bowen, director of the Center for Education Excellence at the conservative Maine Heritage Policy Center.

"Let's liberate these teachers and building principals," he said. "Let them do what we hired them to do."

To that end, Monday's report cites Maine's lack of a law that allows public charter schools that are free from many of the restrictions governing traditional public schools. Maine is one of 11 states that don't allow charter schools, and the state's Legislature in June rejected a law that would allow them.

The document also notes Maine has few programs that connect teacher pay to student performance.

"Research has not shown that having a masters degree improves student performance," Boser said. "We really need to think fundamentally about how we pay teachers."

Few schools in Maine depart from union contracts based on experience and educational level. The Maine Department of Education this fall plans to apply for a federal grant that could provide funds allowing districts to experiment with alternative pay systems.

In the technology category, Boser said, Maine's "D" grade is the result of little research affirming the effectiveness of the state's first-in-the-nation program that equips all seventh- and eighth-grade students and most high school students with laptops.

"Return on investment is an unknown, and that's disappointing," he said.

State education officials point out a recent Maine Education Policy Research Institute study that found middle school students' writing scores improved when they used laptops in class. Another institute study showed students retained more information from earth science lessons when using laptops.

The report evaluating states' penchant for education innovation comes as the federal government prepares to evaluate states' applications for \$4.35 billion in economic stimulus money set aside to spur education innovations. States have to demonstrate they're moving forward on key reforms -- such as charter schools, performance-based teacher pay and other measures -- to receive the money.

Maine Education Commissioner Susan Gendron has said the state will sit out a first round of education innovation grants and try its luck in a later round.

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