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Comptroller's Office Studies Driver Education in Schools

The Tennessee Comptroller's Office of Research and Education Accountability (OREA) has completed a review of driver education in Tennessee, including issues of availability and affordability, particularly for students in Title I high schools. The study was conducted at the request of the General Assembly.

While past studies vary in their conclusions about the effectiveness of driver education on the safety of teen drivers, more recent studies, including studies conducted in Nebraska and Oregon, have linked driver education to fewer traffic crashes. Teen drivers are involved in an average of 21 percent of Tennessee traffic crashes each year.



Driver education is offered in 60 Tennessee school districts, but its popularity has declined. According to an OREA survey of district superintendents, the overall number of districts offering driver education courses has decreased slightly over the past few school years. On a survey of Title I high school principals, 41 percent of principals indicated that driver education is offered at their schools. Those whose districts or schools do not offer driver education cited funding concerns, a lack of qualified teachers, decline in student interest, and the prioritizing of academics and graduation requirements as reasons they do not offer driver education. Most districts and Title I high schools that do offer driver education do not charge students for the course, mostly relying on state and local funding sources to cover the costs.

Tennessee state law allocates a percentage of revenue from litigation privilege taxes (imposed on all criminal and civil cases in the state) to the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) and the Tennessee Department of Safety and Homeland Security for the purpose of promoting and expanding driver education and highway safety. TDOE distributes a portion of this revenue annually to districts that offer driver education based on their total number of students enrolled in the course. In fiscal year 2022, 60 districts received a portion of litigation privilege tax revenue to help fund driver education, a total of over \$1.2 million. Other possible funding sources for public school driver education are explored in the report.

Additionally, OREA looked at private driver education companies, which are popular alternatives to public school programs. As of May 2022, there were 17 approved driver training and testing programs operating in 10 Tennessee counties. The average minimum fee for these programs (typically including 30 hours of classroom instructional time and six hours of behind-the-wheel training) is \$462.67.

The Comptroller's Office has included several policy options for the General Assembly and TDOE in its report. These include improving data collection to allow for more thorough studies of the effectiveness of

driver education and increasing the percentage of litigation privilege taxes that is earmarked for driver education.

To read the report, please visit the Comptroller's website at: tncot.cc/orea.

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