



Jason E. Mumpower, Comptroller of the Treasury

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Comptroller Review Finds Tennessee Reconnect Enrollment Declining, but Participants See Positive Outcomes

The Tennessee Comptroller's Office of Research and Education Accountability (OREA) has released a new evaluation of the Tennessee Reconnect Grant, providing an updated look at how the state's tuition-free program for adult learners is being used and how participants are performing.

Created by the General Assembly in 2017, Tennessee Reconnect helps eligible adults, primarily at public community colleges, earn an associate degree or certificate by covering tuition and mandatory fees after other scholarships and grants are applied. State law requires OREA to evaluate the program every four years. This is the office's second evaluation.

The report finds that participation in Tennessee Reconnect has decreased since the program's launch in 2018, falling from more than 26,000 students in the first year to about 13,000 students by the 2022-23 academic year.



OREA also found that many adult students had not taken advantage of the program but could have based on their age or financial aid status. More than 90 percent of these potentially eligible students did not complete a Reconnect application, and about half did not file the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which is required to receive the grant.

Despite declining participation, Tennessee Reconnect supported thousands of students. Between 2018 and 2023, the program provided nearly \$132 million in funding to more than 34,000 students.

Roughly 40 percent of students who received the Reconnect grant, between 2018 and 2023, earned a credential by the summer of 2024. Students who received the Reconnect grant showed stronger outcomes than similar students who did not receive the grant. The report finds that Reconnect funded students were more likely to remain enrolled and earn a credential.

The evaluation highlights several challenges faced by adult learners. Many Reconnect students balance school with work and family responsibilities, and some report confusion about what costs the grant covers. More than half of Reconnect students report working full time and having dependents.

The report also examines the role of Reconnect Navigators, who help adult students apply for college and stay on track. While Navigators can improve student outcomes, OREA finds that awareness and use of these services vary across the state.

OREA outlines several policy considerations, including improving coordination among state agencies and colleges, increasing outreach to eligible students, and expanding the use of Navigator services.

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

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Media contact: John Dunn, Director of Communications, 615.401.7755 or john.dunn@cot.tn.gov

