

Educating Tennessee's Children in Custody



Children enter state custody generally because they have been neglected and/or abused or because they are delinquent. Being placed in custody means that children often move among a variety of placements, that they must appear in court when ordered to do so, and that their family relationships are often tenuous. Amid this stress and uncertainty, children in state custody still must attend school.

Most of the approximately 10,000 custody children in Tennessee attend public schools across the state. Others attend in-house schools located in the facilities where they reside. Education is often considered the best hope for improving the lives of children said to be "at risk." However, numerous national and state studies document dismal outcomes for children who grow up in state custody, suggesting a widespread lack of attention to the education of this population. Many do not complete high school and few continue to college, placing them at risk for future unemployment and, in some cases, incarceration.

Report Findings:

- Many Tennessee children in state custody experience multiple risk factors that may keep them from succeeding in school—these include living below the poverty level, mental health diagnoses, parents with little education, and parents in prison.
- An estimated 35 to 40 percent of all children and youth in Tennessee custody qualify for special education services, about three times more than the estimated 12 percent of children identified in Tennessee public schools.
- One in five children in Tennessee custody who needs special education services does not receive them.
- DCS has refocused its Division of Education to better organize and govern the schools under its authority.
- The agencies and groups responsible for educating children and youth in Tennessee custody may not be working together as well as they should.
- The educational progress of juvenile offenders deserves greater scrutiny.
- Youth leaving state custody from juvenile justice facilities cannot access critical independent living services that help other state custody youth transition into adulthood.
- Some school systems lose BEP funds under the current system of funding educational services for custody children.



Recommendations:



- Develop a resolution or law containing a unifying statement of purpose regarding the education of children in state custody.
- Waive postsecondary tuition fees at state institutions of higher education for young adults in or formerly in state custody.
- Annually report specific outcome measures for juvenile offenders who receive educational services in state facilities.
- Revise state law to make funding for children in state custody more equitable for school districts.
- Regularly include educators in Child and Family Team Meetings.
- Ensure that teachers and other personnel understand the state's child

welfare system and the difficulties that custody children and youth may experience in obtaining their education.

View the full report at <http://www.comptroller.state.tn.us/cpdivorea.htm>.

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