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Comptroller Report Examines Virtual Schools in Tennessee

A new report from the Comptroller's Offices of Research and Education Accountability (OREA) examines the way virtual schools are funded in Tennessee.

In 2011, the Tennessee General Assembly passed legislation allowing school districts to establish full-time virtual schools, which must be provided resources as any other public school in the state. Since 2011, nine school districts have established virtual schools: Bradley County, Bristol City, Hamilton County, Metro Nashville, Robertson County, Shelby County, Union County, Washington County, and Wilson County.

The Comptroller's Office surveyed the virtual schools last year to learn how they operate and how school districts have allocated funding to them. A profile of each virtual school, which includes funding information, is included in the report.

Most virtual schools have small enrollments as a percentage of their school district's enrollment, though Union County's Tennessee Virtual Academy is the exception: in 2014-15, virtual school students made up 33 percent of the district's enrollment. Collectively, the nine virtual schools served about 0.21 percent of the total statewide K-12 enrollment in SY 2014-15.

Funding for virtual schools is most affected by student enrollment, including the number of students served, whether students are full- or part-time, and whether students originate from other districts. Some virtual schools charge tuition for part-time students that live outside the school district in which the virtual school is operated.

School districts may manage their own virtual schools or contract for services with nonprofit or for-profit entities. Two districts, Robertson and Union Counties, contract with for-profit providers to operate their virtual schools.

The report also examines the academic performance of Tennessee's virtual schools. Student academic growth scores are generally lower for virtual schools than the scores of the school districts that established the schools. The report notes that virtual school performance may be affected by the number of students who enroll in virtual schools for short periods of time, and that enrollment changes in virtual schools with small enrollments can affect academic outcomes.

Virtual schools that perform "significantly below expectations" for growth in student achievement for any three consecutive years may have their student enrollment capped or be closed, subject to a decision by Tennessee's Commissioner of Education.

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