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In 2017, the General Assembly created the Tennessee Reconnect Grant, giving adults an opportunity to earn an associate degree or certificate free of tuition and mandatory fees. Since fall 2018, Tennessee residents have been enrolling in community colleges, eligible public universities, and eligible private institutions using the grant. State law requires the Comptroller's Office of Research and Education Accountability (OREA) to review, study, and determine the effectiveness of Tennessee Reconnect every four years.^A This is OREA's second evaluation of the Tennessee Reconnect Grant; the first evaluation was published in 2022.

As a last-dollar grant, Tennessee Reconnect is applied to a student's tuition and mandatory fee balance after other sources of gift aid, like federal Pell grants and state-funded merit scholarships, are applied. OREA uses the term "last-dollar Reconnect students" to refer to students who received funding through the Reconnect grant.

OREA's evaluation of Tennessee Reconnect includes the following conclusions and considerations:

Conclusions

- The number of Reconnect students has declined since the grant began in fall 2018.
- Starting in the 2022-2023 academic year, the General Assembly lowered the age eligibility threshold for Reconnect students from 24 years of age to 23 years of age. Lowering the Reconnect age eligibility threshold had minimal impact on enrollment.
- Between 2018 and 2023, the Reconnect grant provided nearly \$132 million to over 34,000 students.
- Last-dollar Reconnect students persist and earn credentials at higher rates than similar non-Reconnect students, though overall completion rates remain modest.
- Many adult learners experience barriers to enrollment and persistence, including work and family responsibilities and misconceptions about what costs the Reconnect grant covers.
- Reconnect Navigators provide adult students with valuable support, but awareness of and integration with Navigator services varies across community colleges.

Considerations

- State agencies and institutions could improve coordination to increase the share of new Reconnect applicants who ultimately enroll with the grant.
- State agencies and community colleges should explore ways to increase the number of students who work with a Reconnect Navigator.
- Further research is warranted on the effectiveness of hybrid and virtual course delivery formats for Reconnect students, the role and usefulness of Reconnect success plans, and support models for students who are employed and those with dependents.

Note: Any expansion to Reconnect eligibility or participation may increase the annual cost of Reconnect, and the Comptroller's Office recognizes the tension between declining lottery revenues and steady or growing enrollment in the state's lottery-funded scholarship programs.

^A TCA 49-4-944(k).