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## **Parent Taught Driver's Education Saves Lives**

*By Samuel Redfern*

Parents across America are taking the responsibility of educating their children seriously. They teach their children how to read, write and do arithmetic. As their children grow older many parents want to personally teach them how to drive. Nearly 1.5 million children are being taught at home in the United States with great success, and more of these home schoolers are reaching driving age. Parents want the legal right to teach their students driver's education. They want their children to be safe drivers and believe they can keep their child from becoming an accident statistic.

### **Driver's Education: Traditional Programs Are Failing**

Although all 50 states have laws regarding driver's education, the statistics demonstrate it is not working. More 16 year-old drivers are dying in vehicle crashes than ever before, even though the number of traffic deaths has declined among other teens and the driving populace in general. In 1997, 5,697 teenagers died in the United States from motor vehicle crash injuries. Such injuries are by far the leading public health problem for young people 13-19 years old. The crash risk is particularly high during the first years in which teenagers are eligible for driver's licenses. Thirty-six percent of all deaths of 16-19 year-olds from all causes are related to motor vehicles.<sup>1</sup>

The problem is worse in the United States than in many other countries because we allow teenagers to get drivers licenses and cars at an earlier age than in most other countries, and little driving experience is required before these licenses are issued. Licenses are also inexpensive and easy to obtain. All of these factors result in greatly elevated crash risk to young drivers. The risk of crash involvement per mile driven among drivers 16-19 years old is 4 times the risk among older drivers. Risk is highest at age 16-17. In fact, the crash rate per mile driven is almost 3 times as high among 16 year-olds as it is among 18-19 year-olds.

Crash rates are high because of the young driver's immaturity combined with driving inexperience. The immaturity is apparent in young driver's risky driving practices like speeding and tailgating. At the same time, teenager's lack of experience behind the wheel makes it difficult for them to recognize and respond to hazards. They get in trouble trying to handle unusual driving situations, even small emergencies. Crashes involving young people typically are single vehicle crashes, primarily run-off-the-road crashes, that involve driver error and/or

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<sup>1</sup> Geico Direct, Volume 13 Number 1 Fall 1998 A Driver's Education: How's It Working?

speeding. They often occur when other young people are in the vehicle with the young driver, so teenagers are disproportionately involved in crashes as passengers as well as drivers.<sup>2</sup>

The following facts are based on analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Transportation's Fatality Analysis Reporting System:

Thirty-six percent of deaths of 16-19 year olds in 1996 from all causes occurred in crashes. (This is the latest year for which this information is available).

Motor vehicle death rates per 100,000 people in 1997 peaked at age 18 (drivers) and 17-18 (passengers).

Sixty-two percent of teenage passenger deaths in 1997 occurred in crashes in which another teenager was driving. Among people of all ages, 20 percent of passenger deaths in 1997 occurred when a teenager was driving.

Among drivers who aren't legally permitted to buy alcohol (16-20 years old), 26 percent of fatally injured drivers in 1997 had blood alcohol concentrations at or above 0.10 percentXdown from 53 percent in 1980. This decline is greater than declines among older drivers.<sup>3</sup>

## **Certified Driver's Education Does Not Ensure Results**

Most states require driver's education to be administered through the local public school or a "state certified" commercial driving school. Shouldn't parents have the choice to teach their children how to drive safely? After all, it is parents who are responsible for the well being and safety of their children.

There is no statistical correlation between "certified-led" driving instruction and lower crash rates. If certified instruction has no statistical effect on safety, then why do states still choose to use the expensive systems? The answer is the same as in so many programs run by the government X they concentrate on a process that has long been in place rather than on what is really important, the results of the training process. Furthermore, certification standards vary from state to state. The requirements may be as little as a two-day class or a general teaching certificate with no background in transportation.

## **The Solution: Parent Directed Driver's Education**

There are several groups like National Driver Training and The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, that believe very strongly that parent-directed drivers education is a reasonable alternative for families in lieu of state-licensed drivers education programs. They base this belief

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<sup>2</sup> Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, Sept. 1998

<sup>3</sup> Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, Sept. 1998

on statistical evidence, and the results of parent-directed education in most subject matters. The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety conducted a study in 1985 of 52,304 public high school licensed and unlicensed students from 75 schools in seven different states. They found that, “the most important teaching sources were fathers, mothers and school courses. Sixty-six percent of the high school drivers reported their fathers contributed some or a lot and 56% reported similar contributions from their mothers.”<sup>4</sup>

As of January of 1997, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety’s Status Report advised Americans that traditional driver education does not provide the intended benefits of producing a safer driver. This report suggests gradually releasing young drivers as they demonstrate maturity and skill, while invoking parents to perform the training and monitoring, as the way to lower crash potential. Therefore, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety recommends that new drivers be trained through this process called Graduated Driver Licensing. This process is a systematic process that controls progression to unrestricted driving. The new driver initially receives a restricted license and graduates to an unrestricted license through time and increased experience. Graduated licensing laws have been adopted in 44 states and usually include such restrictions as curfews, limits on the number of teen passengers, requirements involving parental supervision, and zero tolerance for teen alcohol use.

The National Driver Training Institute takes the process a step further by initiating the controlled progression during the driver education process through an entirely parent taught program called “Help for the Teenager Who Wants to Drive.” Rather than rely on the state to oversee the young driver’s progress, the parents assess the teen’s maturity, attitude, and experience to determine the conditions under which he may drive. Many of the largest insurance companies across the country have recognized this as an approved program. Many states have formally approved or certified the program.

In October 2000, the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, conducted a research project on the effectiveness of Graduated Driver Licensing. The survey population consisted of teens who had completed the National Driver Training Institute’s program, “Help for the Teenager Who Wants to Drive.” Initial findings are positive and indicate that less than one percent of survey participants had been involved in an accident.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) also produced some interesting facts over the past 30 years. NHTSA’s sponsored McBride-Reilly report of 30 years ago revealed that parents do produce highly skilled young drivers. NHTSA Drs., Paul Zador and Leon Robertson, published several studies through the 70’s and 80’s pointing out the ineffectiveness of state mandated driver-training programs. The NHTSA’s annual Fatal Accident Reporting System points out that drivers in the 15-24 age group do not display a lower crash rate in those states requiring driver training, versus those states which do not require such training.

In the 1940s and 50’s parents were the primary teachers of their own children in driver’s education programs. Later in the 1960s and 70s the shift focused on school taught driver’s

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<sup>4</sup> Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, Vol. 14, No. 2 1985

education. This shift was made in the hopes of assisting teenagers in driving tests and in gaining important driving skills. Unfortunately this has not improved teenage driving safety as the statistics clearly demonstrate.

We maintain it is important that parents have the choice to direct the education of their children in this area. The Home School Legal Defense Association stands for the rights of parents to teach their children to drive.

There is no major reason to oppose parent directed driver's education. There are no studies that indicate or suggest that this shift would lead to disastrous results. Instead it appears that legislation that gives parents the choice to teach driver's education leads to better teenage drivers and safer roads.

## **The Need For Legislation To Allow For Parent-Directed Driver's Training**

In May of 1997, a parent-taught driver education program, *Help for the Teenager Who Wants to Drive* (developed by the National Driver Training Institute), was used as the model to change the state law in Texas. This change in state law put parents in the center of the training process. In early January of 1998, the Texas Board of Insurance reviewed this process and recommended its inclusion in the same category of training discounts as traditional methods. An insurance discount on premiums will encourage parents to seek this form of training, while reducing loss on the part of the insurance industry when they insure these more thoroughly trained, safer drivers.

Additionally, Nebraska, Minnesota, and Virginia have passed similar legislation recognizing the ability of parents to instruct their students in the area of driver's education.

The Home School Legal Defense Association believes that there are several reasons why the state legislatures should pass parent-directed driver's training acts:

### ***Good Public Policy***

The option for parents to instruct their children in driver's education allows them to be more involved with their adolescent children at a critical, developmental stage. It encourages parents to participate with the child in learning and to take more responsibility for the outcome. A parent typically has the greatest interest in the safety and well being of the child.

### ***Safety***

From the research we reviewed there appears to be no statistical evidence in support of the claim that certified state-mandated programs reduce crash rates. Parents with a good curriculum can provide a graduated form of instruction allowing for more time behind the wheel. The Insurance Institute recommends such a progressive approach.

## ***Greater Choice***

Allowing parents to teach their own children to drive provides them an alternative to public and private driving schools. It is cost-effective, convenient, and allows for a more gradual approach to learning new skills.

## ***Less Government***

If certified instruction has no statistical effect on safety, what compelling interest does the government have in mandating it? Public and private driving schools enjoy the privileges of a government supported monopoly. This conflicts with the fundamental right of parents to direct the education of their children.

## ***Individual Instruction***

The reason for the effectiveness of parent-taught driver education is the same as the reason for the effectiveness of home education in general. Both utilize the tutorial method with a low student-teacher ratio and individualized instruction aimed at mastery. Furthermore, parents do not want their children to harm themselves or cause accidents. Since parents care the most about their children and have the most to lose in the form of higher insurance rates and repairs to vehicles, parents take the time to teach their children well.

## **State Legislatures Should Support Parent Directed Drivers Education**

The argument against parent-directed drivers educationXthat parents simply cannot teach their own students a course in driver training as well as the “professionals”— is wrong and has no statistical backing. In fact, when it is understood that most parents have more than just an economic interest in their students, it should become clear that few, if any, courses cannot be taught to home school students by their parents or through the resources of a support group.

There is no major reason to oppose parent directed driver’s education. There are no studies that indicate or suggest that this shift would lead to disastrous results. Instead it appears that legislation that would give parents the choice to teach driver’s education would lead to better teenage drivers and safer roads. In the same states that have enacted state laws to allow parents to teach their children driver’s education, these programs are working well. HSLDA supports legislation which will allow parents the opportunity to teach their children how to drive. Driver’s education is something that parents can direct and teach, with proven success, and we encourage parents and policy makers to defend and protect this right.

For a complete summary of the laws in all 50 states visit the following link below:

[http://www.highwaysafety.org/safety\\_facts/state\\_laws/grad\\_license.htm](http://www.highwaysafety.org/safety_facts/state_laws/grad_license.htm)

## Model Language For States To Implement:

**Driver training courses.** Requires the DMV commissioner to promulgate regulations by which driver training courses for students can substitute for those conducted by public schools and commercial driver training schools in qualifying minors to receive driver's licenses.

A BILL to amend and reenact § \_\_\_\_\_ of the Code of \_\_\_\_\_ (State) \_\_\_\_\_, relating to issuance of driver's licenses to minors.

**Be it enacted by the General Assembly of \_\_\_\_\_ (State) \_\_\_\_\_:**

**1. That § \_\_\_\_\_ of the Code of \_\_\_\_\_ (State) \_\_\_\_\_ is amended and reenacted as follows:**

§ \_\_\_\_\_. Conditions and requirements for licensure of persons under eighteen; requests for cancellation of minor's driver's license; temporary driver's licenses; Board of Education approved programs; Commissioner to provide for approval of certain driver training courses; fee.

A. Minors at least sixteen years old may be issued drivers' licenses under the following conditions:

1. The minor shall submit a proper application and satisfactory evidence that he (i) is a resident of the Commonwealth; (ii) has successfully completed a driver education course approved by the state Department of Education, the Commissioner under subsection H of this section, or by the Department of Motor Vehicles under Chapter \_\_\_\_\_ (§ \_\_\_\_\_ et seq.) of this title; and (iii) is mentally, physically, and otherwise qualified to drive a motor vehicle safely.

2. The minor's application for a driver's license must be signed by a parent of the applicant, otherwise by the guardian having custody of him. However, in the event a minor has no parent or guardian, then a driver's license shall not be issued to him unless his application is signed by the judge of the juvenile and domestic relations district court of the city or county in which he resides. If the minor making the application is married or otherwise emancipated, in lieu of any parent's, guardian's or judge's signature, the minor may present proper evidence of the solemnization of the marriage or the order of emancipation.

3. The minor shall be required to state in his application whether or not he has been convicted of an offense triable by, or tried in, a juvenile and domestic relations district court or found by such court to be a child in need of supervision, as defined in § \_\_\_\_\_. If it appears that the minor has been adjudged not innocent of the offense alleged or has been found to be a child in need of supervision, the Department shall not issue a license without the written approval of the judge of the juvenile and domestic relations district court making an adjudication as to the minor or the like approval of a similar court of the county or city in which the parent or guardian, respectively, of the minor resides.

4. The application for a permanent driver's license by a minor of the age of persons required to attend school pursuant to § \_\_\_\_\_ shall be accompanied by evidence of compliance with the compulsory school attendance law set forth in Article \_\_ (§ \_\_\_\_\_ et seq.) of Chapter \_\_ of Title \_\_\_\_\_. This evidence shall be provided on a form furnished by the Board of Education and certified by the division superintendent or any of his designees. For minors attending nonpublic school, such certification shall be made by the private school principal or any of his designees; for minors receiving home schooling, such certification shall be made by the home schooling parent or tutor. If the minor is unable to provide such evidence, he shall not be granted a driver's license until he reaches the age of eighteen or presents proper evidence of solemnization of his marriage or an order of emancipation of the parent, as defined in § \_\_\_\_\_, or other person standing in loco parentis, has provided written authorization for the minor to obtain a driver's license.

A minor may, however, present a high school diploma or its equivalent or a certificate indicating completion of a prescribed course of study as a defined by the local school board pursuant to § \_\_\_\_\_ as evidence of compulsory attendance compliance.

5. The minor applicant shall certify in writing, on a form prescribed by the Commissioner, that he is a resident of the Commonwealth. The applicant's parent or guardian shall also certify that the applicant is a resident by signing the certification. Any minor providing proper evidence of the solemnization of his marriage or a certified copy of a court order of emancipation shall not be required to provide the parent's certification of residence.

B. Any parent or guardian of an unmarried or unemancipated minor may, after the issuance of a permanent driver's license to such minor, file with the Department a written request that the license of the minor be canceled. When such request is filed, the Department shall cancel the license of the minor and the license shall not thereafter be reissued by the Department until a period of six months has elapsed from the date of cancellation or the minor reaches his eighteenth birthday, whichever shall occur sooner.

C. The provisions of subsection A of this section requiring that an application for a driver's license be signed by the parent or guardian shall be waived by the Commissioner if the application is accompanied by proper evidence of the solemnization of the minor's marriage or a certified copy of a court order, issued under the provisions of Article \_\_ (§ \_\_\_\_\_ et seq.) of Chapter \_\_ of Title \_\_\_\_\_, declaring the applicant to be an emancipated minor.

D. A learner's permit accompanied by documentation verifying the minor's successful completion of an approved driver education course shall constitute a temporary driver's license for purposes of driving unaccompanied by a licensed driver as required in § \_\_\_\_\_, if all other requirements of this

chapter have been met. The temporary license shall only be valid until the permanent license is presented as provided in § \_\_\_\_\_.

E. The Commissioner, on application therefor by a person at least sixteen years of age but less than eighteen years of age, shall issue to the applicant a temporary driver's license valid for six months if he (i) certifies by signing, together with his parent or guardian, on a form prescribed by the Commissioner that he is a resident of the Commonwealth; (ii) is the holder of a valid driver's license from another state; and (iii) has not been found guilty of or otherwise responsible for an offense involving the operation of a motor vehicle. No temporary license issued under this subsection shall be renewed, nor shall any second or subsequent temporary license under this subsection be issued to the same applicant. Any such minor providing proper evidence of the solemnization of his marriage or a certified copy of a court order of emancipation shall not be required to obtain the signature of his parent or guardian for the temporary driver's license.

F. For persons qualifying for a driver's license through driver education courses approved by the state Department of Education, the Commissioner under subsection H of this section, or by the Department of Motor Vehicles under Chapter \_\_ (§ \_\_\_\_\_ et seq.) of this title; the application for the learner's permit shall be used as the application for the driver's license pursuant to § \_\_\_\_\_.

G. Driver's licenses shall be issued by the Department to minors successfully completing driver education courses approved by the Department of Education or the Commissioner under subsection H of this section when the Department receives from the school or parent proper certification that the student (i) has successfully completed such course, including a road skills examination; (ii) is regularly attending school and is in good academic standing or, if not in such standing, whose parent or guardian, having custody of such minor, provides written authorization for the minor to obtain a driver's license; and (iii) upon payment of a fee of \$2.40 per year, based on the period of the license's validity. For applicants attending public schools, good academic standing may be certified by the public school principal or any of his designees. For applicants attending nonpublic schools, such certification shall be made by the private school principal or any of his designees; for minors receiving home schooling, such certification shall be made by the home schooling parent or tutor. Any minor providing proper evidence of the solemnization of his marriage or a certified copy of a court order of emancipation shall not be required to provide the certification of good academic standing or any written authorization from his parent or guardian to obtain a driver's license.

H. The Commissioner shall by regulation provide for the approval of driver training courses, a list of which shall be maintained by the Commissioner, given by the parents, legal guardians, or tutors of persons under the age of eighteen who are required to have successfully completed a driver training course prior to obtaining a driver's license. Any such regulation shall require that:

1. The parent, guardian, or tutor be a licensed driver;
2. The student driver spend the same number of hours in (i) classroom instruction and (ii) behind-the-wheel instruction as driver education courses approved by the Department of Education;
3. The parent, guardian, or tutor shall not have been convicted of (i) manslaughter resulting from the negligent operation of a motor vehicle or (ii) driving while intoxicated; and
4. A process is formulated which would allow home school student to take the road skills exam at a local site of the department.

The Commissioner shall not approve any such driver training course unless he has determined that the course materials are similar in quality and content to those required in driver training courses approved by the State Department of Education. However, the Commissioner shall not require that:

1. The classroom instruction be provided in a room having particular characteristics or equipment; or
2. The vehicle used for the behind-the-wheel instruction have equipment other than the equipment otherwise required by law for operation of such a vehicle on a public highway when not being used for driver training.

Regulations promulgated under this section shall provide a method by which (i) approval of the driver training course is to be obtained and (ii) a driver's license applicant may submit proof of completion of the course.

Successful completion of a driver training course approved under this section shall have the same effect as completion of a driver training course approved by the State Department of Education.

*Steven Williams of the National Driver Training Institute contributed to this report.*