



# A Fresh Look at the State of Driver Education In America

Approximately 8 percent of all licensed drivers involved in fatal crashes are between 15 and 18 years old, and motor vehicle crashes remain the leading cause of death for this age group. It was once thought that effective driver education and training would reduce the high crash rates of young, novice drivers. Multiple evaluations of driver education, however, have failed to provide any evidence for decreased crash rates among teen drivers who completed driver education. Nevertheless, driver education remains a standard for acquiring driving skills, and many States require driver education for all drivers under the age of 18.

The high rate of driver fatalities among 15- to 18-year-olds has raised the question of whether an overhaul of current driver education practices could produce safer novice drivers. To address this issue, NHTSA conducted a study to (1) identify and review current driver education and training programs in use; (2) identify best teaching practices for teenagers; (3) examine the optimal sequencing for the presentation of safe driving skills in the classroom and during behind-the-wheel training; and (4) assess whether a new approach to driver education would be beneficial.

## Current State of Driver Education

Researchers held in-depth discussions with driver licensing officials in 40 States, and conducted other extensive research efforts (e.g., Internet searches, driver manual reviews) for the remaining States to document the current status of driver education in the United States. The research efforts revealed that:

- Twenty-three States require driver education for all drivers under 18. An additional 6 States require short pre-licensing courses or drug-and-alcohol-awareness courses for all drivers under 18.
- In 35 States, a teen can obtain an unrestricted license before 18 whether or not he/she takes driver education. In 25 States, a teen who takes driver education can get an unrestricted license at a younger age.
- At least 18 States offer some other benefit (such as waiving the practice driving requirements, knowledge tests, or road tests) in addition to younger licensure if a teen takes driver education.

- The majority of driver education programs are required by the States to include 30 hours of classroom instruction, although the lowest number is 8 hours and the highest number is 56 hours.
- Twelve States had a specific curriculum guide for driver education programs to use.
- All but one of the States indicated that instructors had to be certified to teach driver education.
- Most States had both high school and commercial programs in operation, although a few States accept only one of these types of driver education program. Six States accepted Internet driver education, and 3 States accepted parent-taught driver education.
- Oversight varies widely among the States and often involves multiple agencies if more than one form of driver education is acceptable.
- Only 13 of the 40 responding States were able to indicate how many teen drivers who received their first licenses in 2006 had taken driver education.

## Best Teaching Practices From General Education

The Department of Education published a practice guide that assembles the best teaching practices from all areas of education for teenagers. The following box summarizes some general findings that could be applied to driver education:

- **Space learning over time.** Students retain more information when they have heard it on at least two occasions.
- **Interleave worked example solutions and problem-solving exercises.**
- **Combine graphics with verbal descriptions.**
- **Use quizzing to promote learning, including quizzing of prior knowledge as well as on new material.**
- **Help students allocate study time efficiently.**
- **Help students build explanations by asking and answering deep questions.** Deep questions require explanations that appeal to causal mechanisms, planning, well-reasoned arguments, and logic.

Pasher, H., Bain, P., Bottge, B., Graesser, A., Koedinger, K., McDaniel, M., & Metcalfe, J. (2007). *Organizing Instruction and Study to Improve Student Learning: IES Practice Guide*. Jessup, MD: National Center for Education Research.

## Injury Prevention Strategies for Teens

The literature review on injury prevention strategies used in other public health domains yielded interesting information on altering attitudes or changing behavior of teenagers about tobacco, drug, or alcohol use; sex; and obesity.

Most of the successful adolescent injury prevention interventions start at much younger ages than traditional driver education programs. Many of these programs start in elementary school and integrate age-appropriate lessons into a variety of courses. Many programs adopted the social influences model that addresses the need for knowledge about a topic and the need to understand the pressures teens may face from peers and how they can resist these pressures. There is some evidence that having a specialized instructor will improve the success of a program, although in some domains specialized instructors were no better than normal teachers. Some research indicates that a program developed with cultural norms in mind will perform better than a more general program applied to all cultures.

## Expert Panel Review

The study formed an expert panel to apply the results of the various literature reviews and data collection activities to driver education. The expert panel included representatives from driver education, traffic safety research, general education, and injury prevention areas. During one day, the panel reviewed four topics: (1) the state of driver education in America; (2) research on driver education; (3) best teaching practices for teens; and (4) a working model for a driver training sequence encompassing driver education and graduated driver licensing (GDL) systems. The panel also discussed the potential benefits of more frequent and rigorous testing and more parental involvement in the restricted licensing phase.

## Conclusions

- Current driver education appears to do a good job of preparing students to pass the licensing exam. The expectation that driver education will lead to a decreased teen crash rate is unrealistic and beyond what current practice can be expected to achieve.
- GDL systems give novice drivers experience under adult scrutiny and protection by gradually introducing more risky driving conditions. Multiple studies document that GDL systems reduce the number of 16- and 17-year-old-driver crashes.
- Greater parental involvement may help and should be an integral part of GDL and of the overall driver education

process. Currently there is no formal preparation for parents for this demanding role.

- Integrating driver education training with graduated driver licensing systems and expanding beyond current classroom and behind-the-wheel training may have increased traffic safety benefits for young drivers.
- The table below shows one scenario of an expanded driver education system that would start preparing future drivers at an earlier age, go beyond the typical 30 hours of classroom and 6 hours of behind-the-wheel program, and require more stringent testing than is currently characteristic.

## One Example of an Expanded Driver Education System

Pre-Licensing	Primary Education (Grades K-8)	Classroom and parent-taught exercises on students' roles as passengers (e.g., seat belt use, driver distraction, conspicuity)
		Classroom teacher training
		Community education
	Preparatory Education (Ages 14 to 16)	Lecture and/or PC-based classroom training (e.g., vehicle control, hazard identification)
		On-the-road and/or simulator training
		Parent involvement (e.g., train on GDL laws, train on limiting exposure)
Standardized testing (knowledge, road skills, scanning/attention, decision-making)		
GDL Licensing	Learner's Permit	Entry test (e.g., GDL rationale, risks)
		Parent instructor permit (e.g., joint parent/teen classes)
		Checklist of training situations
		Minimum practice hours
		Extend permit phase (e.g., to 1 year)
	Restricted License	Testing (GDL laws and scanning/attention)
		Monitoring and remedial education
		Minimum practice hours
		Recurrent training and education
		Exit testing (acceptable driving record, scanning/attention, effects of alcohol)
Post-Licensing	Unrestricted License	

## How to Order

Download a copy of *A Fresh Look at Driver Education in America*, prepared by Dunlap and Associates, Inc. (63 pages plus appendices that list driver education and GDL requirements by State), from [www.nhtsa.gov/staticfiles/nti/pdf/811543.pdf](http://www.nhtsa.gov/staticfiles/nti/pdf/811543.pdf).



U.S. Department of Transportation  
**National Highway Traffic Safety Administration**

1200 New Jersey Avenue SE., NTI-132  
 Washington, DC 20590

**TRAFFIC TECH** is a publication to disseminate information about traffic safety programs, including evaluations, innovative programs, and new publications. Feel free to copy it as you wish. If you would like to be added to an e-mail list, contact Julie Korkor at e-mail: [julie.korkor@dot.gov](mailto:julie.korkor@dot.gov).