



Driver Education Practices in Selected States

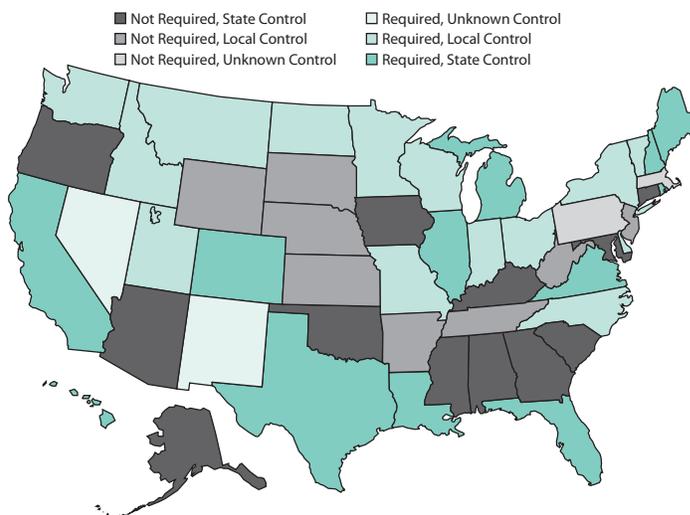
Teen drivers have the highest crash rate per mile driven of any age group (Williams, Ferguson, & Wells, 2005). Immaturity and inexperience are two explanations for why novice teen drivers have such a high crash risk (Arnett, 1992; Mayhew, Simpson, & Pak, 2003; McCartt, Mayhew, & Ferguson, 2006). Immaturity includes the heightened risk-taking behavior teens exhibit. Lack of experience has been linked to crashes regardless of the age at which driving starts. High crash risk by teens can be accounted for both by immaturity and inexperience acting simultaneously. Both explanations can account for the higher teen crash risks at night, due to speed, with passengers, and on slippery roads, for example. Immaturity can lead teens to speed, drive recklessly in high-risk situations, and to succumb to peer pressure. Inexperience can be especially problematic in difficult driving situations and when there are a greater number of distractions.

Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL) systems have been shown to be effective in reducing the high crash rates among teen drivers. GDL systems gradually introduce teen drivers to more risky driving situations over time. GDL components usually include a learner's permit during which driving is allowed only with a parent or instructor, nighttime restrictions that limit late night driving, limitations on the number of passengers teens may carry, a specified period of unsupervised driving without crashes or violations (intermediate license), and prohibition of use of any electronic device while driving.

Driver education has existed in the United States for almost 100 years, and the public has come to accept driver education as a primary method for teaching the "rules of the road" and basic driving skills to new drivers. Research studies, however, generally have failed to demonstrate the effectiveness of driver education in reducing crash rates among teen drivers and some studies even show an increase in crashes following driver education. Some studies suggest that this negative effect occurs in part because a teen can receive a license earlier following completion of a driver education course in some parts of the country. Earlier licensing gives a teen more opportunities to drive and more opportunities to be involved in a crash. A few studies have shown that supplemental driver training (after licensure programs that teach advanced maneuvers, such as skid training) is also associated with increased crash risk.

Driver education still remains a standard for acquiring basic driving skills, and most States require driver education training for drivers 15 to 18 years old. Twenty-nine States require that novice drivers take driver education, though at least 13 of those States do not have a single curriculum that covers all courses being taught in the State. Because there is variability in the curriculum, the method, and the extent of driver education among different States, NHTSA conducted a study to gain a better understanding of how the States across the Nation have implemented driver education.

Figure 1. Driver Education and Curriculum Control in the States



As a national advocate for quality traffic safety education, the American Driver and Traffic Safety Education Association (ADTSEA) created and published a driver education curriculum, updated in 2002. Until 2002, ADTSEA recommended 30 hours of classroom driver education to cover specific curricula and 6 hours of behind-the-wheel instruction. The newest recommendations from ADTSEA call for 45 hours in the classroom and 8 hours behind the wheel. The extent to which different States follow these guidelines is unclear.

Comparing State Driver Education Curricula

Researchers obtained driver education curricula from 10 States. Seven of these States (California, Illinois, Louisiana, Maine, Michigan, Rhode Island, and Texas) require driver education prior to licensing and each has a single statewide curriculum. Three States (Alabama, Minnesota, and North Dakota) do not require driver education and do not have a statewide curriculum. Researchers compared the State curricula to the ADTSEA curriculum.

As shown in Table 1, all States in the study fell short of the recommended number of instruction hours. Most of the States require 30 in-class hours and 6 behind-the-wheel hours of instruction, which is consistent with the former ADTSEA guidelines. None of the States use all of the ADTSEA-recommended material in their driver education courses, but the States do address all of the suggested in-class topics. With the exception of Rhode Island, which does not require on-road training as part of its driver education curriculum, the States' curricula require all of the topics recommended by ADTSEA; the time devoted to each topic is likely to be lower than that proposed by ADTSEA given the shorter time requirements for the State courses.

Table 1. Comparison of State and ADTSEA Driver Education Curriculum

	Class Hours	Behind-the-Wheel Hours	Number of Textbooks, Videos, & Resources	Number of In-Class Topics	Number of On-Road Lessons
ADTSEA	45	8	13	10	6
Alabama*	30	6	0	10	6
California	25	6	4	10	6
Illinois	30	6	6	10	6
Louisiana	30	6	3	10	6
Maine	30	10	4	10	6
Michigan	30	6	7	10	6
Minnesota*	30	6	4	10	6
North Dakota*	30	6	3	10	6
Rhode Island†	33	0	4	10	0
Texas	32	7	5	10	6

* Driver education is not required in this State.

† Does not require on-the-road training

Teen Topical Discussions

Researchers recruited 57 teens from 18 randomly selected States to take part in topical discussions of driver education (see Table 2). Each teen was about to start a driver education course and agreed to participate for a \$40 honorarium. Researchers contacted teens 3 to 4 times over the course of their driver education programs. A researcher asked the teens to identify the topics covered in both the in-class and on-road portions of the courses and to estimate the amount of time spent on each topic.

In general, the driver education courses matched their curricula. The majority of teens reported that their driver education instructors taught the in-class and on-road topics suggested by ADTSEA. Teens reported that the in-class portion of the course lasted the designated amount of time. Thus, if the class was to run 30 hours, the teens spent 30 hours in class. However, teens reported that on average they spent only 4.6 hours actually driving during the course. Forty-nine percent of teens received less than 6 hours of behind-the-wheel instruction. Only 11% of the teens drove for the minimum 8 hours recommended by the new ADTSEA curriculum.

Table 2. Number of Teens per State

State	N	State	N
Alabama	2	Michigan	3
Arizona	1	Minnesota	3
California	7	Mississippi	2
Colorado	3	North Carolina	1
Connecticut	3	North Dakota	2
Florida	4	New Hampshire	3
Illinois	4	Rhode Island	5
Louisiana	4	Tennessee	6
Maine	3	Texas	1

Discussion

There are clear differences in the requirements for driver education between States. Some States require DE for young new drivers prior to licensure while others let the individual decide whether to take DE. Some States vary the permit holding period depending on whether a driver chooses to take DE and some States have their own curricula, which are required by facilities that teach the course. Others leave the details up to local entities.

The topics currently taught in driver education generally match the ADTSEA recommendations. However, the actual time required in the States' driver education curricula falls short of the newest ADTSEA guidelines. The time spent in the classroom portion of the course seems to be as described by the States in terms of hours of in-class teaching according to a small number of students. Parents and State officials should note that driver education students report spending less than the required time learning to drive behind the wheel of a vehicle than what is expected based on the States' curricula. The average 4.6 hours that teens estimated they spent driving is less than the old ADTSEA recommendation of 6 hours and considerably less than the new recommendation of 8 hours.

How to Order

To order *Driver Education Practices in Selected States* (23 pages plus appendices) prepared by Preusser Research Group, write to the Office of Behavioral Safety Research, NHTSA, NTI-130, 1200 New Jersey Avenue SE, Washington, DC 20590, fax 202-366-7394, or download from www.nhtsa.gov.



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