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Experts say state's rules too easy on teen drivers

The logic of 'graduated license' questioned; more training needed

Patrick Flanigan
Staff writer

The crash that killed a 17-year-old driver and her four passengers last month underscores the need to better train New York's young drivers, experts said Friday.

"You wouldn't let a teenager re-wire a house with 50 hours of training, yet we expect that same teen (in New York) to be proficient driver with just 20 hours of practice," said John Ulczykcki, the executive director of transportation safety at the National Safety Council. "Too many parents are giving their kids the keys to the car before they're ready."

Ontario County Sheriff Philip C. Povero revealed Friday that driver inexperience was a leading factor in the June 26 crash that killed five 2007 graduates of Fairport High School.

Accident investigators believe that the driver, Bailey Goodman, overcompensated as she returned to her lane after passing another car. As a result, her sport utility vehicle veered into the path of an oncoming tractor trailer, Povero said.

Larry Scott, manager of the Morgan School of Driving, said passing is a maneuver that takes drivers years to master.

"Passing safely is almost impossible to teach," Scott said. "There are just too many variables."

In that situation, a driver must consider the potential for changing speed of the vehicle being passed; the difficulty in judging the speed of an oncoming vehicle; other vehicles entering the passing lane; and road conditions and blind spots, Scott said, noting that his instructors have students pass another school vehicle when teaching the maneuver.

Scott and Ulczykcki agree that New York laws permit teenagers to accept the full responsibility of driving much too soon.

Ulczykcki said drivers with a learner's permit must certify that they've had just 20 hours of practice before taking a road test. Many states require 50 hours and Oregon requires 100.

Scott noted that drivers don't have to actually prove that they have practiced for 20 hours. "To become a beautician, you need 1,000 hours of training."

In 2003, New York adopted a "graduated license" that places restrictions on the 16- and 17-year-old drivers. But Ulczykcki questioned the logic of a provision that allows 17-year-olds to "graduate" to an unrestricted license by taking a driver's education course.

"I view driver's ed as the beginning of the learning process, but when a state passes a law that uses driver's ed as an incentive to get an unrestricted license, they're saying it's the end of the learning process," he said.

State Sen. Joseph Robach, R-Greece, a member of the Transportation Committee and a supporter of the graduated-licensing law, said it's too early to know whether the law is working.

"A lot of states have different standards (for issuing licenses) and New York has tended to be more restrictive," he said. "It's an ongoing process. That's why (the Legislature) is always looking for public input and checking the pulse of the community."

State Sen. George Maziarz, R-Newfane, Niagara County, one of the co-sponsors of the graduated-license law, said measures to regulate young drivers are a work in progress. New technology and other changes on state highways require legislators to keep a eye on developments.

For instance, he said, virtual-driving simulators might be a better measure of driving ability than road tests because they create many different kinds of driving conditions.

"If you take your road test in the summer, it doesn't mean you know how to drive in the winter," Maziarz said.

Scott said the requirement is lax because many parents want their children to drive sooner rather than later. He recalled one incident, prior to the graduated-licensing law, when a 16-year-old student told him she intended to take her road test within a few days of getting her learner's permit.

When Scott raised his concern, the girl's mother looked up from the check she was writing for the driving instruction and said: "I'm not driving this kid around all summer," Scott said.

"I wanted to jump over the counter."

PFLANIGA@DemocratandChronicle.com

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