

HEY, GUY: THIS SITE'S FOR YOU...

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Teen drivers, rules under scrutiny

Tragic run of crashes spurs hard questions

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Two recent multiple fatality crashes involved teenage drivers who were relatively inexperienced and were driving at night. Those high-profile crashes are drawing increased scrutiny of the state's driver's license requirements and its enforcement of existing rules.

For teens, driving is a high-risk activity: More than 4,400 teenagers died nationwide in crashes in 2005, making auto accidents the leading cause of death for children in that age group, according to the most recent statistics available from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. A driver between the ages of 13 and 19 was behind the wheel when 1,200 of those fatalities occurred.

That same year — in New York alone — 38,000 drivers ages 16 to 20 were involved in 27,500 personal injury and fatal crashes.

New York's requirements for teen drivers are less stringent than most other states'.

To address problems with teen driving, New York passed a graduated driving license law in 2003 that grants additional privileges over time as teens meet training and age benchmarks.

But the laws don't go as far as groups such as the AAA Foundation or other safety experts would like.

Judie Stone, president of Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety in Washington, D.C., said young people need adequate on-the-road training, perhaps more than the brief written test, 20 hours of supervised driving and a 15 minute road test New York requires for a junior driver's license.

"Exposure to driving and experience in driving are the biggest problems for teens," she said. Although her group hasn't studied whether longer road tests would result in better drivers, she said, it knows that strong laws governing how and when teens drive do make a difference.

Driving instructor Frank Loiacono of Greece, who has taught kids to drive for more than 30 years, said he'd like New York to upgrade to a more comprehensive road test like the one given in California. That test is at least 10 minutes longer and requires highway driving.

"You can't even bake a cake in 12 minutes," he said.

And, he said, with ever-increasing numbers of cars on the road, changing traffic patterns and the proliferation of in-car distractions such as DVD players and GPS devices, it would be advisable to require kids to practice more in order to earn a license.

"If I want to be a concert pianist, I can't do it just practicing one hour a week," he said.

Less than 15 minutes after hopping in a car with a state Department of Motor Vehicles driving examiner, Nick Ferrante became a newly licensed driver.

The Ogden 16-year-old earned his junior license by making a few right turns and left turns, stopping for a stop sign and traffic light, parallel parking and navigating through a k-turn on relatively traffic-free Brockport streets. He didn't have to drive at highway speeds, nor did he have to show that he could safely pass another car or merge with expressway traffic.

But as soon as he passed his test, Nick could have set out alone to battle rush-hour traffic on Interstate 490.

"Well, I think I'm just going to drive home," he said.

Pay attention

Students in Loiacono's classroom at Arcadia Middle School in Greece fall into a horrified hush as a gory crash re-enactment plays out on a screen. In the video, a back-seat passenger rag-dolls throughout a car, ricocheting off the other occupants, killing them all. "This happens," says Monroe County Sheriff's Deputy Charlie Campanella, leading the class. "In fact, this just happened where I work. So you just tell people in your car that you aren't going anywhere until they buckle up."

The class is part of the state-approved drivers education program that allows young drivers to get a senior driving license at age 17 rather than 18. Such courses must be state Education Department-approved, can cost up to \$400 and are offered only through high schools or colleges, not private driving schools.

But with the upgrade, 17-year-olds can drive whenever they like with as many passengers as they like. Otherwise, they're restricted to having only two nonfamily passengers under 21 at any time and generally may not drive between 9 p.m. and 5 a.m.

During the program's 24 classroom hours, students closely review the state Department of Motor Vehicles driving manual, take tests and listen to presentations. In this class, guest speaker Campanella focuses on the consequences of drinking and driving, seat belt use, cell phones and paying attention to the road.

The kids — a mix of permit-holders and junior licensed drivers — are strikingly honest, some saying they've been confronted with choosing between getting in a car with an underage drunk driver or finding another way home; some admitting to driving distractedly; some saying it's common to drive while chatting on the phone and even while sending and receiving text messages.

Gidion Beyene, 16, has three reasons for taking the course: "To get money off my car insurance, more experience and to be able to drive after 9," he said.

Campanella tells the class he's been the first to arrive at too many terrible crashes and too often been the last person to cradle the dying at roadside.

"Driving a 3,200-pound vehicle is an amazing privilege and an awesome responsibility," he says.

Outside in the parking lot, teens in groups of four pile into cars with a certified driving instructor. After hearing a brief tutorial on how to hold keys to fight off an attacker and an admonition to never confront someone breaking into your car, the kids drive off to practice driving downtown.

During the 24 in-car instructional hours, each driver gets about six hours behind the wheel.

Suboptimal

Letting students who take the state Education Department-approved course move from a junior license to a senior license at 17 is one of the reasons New York's graduated license law is far from optimal, said Stone, of Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety. Other areas of the law fall short of recommendations by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety.

Teens at least 16 must pass a written test and a vision test to receive a learner's permit. Then they need to take a mandatory 5-hour prelicensing course — a classroom course that covers the basics and includes no driving — and clock at least 20 hours of driving (although 30 hours is recommended) while supervised by a parent, guardian or private driving instructor.

Both AAA and Advocates recommend at least 50 hours of supervised driving before the road test. Thirty-one states require at least that much supervision.

"I went way past the minimum driving hours," said Nick, who got his learner's permit in September 2006.

"I guess I would hope that if 20 hours aren't enough, people just wouldn't sign up for their road test," said Nick's mom, Patty Ferrante. "And, I do think the test should have kids go on the expressway to show they can merge on and off."

New York is one of 10 states that does not have a mandatory six-month waiting period before a learner's permit can be upgraded to a junior license.

At age 16 and 6 months, young drivers can take the test Nick took to get a junior license.

The state allows junior drivers two passengers younger than 21. Advocates prefers one. Thirty-one other states and the District of Columbia agree.

To qualify for a senior license, Nick will either have to take driver's education or turn 18.

Stone said there's no proof driver's education makes teens better drivers. Only experience and maturity do that, she said.

Only Delaware meets all five provisions of the Advocates' optimal graduated license program, including an all-out ban on cell phone use by teens, hands-free device or not.

State Sen. Joseph Robach, R-Greece, a member of the Transportation Committee, said he's willing to take a look at the current guidelines, but that it's too early to know if the 2003 law is ineffective.

"We are trying to make the roads safer for young people, old people, motorists and pedestrians," he said. "But we're dealing with human beings and unfortunately there will always be some degree of error, so we're always trying to fine-tune the laws."

Not more laws

Although there is a call for new laws to regulate teen driving, most crashes — not just those involving teens and young drivers — are caused by breaking laws that already exist.

Speeding was a contributing factor in about 30 percent of New York's 1,308 fatal accidents in 2005. Drinking and driving was a factor in 15 percent of the crashes. And driver inattention, failure to keep right and failure to yield the right-of-way each was a factor in about 10 percent of the remaining crashes. Cell phone use was a factor in only one fatal crash.

That's why some people are skeptical that a proposed ban on sending text messages while driving will make a dent in crash statistics. Legislators issued a renewed call for such a law after investigators announced earlier this month that the teen driver involved in the June 26 quintuple-fatal crash in East Bloomfield may have been text messaging while driving.

Plus, Robach said drivers have a responsibility for knowing and abiding by the rules of the road.

"There's already a bill on the books that can be enforced for distracted driving," he said. "That can be used for anything at the officer's discretion, be it shaving or putting on makeup, texting to eating a hamburger."

And, Greece Police Officer James Leary said, it would be almost impossible for a police officer to see drivers holding a phone in their lap to tap out a text message.

Leary would like to see more parental awareness of the existing graduated licensing laws, and of how and when their kids are driving.

He'd also like to see everyone on the roads model better behavior for young drivers.

"Drivers should think about their driving every day and the risks they take," he said.

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What's at stake

Safety on the roads. Safety agencies say New York's laws governing teen drivers don't go far enough.

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