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Driver's ed could get a revamp

With one young North Carolina driver dying every three days, legislative changes could be proposed by January

THOMAS GOLDSMITH, Staff Writer

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North Carolina will spend \$33 million this school year on a generations-old rite of passage: driver's education. But there is little evidence that the program's 30 hours in the classroom and six behind the wheel help young people avoid crashes.

"There's a pretty widespread belief that this is an antiquated system," said UNC-Chapel Hill professor Rob Foss, an adviser to state government on highway safety.

"It's analogous to saying, 'Let's take a class of high-school kids who have never held a basketball, give them 30 hours in the classroom and six hours hands-on,' and say, 'Now we have taught you to play basketball.' "

The state medical examiner's office, alarmed by the number of deaths with young drivers at the wheel, recently asked a state task force to reconsider driver's education with an eye to proposing changes to legislators by January. The goal is to reduce crashes that killed more than 1,200 North Carolina drivers age 20 or younger between 1997 and 2006 -- roughly one every three days.

Attempts to remake driver's ed could bring a clash in the legislature. Between employees paid to teach more than 100,000 students per year and lobbying support for keeping the system in place, an overhaul is unlikely to arrive smoothly.

"There are a number of other states that have cut their programs and are regretting it," said Connie Sessoms, driver-education specialist for Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools.

Companies that contract with each county to train Tar Heel drivers say there's unquestionable value in the program; officials at Jordan Driving School, which trains tens of thousands of young drivers a year in Wake and Mecklenburg counties, said the company has already revamped its programs.

"I've seen studies come and go," said Crawford Jobe, a veteran driving teacher who trains and evaluates instructors at Jordan. "This approach is the best thing I've seen."

Jordan has developed its own driver's education computer program, training manual and video in recent years. Still, president Lorraine Jordan said, there's room for improvement in the state-supported program, one of the few remaining in the United States.

"I think a law needs to be passed that the parents have to log a certain number of hours driving with their children," Jordan said.

Little difference found

Those who question the value of traditional driver's education cite decades of research, including a landmark DeKalb County, Ga., study from 1983. The study showed that teens who went through



Driving instructor Frank Williams teaches Matt Wyckoff, left, and Ryan Lanier, both 14, about space when parking.

Staff Photo by Shawn Rocco

driver training had no fewer accidents and tickets than those who did not.

During the last 25 years, most state school systems have removed driver's education as part of the school day. In most states, parents pay private instructors or teach their children themselves. However, the word that driver's ed may not get the job done can surprise people who went through it.

"I was surprised when I first heard that -- now I've just accepted that it's not worth much," said state Sen. Austin Allran, a Hickory Republican who is a member of the committee of the Child Fatality Task Force that will examine driver education.

Critics of state-supported driver's education, including some students, say the course fails to deal with the realities and dangers of 21st-century driving, relies too heavily on classroom instruction and misses the chance to use new technologies.

"I think a lot of (classroom instruction) was common sense, but we kind of needed to do it to pass the test," said Karan Sethi, 15, a rising East Chapel Hill School sophomore who took driver's ed this summer.

Karan's mother, Ritu Sethi, said she had little interaction with her son's driving instructor. Now that Karan has his learner's permit, it will be up to his parents to supervise his driving for a year as he looks forward to the reward of a provisional license.

High-tech simulation

Future driver's ed students may see something more like the scene Monday in a Research Triangle office building. Morgan Heneghan, 17, was using a video-game controller to pilot a virtual car down a virtual city street, successfully avoiding a police car and a pedestrian before stopping at a traffic light.

"That was pretty cool," he said.

Morgan, a rising senior at Green Hope High School and a recent driver's education graduate, is the son of Jerry Heneghan, CEO of Virtual Heroes, which develops training software based on video-game technology. Like Karan Sethi, Morgan got little out of the classroom part of driver's education.

"The book work gives you the set guidelines, but it's not the same as going out and experiencing it first hand," he said. "Actual simulators would be a lot more effective."

Driving schools avoid letting students experience dangerous moments such as drifting off the road's edge because of the possibility of crashes.

Simulation of the kind being developed at Virtual Heroes -- initially for a National Institutes of Health anti-drug program -- could give young drivers at least a taste of those adrenaline-pumping moments.

If simulation stands up to testing, it could mean a breakthrough for driver's education when used with on-the-road and other methods, Foss said. At least half a dozen companies and institutions are working on simulators, but high costs present a barrier.

"We are talking about a \$100,000 piece of equipment, with three gas plasma screens," said Greg Befort, director of the Regional Public Safety Training Center in Reno, Nev. "The one we have is geared for public safety officers, but I think a lot of the same driving simulation could be used for driving in general."

Getting up to date

Improvements in curriculum and high-tech devices could drag North Carolina's driver's education program -- with its intensive classroom instruction and limited drive time -- into the 21st century, said Sessoms, the driver-education specialist for Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

"That model was developed back in the 1930s," said Sessoms, a driver-education advocate who is research and development director for the American Driver and Traffic Safety Education Association,

a trade group.

"We didn't have the complex vehicles and complex road systems that we have now. Driver's ed has not caught up with that."

thomas.goldsmith@newsobserver.com or (919) 829-8929.

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