

SJR 378: Joint Subcommittee to Study Revision of the Curriculum for Driver Training Programs

June 26, 2007 - Meeting Summary

Senate Joint Resolution 378 (O'Brien) establishes a joint subcommittee to study revision of the curriculum for driver training programs. The joint subcommittee held its first meeting on Tuesday, June 26, 2007 in Richmond. Senator Jay O'Brien as the patron of the resolution served as acting chair for the meeting because there was not a quorum present, and Delegate Matt Lohr served as acting vice-chairman. Other study members include: Senator Lucas, Senator Devolites Davis, Delegate Carrico, Delegate Iaquinto, Delegate Ward, and Delegate Bowling. Senator O'Brien explained his motivation in introducing the resolution and indicated that car accidents involving teen drivers are reaching epidemic proportions. For the most part he believes that most accidents are caused by risky behavior and lack of experience. It is his hope that through the work of the joint subcommittee the Commonwealth can ensure that new drivers are receiving the best curriculum possible.

Overview

Staff presented an overview of the mandates of SJR 378. The joint subcommittee is charged with evaluating the curriculum used by school-based and commercial driving schools; surveying other states to identify innovative approaches to driver training; and considering the appropriateness of the curriculum for new adult drivers, especially those for whom English is a second language. The resolution also specifies that the Department of Motor Vehicles and the Department of Education are to provide technical assistance to the joint subcommittee.

Presentations

Driver's License Requirements and Commercial Driving School Licensing Requirements

Ms. Karen Grim, the Assistant Commissioner of Driver, Vehicle, and Data Management for the Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles, provided the joint subcommittee with an overview of Virginia's current driver's license requirements and licensing requirements for commercial driving schools wishing to operate in the Commonwealth. A juvenile applicant is eligible for a learner's permit at 15 years and 6 months. The learner's permit must be held for 9 months before the provisional driver's license may be issued, and during the time that the learner's permit is held, the juvenile must complete a driver's education course. Additionally, to receive a provisional license the juvenile must drive at least 40 hours with supervision and pass a driving test.

Ms. Grim described the licensing requirements for commercial driving schools that provide the required education course for those drivers choosing not to participate in the school-based program. She informed the subcommittee that the commercial course

content is identical to the curriculum followed by the school divisions and during the 2005-2006 school year 39% of students completing a driver's education course utilized the commercial driving schools. There are currently 72 licensed commercial driving schools in Virginia, and 500 instructors licensed by the Department of Motor Vehicles. Current regulations governing commercial driving schools have been in place since 1993, but new regulations for commercial driving schools should be in place in the next couple of months, and will include strengthened oversight and sanctions for schools not following regulations. Ms. Grim briefly described statutory licensing requirements for the schools and the instructors, including a pre-licensing audit and an annual auditing requirement to ensure that facilities and vehicles meet statutory and regulatory requirements.

The joint subcommittee requested that the Department of Motor Vehicles consider any changes needed in training or curriculum, including whether the driving age in Virginia should be raised and whether any other recommendations can be made to address the safety of teen drivers in the Commonwealth.

Driver's Education Curriculum

Ms. Vanessa Wigand, the Principal Specialist for Driver Education, Health Education and Physical Education, at the Virginia Department of Education provided the joint subcommittee with an extensive overview of the current driver education curriculum including the standards of learning and the "Curriculum and Administrative Guide for Driver Education in Virginia" which prescribes the content of a state-approved driver education program.

She began by reviewing the curriculum which is divided into 11 modules and provides lesson plans so that students may learn what the standards require them to know. The different modules include licensing responsibilities, driver responsibilities, basic maneuvering tasks, information processing, driver performance, vehicle functions, and behind-the-wheel and in-car observation. The curriculum guide is set for revision in 2008.

Ms. Wigand noted that approximately 90% of localities offer the minimum 45 clock hour course in driver education and the remaining 10% of localities offer a 90 hour course. Ms. Wigand informed the joint subcommittee that based on crash data there is no appreciable difference with respect to number of accidents in the localities offering a 90 hour course versus those localities offering a 45 hour course. There was some discussion of the crash data as a whole and the joint subcommittee learned that when the crash rate is particularly high in a certain locality, an informal inquiry is conducted by the Department of Education. Historically the finding in such localities suggests that there was too much time spent on the driving range and not enough time on the actual road.

National Perspective

Ms. Danielle Roeber of the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), spoke to the joint subcommittee with a national perspective. The NTSB is an agency that

investigates crashes in order to reduce fatalities and prevent the crashes from happening again. It held a driver's education forum in 2003 and found that all forum participants (including public schools and commercial driving schools) claimed that education has some level of success in reducing teen crashes, but that no group has identified or evaluated a best practice. She informed the joint subcommittee that some states have no driver's education requirement, or if there is a requirement, there is no uniform curriculum in place. As a result of the NTSB forum in 2003, it was recommended that the National Highway Transportation and Safety Administration (NHTSA) and DOE study what states are teaching and how they are teaching it, and come up with best practices or a model program. Ms. Roeber stated that NHTSA was to publish a report by the end of 2006, but that it was not available yet. She concluded that while driver education has not been proven to be effective, it has not been proven to be ineffective either, and that it is clear that teen drivers remain disproportionately involved in crashes, indicating a need for a best practices recommendation.

Public Comment

During the public comment period the joint subcommittee heard comments from a member of law enforcement who indicated that parental involvement is paramount for young drivers. Additionally, a commercial driving school operator stated that the auditing of commercial driving schools conducted by the Department of Motor Vehicles is very necessary.

Next Meeting

The joint subcommittee plans to have two more meetings during the 2007 interim. The next meeting will be held in early September after Labor Day and a final meeting sometime after the election in November.

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Study website: <http://dls.state.va.us/DTP.HTM>