

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

September 18, 2007 - Meeting Summary

The Joint Subcommittee to Study Revision of the Curriculum for Driver Training Programs, held its second meeting of the 2007 interim on September 18, 2007 in Richmond. Senator Jay O'Brien was elected the chairman of the joint subcommittee, and Delegate Matt Lohr was elected vice-chairman.

Presentations

Maryland's Graduated Licensing System, Rookie Driver System

Ms. Jennifer Hine, the Operations Manager of the Driver Services Division for the Maryland Vehicle Administration, informed the joint subcommittee about Maryland's Graduated Licensing System that was adopted in 1998. To begin she shared that the system applies to all novice drivers, not just teens, and that since the system has been in place, the crash rate has declined among novice drivers. Aspects of the Maryland program that differ from Virginia's program include: the minimum age to obtain a learner's permit, the number of hours of driving practice required to obtain a provisional license, sanctions for being convicted of a moving violation during the learner's permit phase, and completion of a practice driving skills log documenting a minimum of 60 hours of supervised driving practice. A learner's permit must be held for six months, and the provisional license with restrictions must be held for 18 months, conviction-free, before a permanent driver's license may be obtained. The provisional license restrictions include a prohibition, for the first five months, from transporting any passenger under the age of 18. In addition, Maryland is also promoting the voluntary participation of parents and their children in a parent/teen driving agreement whereby parents and teens set their household rules for driving.

Use of Simulators in Driver Education

Ms. Vanessa Wigand, the Principal Specialist for Driver Education, Health Education and Physical Education for the Virginia Department of Education presented information regarding the prevalence of simulators in the driver education programs around the state, the costs of such simulators, and the average cost to provide driver education per pupil. According to Ms. Wigand, simulators have been in use in Virginia for over 30 years and can cost anywhere from \$25 for desktop software up to \$150,000 for full-sized vehicle body. Currently 12 school divisions in the Commonwealth utilize some form of simulation and the average crash rate in those localities is 10.0 percent, compared to the non-simulation localities that have an average crash rate of 10.3 percent. Ms. Wigand also pointed out that the localities utilizing simulation also often include a parental involvement requirement, multiple car and crash avoidance ranges, and skid cars. Additionally, Ms. Wigand addressed those localities offering a 90-hr program,

rather than the minimum requirement of a 45 hr. program. Currently 10 localities offer the 90-hr. semester program, of which 4 have a lower crash rate than the state average, and of which 6 have a significantly higher crash rate than the state average. The average cost for a public-school in-car program is \$189 with an average fee being charged of \$72 vs. the average cost for commercial schools of \$275. Finally, 35 school divisions will be offering "Partners for Teen Safe Driving" during this school year which is a program aimed at parents to assist them guide their children through the first years of driving.

Local School Division Initiatives

Ms. Bonnie Conner-Gray, the Secondary Health, Physical Education and Driver Education Specialist for Henrico County Public Schools, spoke specifically about Henrico County's Driver Education Program, as it goes beyond the minimum requirements of state law and regulation. The program offered in Henrico County is a semester long, 90-hr program. It affords students a wide variety of experiences including simulation experience and the opportunity to attend a crash avoidance range. The newer simulators in use in Henrico cost \$3,000 - \$3,600 per unit, but offer a highly advanced virtual driving experience. The simulation is in addition to three weeks of behind-the-wheel range driving and since the new simulators have been in use, the Henrico County Public School crash rates have decreased to 8.4% in 2006, down from 21% in 2003. The crash avoidance range is not a requirement, but currently about 20% of the students attend the three-hour program offered on a Saturday. It is Ms. Conner-Gray's hope that by the 2008-2009 school year attendance at the crash-avoidance program will be mandatory. Additionally, Ms. Conner-Gray discussed the importance of instructor training and that it may be the best insurance for effective driver education programs. In Henrico, all driving instructors must attend an eight hour advanced crash avoidance training course with International Training, Inc., a company that also trains secret service drivers.

Commercial Driving School Oversight and Graduated Driver's License Requirements

Ms. Karen Grim, the Assistant Commissioner for Driver, Vehicle, and Data Management, for the Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), gave additional information about the auditing of commercial driving schools, and crash data since Virginia adopted graduated driver's license requirements in 2001. She first noted that the heaviest population of commercial driving schools appears in northern Virginia and Roanoke. There were a total of eight complaints about commercial driving schools in 2006, and so far in 2007 there have been seven. Currently sanctions are available to DMV to impose on commercial driving schools and the new regulations going into effect in January will give DMV the opportunity to discipline individual drivers as well. Regarding the crash data since the graduated license requirements went into effect in 2001, the rate of 15-17 year-old drivers involved in crashes and the rate of injuries have decreased, while the rate of fatalities has fluctuated.

Public Comment

During the public comment period the joint subcommittee heard comments from Ms. Robin Thompson, of Fairfax. Ms. Thompson spoke as a parent who has lost a child in a fatal car crash, and urged the joint subcommittee to consider incorporating crash avoidance components to the current driver education curriculum. She also advocated for widespread use of simulators and more extensive instructor training. Additionally, Ms. Sherry Bollhorst of Hampton City Schools spoke about accountability on the part of driver education instructors. She assured the joint subcommittee that there is strong oversight from the Department of Education and that the instructors in Hampton meet all insurance and driving record requirements.

Next Meeting

The joint subcommittee plans to have one more meeting during the 2007 interim. The final meeting will be held in late November after Thanksgiving.

Nicole M. Seeds, DLS Staff

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