

Beacon Hill Byline

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Creating Safer Teen Drivers: Part 1

The first Driver's License! It's every teenager's dream and many parent's nightmare as the car keys get turned over to the new driver in the family.

Recent news stories of fatal car crashes that involved young drivers have brought the issue into the legislature for our attention. The House of Representatives has just acted on a bill to send more experienced drivers onto our roads with their first license. Here is the background for our action.

This year's bill is really Act II in a program of driver safety. Ten years ago the legislature first enacted a Junior Operator License. At that time we barred drivers from driving with their friends in the car for the first 6 months of licensure and added new penalties for operating under the influence. And statistics showed a reduction in crashes from 40% to 34% of 16-year-old drivers. Now we are trying to do better.

We are trying to improve on those numbers. Here are the changes approved last week.

- **Speeding penalties.** A junior driver driving more than 10 miles over the speed limit will lose his license for 90 days after a first offense, and for one year for any subsequent offense. These penalties are in addition to existing fines, and any year suspension carries with it a \$500 fee for license re-instatement.
- **Changes to driver training.** Students must have 12 hours of driving during their driver's education course. Actual class time remains unchanged, but a parent is now required to participate in 2 of the 30 hours of class time. Responding to parent concerns about the quality of the actual education in those courses, new staff is provided to the Registry of Motor Vehicles for oversight of those programs.
- **More practice.** A student driver must drive 40 hours with a parent, a requirement that drops to 30 hours if the student takes a RMV approved defensive driving course.
- **Other penalties.** Violations of passenger and time restrictions will carry a 60-day suspension that increases with subsequent violations. The violations fall under primary enforcement for the first time, so drivers can be stopped for the offenses.

The legislature rejected proposals to raise the driver's age to 17 1/2 and to bar siblings from riding in the car with new drivers, leaving those decisions to individual families. Efforts to ban cell phone use and add primary seatbelt use also failed.

The bill now goes to the senate, where it must be approved so it can be enacted by July 31.

For now, I'm waiting for feedback from parents and their teenagers.

After the first junior license law was enacted, I received letters of complaint from high school sophomores, which I expected. I was surprised, however, to hear objections from several parents because we had delayed by 6 months the time when their children could ride with friends. The new restrictions also reduced the accident rate for new drivers by 15%.

Now we impose a tough penalty for speeding because speed kills. We require more training because experience is a good teacher. We hope and believe that the new law will save lives and heartache for many families in the years to come.