

EDITORIALS

Teens at the wheel, safely

If this year is like last, dozens of teens will die in car crashes in the Chicago region.

They will die because they drive drunk or high. They will die because they speed. They will die because they are distracted by too many young passengers. They will die because they are inexperienced at the wheel and didn't have nearly enough supervised road time in driver's ed or with a parent.

And they will die because politicians, teachers, parents and teens themselves too often shrug and accept the unconscionable death toll as insurmountable. It is not, as the Tribune's year-long "Teens at the Wheel" series has demonstrated. The series—which concludes today with a special section—exposed huge gaps in the state's system of educating and licensing of teen drivers in Illinois. It showed how some local teen-to-teen "drive safe" programs can make a big difference. And it sent a stark message to parents: Don't cheat your child of valuable supervised time behind the wheel.

Soon state lawmakers will have a chance to reduce the death toll. After months of study, Secretary of State Jesse White's task force on teen driving has proposed a sweeping series of 10 recommendations to help keep teen drivers alive. These preliminary proposals push everyone—kids, parents, educators, cops—to do better.

Overall, these are excellent ideas.

The highlights include:

■ Extend the learner's permit phase from a paltry three months to nine months. This would be a huge improvement. The more supervised driving, the safer the driver. A longer learner's permit phase—a year would be preferable—allows the teen driver to gain that experience under a variety of road conditions, including winter.

■ Boost actual on-the-road experience in driver's education. Six hours is the standard, but school districts can get exemptions so that students may get as little as one hour of driving experience. That shortchanges the teen—and every other driver on the road. White's draft report also wisely calls for updating statewide driver's ed standards and eliminating all exemptions that allow a student driver to pass driver's education class with less than six hours behind the wheel in actual conditions.

■ Double the period—from six months to a year—in which a new driver can carry a maximum of one unrelated teen passenger. Absolutely. The statistics are particularly stark here, showing how the danger of fatal crashes soars as the number of teen passengers increase.

■ Toughen penalties for teen violators. Most important is a proposal that requires a clean driving record for six months before a teen may graduate from the initial, restricted license to a full adult license. The point here is that you *earn* the privilege of unrestricted driving, you don't simply receive it by default, because of age or a certain amount of time at the lower level.

The biggest problem: A proposal to shift the curfew from 11 p.m. to 10 p.m. on weekdays and midnight to 11 p.m. on weekends. That would apply to 16- and 17-year-olds, and not just those who are driving. That's too broad. A better idea: Create a nighttime driving curfew for new drivers, and make it the same for weekdays and

weekends. From 10 p.m. to midnight, the fatal crash rate more than *doubles* for inexperienced drivers, statistics show. For the first six months on the road, a 9 p.m. limit is ideal, according to Rob Foss, director of the Center for the Study of Young Drivers at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

The task force also recognizes, as the series did, that parents play a critical role in a new driver's training. The report urges a mandatory parent-child meeting with a driver's ed instructor, for instance, because often parents are unaware of how much experience the teen is—and isn't—getting. It suggests that the state create a voluntary parent-teen contract so that parents can be clear on what is expected from a new driver. And it recommends that a driver under 18 who is ticketed for a traffic violation must appear before a judge, *with a parent*, to get court supervision rather than a conviction. That ensures that a parent is fully aware of the teen's infraction.

Some important questions remain. How much would these changes cost? And who would pay?

That should be part of the debate in the upcoming legislative session. State Sen. John Cullerton (D-Chicago), co-chairman of the task force, said he plans to introduce an aggressive proposal based on the group's final recommendations. That will be welcome. There's much to be done to help keep teen drivers safer.

The Tribune series has chronicled a year of sorrow for so many families. Let this be a year of hope.

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