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SCOTT C. SMITH, *Publisher* ANN MARIE LIPINSKI, *Editor*R. BRUCE DOLD, *Editorial Page Editor*GEORGE DE LAMA, *Managing Editor, News* JAMES WARREN, *Managing Editor, Features*TIMOTHY J. McNULTY, *Public Editor*

## EDITORIALS

### Behind the wheel, safely

Somewhere in the state there's going to be a new teenage driver who won't pile into a car with his buddies. He won't be out cruising after midnight. He won't be driving a car before he's ready. And he won't die in a car crash.

If the statistics hold, there actually will be quite a few of these lucky neophyte drivers. We don't know the numbers yet. But teen driving deaths should decline in the coming years, thanks to some tough new restrictions on teen drivers passed by the Illinois House last week.

Among the big changes:

■ Learner's permits are extended from three to nine months.

■ Night restrictions for drivers younger than 18 are moved back an hour.

■ Passenger limits on 16- and 17-year-old drivers are extended from six months to one year.

■ Students must get six hours of supervised driving on the streets, not in simulators or "driving ranges."

These are terrific changes.

For too many years, people have shrugged at the horrific toll of teen driving deaths as if it were somehow ordained, as if there were nothing that lawmakers could do about it. But a powerful yearlong Tribune series, "Teens at the Wheel," demolished that myth. Inspired by the series, Secretary of State Jesse White spearheaded the effort to tighten teen driving requirements. And Illinois lawmakers responded impressively, with a *unanimous* vote.

Our congratulations to White and to the bills' sponsors—and to the reporters and editors who produced the series. They did what a newspaper does best.

Some teens may not like these new limits. Some of their parents may also find them a nuisance at times. But White has an answer for that.

"They may not like me now," he said. "They may not like the legislation, but when they reach the age of 21 and are alive and well, I think they'll love Jesse White and the members of the General Assembly for our initiative."

Statistics show—oh, forget the statistics. *Parents* know from experience, from overseeing a teen driver, from being teens themselves who learned to drive, that more supervision generally produces a safer teen driver. It's a matter of packing as much of that supervised experience behind the wheel as possible before teens are let loose on the roads by themselves.

Those 50 hours overseeing your teen driver, as required by law, can be the longest 50 hours of your life. But they also may be the most important. Don't cheat

a teen of one minute.

Most of the new measures kick in Jan. 1, assuming Gov. Rod Blagojevich signs the law. But parents don't have to wait to set tougher limits for their teens. Some experts, for instance, recommend that new teen drivers not be allowed to carry *any* teen passengers for the first six months. And there's evidence that dialing back nighttime restrictions even earlier than the new law saves lives.

Teens may squawk that they're being punished for a small handful of their irresponsible peers. And many teens *are* safe drivers.

But these new rules will reduce distractions and limit their risk at the most vulnerable times. When it comes to teens behind the wheel, there's no such thing as too safe.

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*Overseeing your teen driver may be the most important hours of your life.*

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