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Survey backs wisdom of teen driving laws

Just as Illinois lawmakers begin to consider tighter limits on teenage drivers, new survey results confirm the wisdom of at least one proposed change in state law.

The national survey, conducted by State Farm Insurance and a children's hospital in Philadelphia, quizzed more than 5,600 teens from 68 high schools nationwide about their driving habits. The survey delivered positive news in that 90 percent said they rarely or never drink and drive. Maybe, just maybe, most teens are hearing and heeding the warnings, the grim statistics and the prom-season crash re-enactments on the consequences of drinking and driving.

But most young drivers surveyed also said that often they see their friends drive with distractions ranging from loud music and cell phone conversations to passengers drinking, smoking pot or generally "acting wild."

Which is where one of Illinois' proposed new laws enters the picture. This provision would extend the time for which new drivers may carry only one teenage passenger. That restriction, which now covers new drivers for six months, would be extended to a full year. Teens and some parents object, noting the convenience of one student being able to take a car full of friends to and from extracurricular activities. The point is well taken. A one-year restriction on passengers would inconvenience many; no doubt.

Convenience, though, must be placed on the scales opposite the hazards created when several friends in a car are cranking up the radio volume, boogieing in their seats, reaching over to honk the horn or leaning out of windows to shout at friends nearby. Haven't seen any of those behaviors lately? Try setting up your own observation station near any suburban high school after school some afternoon or after a ballgame some evening. Are all high school kids guilty of distracting the driver? Of course not. But as the survey suggests, enough engage in such rowdiness, as natural as adolescence itself, to tip the scales in favor of safety first: restricting the number of passengers for a full year of driving.

The one-year passenger limit is only one of several tighter restrictions proposed by a task force assembled last year by Secretary of State Jesse White. The other most significant and important change would lengthen — to nine months from the current three — the time a teen driver must hold a learner's permit before obtaining a driver's license. The additional six months of driving under a parent's watchful eye and of driving through varied weather conditions is almost certain to produce safer drivers.

We're less sold on the value of a third major provision, which would move the curfew for new drivers one hour earlier, from 11 p.m. to 10 p.m. on weeknights and from midnight to 11 p.m. on weekends. But, in keeping with the general philosophy of erring on the side of caution to save young lives, it's an acceptable change, particularly with the exceptions for work and sanctioned school activities currently included in the bill.

While lawmakers will wrestle with many high-profile and controversial issues during this session, it's possible that nothing they do will be more important than fine-tuning the driving laws in ways that keep our teens, and those with whom they share the road, safer.