

Laws are fine, but parents are the key to drivers

By the H&R Editorial Staff

Updated: Tuesday, February 6, 2007 11:56 PM CST

Secretary of State Jesse White wants to make it tougher for teenagers to get and keep driver's licenses.

For the most part, his plan is a sensible approach to keeping young drivers safe. The ultimate answer, of course, is to consider increasing the driving age from 16 to 18. But that's politically distasteful, so White is proposing these reforms:

- n New drivers would have to hold a learner's permit for nine months, not three.
- n Teenagers would be limited to driving with only one unrelated teen for a full year, not six months.
- n Students would have to complete six full hours of real-life driving with an instructor. Simulators wouldn't count.
- n And drivers younger than 18 who get tickets would have to appear in court, with their parents, before a judge.

White believes the changes will reduce accidents and make teens better drivers. "They might not like Jesse White now," he said. "But when they reach the age of 21, they'll love me."

The proposals are being spurred by some horrific deaths involving teen drivers, including 15 deaths in 15 months in Tazewell County. Sen. Bill Brady, R-Bloomington, which represents a portion of the county, said he thinks the General Assembly is ready to toughen the driving laws for teens.

Requiring new drivers to have a learner's permit for a longer period of time certainly makes sense, if parents understand that they need to help their teens get ready to become drivers. Rick Austin, the driver's education coordinator at Eisenhower High School, said parents can help a lot, even if it's just letting their teens drive through quiet neighborhoods. "A lot of parents don't want to take the time to take their own son or daughter out driving," Austin said.

It also makes sense to reduce the number of teen passengers a new driver can have in the vehicle. There's little doubt that passengers can be distracting, and teen drivers especially need to concentrate on their driving.

Giving teens more actual driving time with an instructor is a good idea but may come with a hidden cost. Legislators should ask school districts if they are staffed to provide six hours of driving with an instructor for every student.

We also wonder about the wisdom of having a teen and a parent appear before a judge if the teen receives a traffic ticket. While the idea of appearing before a judge would be imposing, we also wonder if it will further burden an already overcrowded court system. Under current law, teen drivers are placed under court supervision after one moving violation and their licenses are suspended for a minimum of one month if they receive two moving violations in a two-year period.

With those qualifications, White's proposals are sound and should get a good hearing in the General Assembly. But it should also be noted that parents are a key component of teaching any young person to drive, and parents should help train teen drivers, give them adequate practice time and also suspend driving privileges if the teens aren't practicing good safety habits.