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OUR OPINION

Prudent rules for teen drivers

THERE IS NO single event in a teenager's life more liberating than getting his or her driver's license. Suddenly, a world once restricted to a small geographic area, and limited further by reliance on a parent's willingness and availability to serve as chauffeur, becomes seemingly limitless.

The rush of freedom that comes with the first time a teen is given the keys and allowed to drive solo is a feeling not soon forgotten.

We're sure that for many 15- and 16-year-olds, last week's action in the Illinois House represented the ultimate act of adult cruelty; another brick in that authoritarian wall that encircles and limits teenage freedom.

But in sending to Gov. Rod Blagojevich a bill that would impose a sweeping new set of rules for teen drivers and drivers-to-be, the General Assembly, at the urging of Secretary of State Jesse White, took a historic step in protecting the group of drivers that is consistently at greatest risk of injury or death behind the wheel.

THIS, OF COURSE, is exactly the kind of message most teens hate to hear. Eager to leave childhood behind yet facing a world still controlled by adults at every turn, teenagers want nothing more than to prove they belong in the adult world. That urge — along with youthful feelings of invincibility, inexperience behind the wheel and innumerable other factors unique to adolescence — makes for a combination that far too often is not conducive to safe driving. The last thing many teens want to hear is that a restriction is for their own good.

And that is why Illinois' adoption of a new, graduated driver's license system is a welcome and much-needed move.

We need not repeat the litany of statistics that support the need for greater care in licensing 16-year-olds to drive. A look at the broadest categories of teen crash statistics speaks for itself: Auto accidents are the top killer of teenagers (they account for more than a third of all deaths of 16- to 18-year-olds), 16-year-olds have the highest accident rate of any driver age group and are three times as likely to be victims of fatal crashes than any other age group.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's Web site (nhtsa.dot.gov) is a treasure trove of facts and figures for anyone who still needs convincing.

IF SIGNED INTO LAW, the bill passed last week will not only usher in more stringent requirements for obtaining a license, but also will bring more serious consequences for young drivers who get traffic tickets. The law would triple the amount of time — from three months to nine — between obtaining a learner's permit and a driver's license. It trims an hour from the curfew for 16- and 17-year-old drivers and doubles — from six months to one year — the period during which they can have no more than one teenaged passenger except immediate family members. It also requires that parents attend hearings for 16- and 17-year-olds who receive traffic tickets and want to obtain court supervision, and requires attendance at traffic school for drivers under 21 who seek court supervision for tickets.

The new law is far-reaching and is backed by data that shows reduced accident and fatality rates in states where similar programs are in effect.

We wouldn't expect any teenager who will be subject to the new rules to thank Jesse White for extending the learner's permit period, restricting his or her hours of driving or prohibiting driving with a carload of friends for an entire year. We're confident, however, that all drivers in Illinois, especially the youngest, will benefit from the safer, more experienced drivers this bill, if signed into law, will bring.