
OUR VIEW

Pass sensible teen-driving laws

On a blustery winter evening, a 16-year-old El Paso girl lost control of her car and slid into oncoming traffic on Route 116 near Flanagan, striking a westbound pickup truck. The Feb. 16 accident added three more names — 18-year-old Curtis Turner and 16-year-olds Jaclyn Mowrer and Eric Moore, all passengers — to an already too-long list of central Illinois teenagers killed in car crashes. Fifteen teens in Tazewell County alone have died on the roads since March 2005.

And so it's understandable that parents, educators and lawmakers are demanding solutions. In their desire to be responsive to constituents, legislators must sort out which measures stand to make the most difference, and which do not.

In the first column goes a proposal from Secretary of State Jesse White. Among other things, White would triple — to nine months — the time teens must hold permits. He would impose earlier curfews, with exemptions, and restrict young drivers to one teen passenger, besides family, for one year, instead of the current six months. Student drivers also would have to spend six hours on the road with an instructor.

Less persuasive are proposals from Hutsonville Rep. Roger Eddy and Peoria Rep. David Leitch. Eddy's legislation would subject anyone under 18 to random drug testing when seeking a permit. Leitch's bill, which has cleared the House and awaits Senate approval, would require drivers under 18 with a learner's permit or graduated license to affix a sign to their vehicles, signaling their novice status to other motorists.

Parents may appreciate Eddy's basic idea — that teens who abuse drugs or alcohol don't deserve to drive. But like some school testing policies, its very randomness is unfair, as some kids who do use will fall through the cracks, while others who don't must

tolerate the embarrassment of presumed guilt. Kids *do* covet this privilege, but teens being teens, many will think they're immune to their test number coming up. And what's to stop them from imbibing after they've passed? If we want our roads free of impaired motorists and their privacy isn't relevant, why not test *all* drivers renewing their licenses?

Meanwhile, the State Police and secretary of state, among others, have expressed concern that Leitch's bill could have the undesired consequence of tipping off those who prey on youngsters. Leitch says worried parents can remove the signs without penalty, but if the law has no teeth, what's the point? Then this is just a fee increase, albeit a small one. Illinois would be the first state with such a law, though some other nations have it.

Tuba Kiroglu, Zachary Swingle, Andrew Ford, Ashley Waddell, Hugh Schieler, Johnny Goulden, Eric Rigelwood, Paige Lawson, Andrew Neitzer, Jacob Barding, John Stadsholt, Jeremy Watson, Matthew Bence, Russell Foster — all of these area teenagers died in 2005 and 2006, in *single-car* accidents which happened in an instant. It's quite unlikely that these signs would have made a difference in those tragic outcomes. Mostly, these young people were victims of inexperience. White's bill is the most pragmatic, as it recognizes that driving is a skill that can't be acquired solely in the classroom. Mature, competent drivers know how to navigate poor road conditions, temper the urge to speed and limit their distractions.

Illinoisans should be pleased that their elected officials are devoting so much attention to young drivers. But with prom and graduation coming, parents don't need a state mandate to spend a few hours riding shotgun with their teenagers. What these rookie drivers learn now could save them later.

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