

The State of Driver Education

Background

Driver education provides an efficient and effective means to teach new drivers the rules of the road as well as the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to operate a vehicle on our highways. It typically consists of both “theoretical” classroom instruction and “practical” training in the vehicle (e.g., 30 hours of in-class instruction and 6 to 8 hours of behind-the-wheel training). Online driver education programs are now increasingly available in addition to or in lieu of classroom instruction.

Driver education is most often available to young people through either public secondary schools and/or commercial driving schools that are privately owned and operated. Driver education is a mandatory requirement in 33 states to obtain an intermediate license, but in the others it is not compulsory, although provisions may be in place to encourage teens to take driver education (e.g., obtain a learner or provisional/intermediate license at an earlier age, fewer hours of supervised driving practice required).

Driver education is recognized and promoted as a safety measure that dates back to the early 1930s. Although past evaluations have reported results that often challenged its safety benefits, recent studies in Nebraska (2015) and Oregon (2014) suggest that driver education continues to hold promise for reducing collisions. Both studies applied evaluation methods that improved upon earlier study designs, including the use of large populations rather than the small samples typically used in randomized evaluation studies, which are prone to sample attrition and reduced power. Both studies also controlled for key demographic variables, which was not always the case in earlier investigations. Similar to previous evaluations, however, both studies have limitations, primarily due to the lack of random subject assignment and only controlling for a few key factors. It is possible that other factors related to self-selection might still account for some or all of the differences in collisions and not just having taken driver education. The strengths and limitations of these studies need to be taken into consideration in future efforts to evaluate the safety effects of driver education.

Recent Developments

Although there are similarities in driver education programs, there is considerable variation in their content and delivery across states and within some states. As well, in some states responsibility for public driver education and commercial driving schools resides in different agencies often with limited coordination, communication and cooperation. In an effort to enhance the quality and uniformity of driver education programs across the U.S., the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) funded a series of projects designed to improve the quality, consistency and delivery of driver education programs and to create appropriate tools to inform and guide state initiatives to improve state driver education programs. A broad cross-section of experts representing different disciplines has been engaged in this work to provide states with the most current research and practice regarding this road safety issue.

One of the efforts that NHTSA supported was the formation of an association of major stakeholders in 2010, known as the “Association of National Stakeholders in Traffic Safety Education” (ANSTSE). The Association is comprised of a variety of traffic safety stakeholders, including:

- AAA,
- AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety (AAAFTS),
- American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators (AAMVA),
- American Driver and Traffic Safety Education Association (ADSTEA),
- Driver Education and Training Administrators (DETA),
- Driving School Association of the Americas (DSAA),
- Governors Highway Safety Association (GHSA), and
- Transportation Research Board (TRB).

The Association, with the support of NHTSA, has developed the Novice Teen Driver Education and Training Administrative Standards (NTDETAS), which combines the outputs from the various projects to create this single resource for states. The NTDETAS were initially published in 2009 and replaced in 2017 with a revised version of the standards. The 2017 version can be accessed at (www.anstse.info). The revised NTDETAS provides enhanced standards including sections on classroom and behind-the-wheel delivery standards as well as online delivery standards, which are specific to web-based driver education programs. The revised NTDETAS also includes a section on instructor qualifications and reference to the 2017 model training curriculum for the teaching task instructor’s guide.

The NTDETAS are recommendations regarding the minimum acceptable benchmark for “novice teen driver education and training programs” within the U.S. They contain minimum mandatory and recommended requirements that must be met to be considered “in compliance” if states choose to use the Standards, and affirm these Standards are met in their state. Of note, the implementation of the Standards can be approached incrementally so it is manageable for states to achieve.

ANSTSE has also developed and maintains the website www.anstse.info with assessment tools and resources. The website also provides an Information Sharing System, which is a free online, self-assessment tool for States to gauge how their current teen driver education program aligns with the NTDETAS, NHTSA State Driver Education Assessment reports, information on requesting technical assistance provided to states by key experts in the field and copies of the NTDETAS and the model training curriculum for the teaching task instructor’s guide.

NHTSA also maintains a website that includes information, research, and resources on teen driving and driver education <https://www.nhtsa.gov/road-safety/teen-driving>.

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