



# States consider expanding graduated license programs for teens

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for Stateline Midwest

With teen driver fatalities on the rise nationally, lawmakers in two Midwestern states considered bills in 2003 to curb the driving privileges of young people, continuing a legislative trend in recent years that has seen a significant increase in the number of graduated license programs.

The idea behind the proposed legislation in Illinois and Minnesota is similar to what has driven the push around the country: young, beginning motorists need to mature and hone their skills before receiving full driving freedoms.

“When you couple young drivers with a teen sense of invincibility, bad things can happen,” says Kevin Smith, a spokesman for the Minnesota Department of Public Safety. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), in 2002, 8,278 drivers between the ages of 15 and 20 were killed in motor vehicle crashes — the leading cause of death among that age group. In addition, 14.6 percent of all fatal crashes in 2002 involved young drivers, who account for only 6.6 percent of the total number of licensed motorists.

Two legislative attempts in the region this year tried to build on the respective states’ existing graduated license programs. The Illinois measure, which was signed into law by Democratic Gov. Rod Blagojevich, prohibits drivers under 18 years old from driving with more than one passenger under the age of 20. The restriction lasts six months after a license is issued. It excludes a driver’s siblings, stepbrothers and stepsisters, and children and stepchildren.

“For every teenage passenger you add [to a vehicle driven by a young driver], the crash rate goes up by 50 percent,” says Illinois Sen. John Cullerton, citing statistics supported by the National Safety Council. “This [legislation] will save lives.”

Sen. Larry Bomke, a Republican from Springfield, adds: “I think everybody recognizes that youthful drivers have a larger number of accidents. And the most critical accidents occur in the first six months.”

Still, passage of the Illinois bill did not sit well with some lawmakers who believe the state moved into an area best regulated by the parents of teen motorists.

“Where do we stop being everyone’s mother and father?” asks Republican Rep. Bill Black of Danville.

State Sen. Dale Risinger, a Republican from Peoria, also says the legislation fails to recognize the needs of different communities, particularly rural districts like the one he represents in downstate Illinois.

“Some downstate kids have to drive from far distances to school, and sometimes they even carpool,” says Risinger, who voted against the measure. “The problem for downstate parents becomes how to get the kids to school.”

Still, supporters say these inconveniences should not outweigh the legislation’s potential to save lives and reduce the number of car accidents by eliminating distractions when teens are learning to drive.

“The intent behind it, to give new drivers time to learn and gain experience, is important,” argues state Rep. Dan Brady, a Republican from Bloomington.

Cullerton’s original legislation also included a curfew stipulation banning young motorists from driving between the hours of 9 p.m. and 6 a.m. After heavy constituent backlash, the Democrat from Chicago modified his bill. Many teen-agers and parents worried that a driving curfew would interfere with after-school programs that sometimes run past 9 p.m. Also, some teens have jobs that run well into the evening hours.

A proposal in Minnesota this year would have strengthened that state’s graduated licensing program for teens, but it stalled in committee. The bill would have banned 16- or 17-year-olds from getting a full license if they had been convicted of a moving or seat belt violation in the preceding 12 months. It also would have prohibited provisional license holders from driving between midnight and 5 a.m., unless they were coming from or going to a job, school or religious activity. In addition, excepting family members, the provisional license holders could not drive a car with more than one passenger under the age of 18 in it. Finally, they would have to make sure every passenger under the age of 18 was wearing a seat belt.

“The theory and purpose is to reduce accidents for the least experienced drivers,” says Sen. Tom Nueville, a Republican from Northville, who served as a co-author of the measure. “With time behind the wheel, they would ultimately get full license privileges.”

## Progress seen in states

Many states now have in place some kind of graduated licensing program for young drivers. They differ from state to state, but most have

two or three phases to them. First, a young driver is given a learner’s permit that allows him or her to drive, but under the supervision of a licensed adult. All occupants are often required to wear seat belts; to move on to the next stage, the young driver must remain crash and conviction free.

The NHTSA also recommends that states include an intermediate phase in which adult supervision would be required for any late-night driving.

In addition, the young person would have to remain conviction and crash free for an entire year. Only during the third stage would the teenager receive full

driving privileges from the state.

In 1998, Iowa adopted a graduated license system modeled after the state of Michigan’s. *The Des Moines Register* reports that the state of Iowa’s crash rate for 16-year-olds dropped 21.3 percent between 1995 and 2000. The rate for 45- to 54-year-old drivers fell by 6.3 percent over that same period of time.

Wisconsin, which codified a graduated license law a little more than three years ago, has seen a decrease in the number of 16-year-old drivers killed and injured in traffic accidents.

Under that state’s law, a teen must wait six months after receiving a learner’s permit and spend 30 hours driving with a parent before getting a probationary license. After that license is issued, the law places limits on when teens can drive and the passengers in their vehicle.

In September 2000, 12 months after the law took effect, there was a 33 percent drop from the average number of fatal crashes over the previous four years, according to the state’s Department of Transportation.

Additionally, 16 percent fewer 16-year-olds were involved in accidents with injuries.

“It appears as if the percentage of young drivers involved in crashes is falling, but we haven’t gotten the whole picture of the program yet,” cautions John Alley, a spokesman for the Wisconsin Department of Transportation.

“We are certainly optimistic, though, that the [graduated license program] is going to save lives and prevent crashes in the state of Wisconsin.”

