

# Driver distractions seen in teen crashes

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Teen drivers are inexperienced drivers, and that can lead to accidents – sometimes fatal – even when no drugs or alcohol were involved.

The community of Fairport, a suburb of Rochester, opened its school year reeling from a horrific accident on June 26 in which an SUV carrying five new Fairport graduates crossed the center line and crashed head-on into a tractor trailer at 10 p.m. All five young women inside were killed instantly.

An investigation revealed that someone in the vehicle had used the 17-year-old driver's cell phone to send a text message just minutes before the crash. It was also discovered that the driver had only a junior driver's license meaning it was illegal for her to be driving after 9 p.m. No drugs or alcohol were involved.

Motor vehicle crashes are the number one killer of teens, claiming more than 6,000 15- to 20-year-olds each year, according to the Automobile Association of America (AAA). And driver distraction accounts for 25 to 50 percent of all crashes. In September, California made it unlawful for teenage drivers to use any electronic device – including hands-free devices – while driving.

There were 26,000 vehicle fatalities or personal injury accidents involving drivers between the ages of 16 and 20 in New York in 2005, according to the Institute for Traffic Safety Management and Research at the University at Albany.

AAA studied nationwide automobile crashes involving 15- to 17-year-olds between 1995 and 2004, and found that the majority of fatalities in teen crashes are people other than the driver. The study revealed that 36.2 percent of those killed were the teen drivers; 31.8 percent were passengers of the teens; 24.2 percent were occupants of other vehicles and 7.5 percent weren't in a vehicle.

When accidents occur, many people ask what could have been done to avoid such deaths and injuries. Sometimes those questions are directed at the schools. Do schools have a role to play in seeking to prevent teen driving accidents? What can be done?

## Enforcing the law

Experts say campus enforcement of driving laws is a good place to start encouraging teens to follow the law. "School policy is critical," Marilena Amoni, associate administrator for the National Highway Traffic Safety Association (NHTSA) told *On Board*. "Student drivers should be required to follow the same Department of Motor Vehicle restrictions on campus as they do elsewhere. And the school needs to enforce the law and impose sanctions for violations." Sanctions can include losing parking privileges or the right to drive on campus.

Amoni said the key is to have the



Photo by Barbara Bennett

Some teens need to learn that texting and driving don't mix, just as drinking and driving don't mix.

entire school community promoting the same message and enforcing the same policies. "Teachers, administrators, athletic coaches and school resource officers all need to be on the same page when it comes to enforcing traffic safety laws," Amoni said. For example, school personnel should say something if they see too many students piling into a single car. Likewise, school personnel should be vigilant about students failing to follow laws on seat belt usage, speeding and driving after hours.

When organizing extracurricular activities, school staff ought to consider the ages and driving status of students, Amoni said. "Athletes that have practice or club members that go to events that extend into nighttime hours are often driving home past the time they are supposed to be behind the wheel." Often, they have passengers. School resource officers, most of whom are connected to the local police department, can play a critical role in making sure students know and abide by driving laws. Amoni noted that resource officers typically are closer in age to the students and may be privy to information such as student parties involving alcohol. "The resource officer is more likely to hear the buzz when a party is planned and can alert the police department – it's all about connecting the dots," Amoni said.

## Making safety part of the curriculum

NYSSBA's Area 9 Director Richard Feller said his school district, the Monticello school district in Sullivan County, has experienced multiple student vehicle deaths and injuries. He is proud that, starting this year, Monticello has brought driver education back into the regular school year after making it a summer-only class some 20 years ago.

"It is interesting that we offer many

programs in our schools regarding student health and safety that are required, but drivers' ed is not one of them," Feller told *On Board*. "We teach about the dangers of smoking, drinking, STDs and a host of other things, but for the one thing that can kill you and many others in an instant (an auto accident) we do not have a required safety course."

The State Education Department (SED) approved 335 summer drivers' education courses being offered by New York public schools and BOCES this year. SED does not have data on the number of districts that offer the course during the school year.

When should drivers' education begin? In kindergarten, according to Sandy Spavone, executive director for the National Organizations for Youth Safety (NOYS). Teachers can talk about the importance of wearing safety belts, for instance. Spavone also suggested that posters about traffic safety be displayed prominently on school grounds.

Amoni said traffic safety should be in the health curriculum as well as referred to in core courses like math and science. "Students could study the physics of a crash in math, for example."

## Other avenues

The NHTSA and NOYS suggested several other ways schools can help keep student drivers safe:

- **Rethink open lunch hours.** Many schools allow older students to leave campus during their lunch hours. "We've all seen it – a ton of kids piled in a car leaving school grounds," Amoni said. Not only is it impossible for all of the passengers in an overstuffed car to be wearing seat belts, but it is unlikely that the driver's full attention is on the road.

## • Later start times for high schoolers.

Many studies have been done on the sleep habits of teenagers with much the same conclusion – most teens stay up late at night and have trouble getting up early in the morning.

## • Establish home-school links.

Sponsor parent education programs to increase parent knowledge and expertise on young driver concerns. "Administrators must be more forceful with parents – letting them know that driving provisions will be enforced on school property," Amoni said. Students also need to know that the same laws apply no matter where they drive. "The schools and the parents need to work together and control when and where teens drive."

## • Enlist the help of students.

Establish a youth coordinator or youth panel to work with the school board and school district. Teens are more inclined to accept policy and education when it is done with them and not to them. "Teens are very good at policing themselves and each other. They are also strong advocates for health and safety and know how to reach their peers," Amoni said.

- **Encourage school bus usage.** "The safest mode of transportation is a school bus," Amoni asserted, adding that schools can look at ways to discourage driving to and from school. "It may make sense to not give students an incentive to drive rather than take the bus."

"Schools need to be much more proactive when it comes to teen driving," Amoni said. "High schools in particular need to be paying closer attention to their students who drive."