

Senate Bill 16 is a measure that could save lives

By Mark Bennett

The Tribune-Star

TERRE HAUTE — The grim crash statistics didn't work. The sad testimony of grieving parents didn't either.

Maybe the resistance to change and regulations held greater influence over Indiana legislators. Whatever the reason, the Hoosier state has failed in recent years to make its roadways safer by strengthening laws regarding its youngest and least-experienced drivers.

"We tend to be a conservative state. It took us how long to get a primary seatbelt law?" said Stan Henderson, an associate professor of health, safety and environmental sciences at Indiana State University, where he supervises driver-education teacher training.

Indiana passed its primary seatbelt law in 1998, 14 years after New York passed the nation's first buckle-up law.

Conservatism makes sense, sometimes. Foolish stubbornness doesn't. The Indiana General Assembly should pass Senate Bill 16 — the latest proposal to better prepare 16- and 17-year-olds to drive cars and trucks through busy city streets, over interstates and down curvy country roads. The safety of those teenagers, as well as other drivers and passengers their vehicles encounter, is at stake.

The word "restrictions" rankles some folks. Still, if more restrictions are imposed on teen drivers, fewer accidents occur, research shows. In this case, it's a worthwhile tradeoff.

As with most states, Indiana has a graduated driver's license (or GDL) program. Indiana's GDL received just a "fair" rating in a 2006 national study by Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. The university rated states' GDLs based on seven components of driver training. In some of those areas, Indiana's law doesn't even register a blip.

One criteria calls for a minimum of 30 hours of supervised driving practice during the learner stage. That's actual, behind-the-wheel road time beyond the training in a formal driver's ed program, alongside a parent or a licensed adult. Illinois requires 50 hours, including 10 at night. Indiana requires none, day or night.

Any Hoosier 16-year-old can walk into a license branch, pass a written test and a vision screening and come out with a learner's permit. Six months later, they can return, pass a driving test and get their probationary operator's license. That's all it takes.

That's lame. It's barely a notch tougher than getting a fishing license.

The bill before the Legislature now would mandate 50 hours of supervised practice with a learner's permit. Teens would also have to be several months older to get driving privileges. The minimum age for a learner's permit would be 15½ with driver's ed, and 16 without it. (It's currently 15.) The coveted probationary license age would rise to 16½ with driver's ed, and 17 without it. (It's 16 and 1 month now.)

Those extra months aren't just a meaningless way to torture teenagers. That wait makes a big difference. The crash rate per mile for 16-year-olds is twice as high as those 18 to 19, and 10 times greater than drivers 30 to 59, according to federal statistics. A few months of extra maturity and practice will save lives.

The bill also encourages driver's ed courses. Public high schools began eliminating driver's ed in the 1980s, and private courses cost \$300 or more and aren't offered in some rural areas. So, the the Department of Education and the Bureau of Motor Vehicles would also be mandated to offer a 30-hour Internet driver's ed course. Those completing that online class can get their probationary license at 16 years and 9 months.

Under a compromise among the lawmakers, those elements of the bill would take effect in July 2010. But a ban on cell phone use by drivers 18 and under would go into effect this July.

On Wednesday, the House Transportation Committee approved the proposal, sponsored by Republican Sen. Travis Holdman of Markle. Now, the full House will vote on the measure.

It's hard to imagine the proposal getting rejected, but it's happened before.

"I have had four phone calls or e-mails from folks who told me this is a bad law, or that we're picking on kids, or that their kids are smart enough" to drive safely under the current law, Holdman said by telephone from Indianapolis last week. "I've had hundreds and hundreds of calls and e-mails and letters saying we need this law."

It doesn't pick on kids. It protects them, their passengers and other innocent passersby. When it comes to driving safety, frankly, age matters.

Only 6 percent of Indiana drivers are between 16 and 20 years old, yet they account for 17 percent of all fatal single-vehicle crashes, according to a 2006 report by the Governor's Council on Impaired and Dangerous Driving.

Henderson, who's been training driver's ed teachers and instructing first-time drivers for 43 years, estimated the stronger law would improve accident rates by 7 to 25 percent.

"To me, that's worth it," he said.

Most Hoosiers agree. The legislators need to hear those voices.