

Teen driver law aims to cut risks, but distractions, speed still kill

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It's been more than 10 years since the state adopted a graduated driver's license system that, in part, prohibits teens from jumping in the car together for six months after they're licensed.

The law has saved teens' lives by eliminating a big distraction for young drivers, experts say. And data showed a 36 percent drop in fatal crashes involving 16-year-old drivers in the first 5 1/2 years after the 1997 Teenage and Adult Driver Responsibility Act.

Still, too many young people die on the state's roadways every year as the result of risky behavior, said Bob Dallas, director of the Governor's Office of Highway Safety.

"The numbers throughout the state indicate we still have a lot to do," Dallas said.

A week ago, two 16-year-old Cedar Shoals High School students were killed and a 15-year-old passenger was seriously injured in a wreck on the Athens Perimeter. Speed was a factor in the crash, which also injured another driver, the state patrol said.

Also this week, a 16-year-old Dawson County High School student was killed in a single vehicle wreck on Georgia Highway 136. He was the second Dawsonville teen killed in a car crash in three weeks.

On Feb. 28, a 16-year-old North Carolina high school student, his 20-year-old sister and 22-year-old brother were killed in a wreck on Interstate 20 near Madison, according to reports.

And four days earlier, a 17-year-old East Jackson Comprehensive High School student was killed and a fellow student seriously injured when he pulled out in front of a tractor trailer on Georgia Highway 129. The tractor trailer driver also was sent to the hospital.

In all last year, 18 16-year-olds were killed in car crashes, according to preliminary data from the Governor's Office of Highway Safety. Twelve of the crashes happened because the driver lost control, which indicates they were speeding.

Cedar Shoals High School Principal Ingrid Gilbert knew the two victims of last Saturday's crash very well. She called Robert Burgdoff and Kenneth Davis "wonderful kids."

"Being a parent of two Clarke County graduates, it's the worst news you can imagine," Gilbert said. "There really is nothing you can say. You pray constantly that your kids will make the right decision and do the right thing."

Burdoff and Davis were on their way home from a round of mini-golf at Georgia Square Mall when Burdoff lost control of his car, crossed the median and hit another car head-on.

Both teens had obtained their driver's licenses only recently, friends said. Davis could have gotten his license in November, but he waited an extra two months for Burdoff to turn 16, friends said, noting how close the two were.

"All we can do is continue to talk to students about doing the right thing and making wise decisions," Gilbert said. "Maybe other kids will learn what tragedy can happen."

Teens tend to get distracted or show off when other teens are in the car with them, Dallas said.

That makes them more likely to speed, the most common cause of fatal crashes involving young drivers, according to a 2005 study by Emory University that analyzed the state's 1997 graduated license law.

And that's why the law requires 16-year-olds with an intermediate "Class D" license to only drive with members of their immediate family for the first six months, Dallas said.

For the next six months, a Class D driver only can have one passenger under 21 who's not an immediate family member. After that the driver only can have three passengers under 21.

"By saying how many teen passengers you can have, it eliminates the biggest source of distraction for a teen driver," Dallas said.

State lawmakers continue to work on rules for teen drivers.

The 2007 law known as Joshua's Law requires 16-year-olds to complete a driver's education course and log 46 hours of supervised driving before getting a Class D license.

While officials know that enrollment in driver's education classes has increased since Joshua's Law started Jan. 1, 2007, it's too soon to tell whether it's reduced fatalities or crashes, he said.

Dallas also touted a measure passed Thursday by the state House of Representatives that would ban teens from using cell phones while driving.