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Driver's ed cash largely unspent

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Two years after Georgia legislators passed Joshua's Law, which mandates driver's education for teens under 17 seeking a license, the state has yet to develop a comprehensive statewide course.

Millions of dollars raised since May 2005 have not been spent by a state commission authorized to establish a driver's education program in Georgia's public schools.

And parents who want to sign up teens for the state-required driver's education programs are having a hard time finding courses that meet the state's requirements. Many have turned to private companies, which often charge hundreds of dollars.

Janet Kelley, a Douglasville mom, began looking for a course last winter for her son, Evan, who turned 16 in January. Kelley found only two private companies near her home that offered courses meeting the requirements of Joshua's Law. The hit on the family's pocketbook? About \$400.

"I'm pleased my son went through the experience," Kelley said. "I actually liked having the weight of the law behind us requiring driver's education, but I'd like to see more choices. Basically, having the law go into place without a lot of access to driving schools is the main problem."

Born of a loss

Sen. Preston Smith (R-Rome) introduced Joshua's Law in 2005 after being approached by Alan and LuGina Brown, the parents of Joshua Brown, a 17-year-old from Cartersville who was killed in a single-car accident on a wet road in July 2003. The Browns became advocates of driver's education, saying they believed their son might still be alive if he had taken such courses.

Joshua's Law requires 16-year-olds who want a Class D license to complete a state-approved driver education course that includes 30 hours of classroom or online courses and 40 hours of supervised driving, six of which must be at night. The law also created a nine-member Georgia Driver's Education Commission, which is authorized to accept a 5 percent surcharge on traffic violations such as speeding and driving under the

influence to start up a statewide driver's education program in public schools.

The surcharge has generated \$11.9 million since collections began in May 2005, according to the Governor's Office of Planning and Budget. Since then, the commission has requested only \$2.7 million. The remainder of the money has gone back into the state's general fund and cannot be used by the commission for driver's education.

Smith said he is "frustrated" because he wants to see an affordable and accessible statewide, driver's education program in Georgia.

"I don't like the fact there are parents who think there is only a \$700 driver's education course for their kids and that this law was created to enrich some private provider," said Smith. "There will always be room for private courses, because they may offer the flexibility some parents are looking for. But the idea of the law was not to create a requirement, and then not have a program so only the private companies could make money."

Program takes time

Robert Dallas, vice-chairman of the driver's education commission, said that starting a comprehensive, statewide driver's education course takes time. Dallas argues that there is no single driver's education program that is supported by data as being the most effective.

"All of us involved in the driver's education commission would like to today — not tomorrow — roll out a program that the experts and data agree is the perfect program," Dallas said. "The reality is that does not exist. All the programs have to be put in the context of their respective costs."

Dallas said that the commission, which now consists of eight members, has worked on several projects to improve teen driving in the state, including the development of an online class that ranges in price from about \$45 to \$100. Students can take the online course to meet the 30-hour classroom requirement of Joshua's Law.

Dallas also cites a \$900,000 allocation by the commission to purchase computers dedicated exclusively to the online driving course for public libraries, and the development of a brochure that encourages parents to become more involved in teaching their kids to drive. He said the state is collecting data on driver's education courses to someday ascertain which are the most effective in preventing crashes.

The commission also plans to spend about \$938,000 on grants allowing a limited number of high schools to offer driver's education, Dallas said. Currently, there are 205 state-approved driver's training schools in the state, of which 14 are at private high schools and 111 at public high schools. Eighty are run by for-profit companies, according to the Georgia Department of Driver Services.

Not a magic bullet

Some safety experts agree with Dallas that there is not a lot of conclusive data supporting the notion that driver's education reduces the number of crashes and deaths among teens.

"The reason it has not made as much difference as we hoped is because serious crashes don't occur because the kids don't know what to do — they know that running a red light, or speeding at 80 miles per hour, or loading a car with eight passengers is dangerous," said Susan Baker, a professor

at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, who specializes in injury prevention. "But there are things that drivers education may not change."

Baker and other research experts found that graduated driver licensing, which became law in Georgia in 1997, decreases fatal crashes for 16-year-olds. A graduated driver licensing program that includes provisions such as a minimum of 30 hours of supervised driving, nighttime driving restrictions, and a restriction of carrying passengers can reduce deaths.

Alan Brown, the father of Joshua Brown, however, is convinced that driver's education — especially a program that includes driving simulators — can help save lives. Brown and his wife helped raise the necessary funds to open a driver's education center with a simulator at Cartersville High School. Brown said he is "disappointed" the commission has not done more to expand driver's education across the state.

"Why did they raise \$11 million and not spend a penny to save the first life?" Brown said. "That is just heartbreaking."

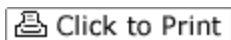
Now, Brown is throwing his support behind an effort by Smith to significantly revamp Joshua's Law.

Smith's Senate Bill 315 would extend the surcharge collection by five years until 2013, abolish the driver's education commission, and authorize the Georgia Department of Education to spend the funds for a driver's education program in public schools. The bill also would repeal the mandatory driver's education requirement for teens under 17.

"The people who run the commission say they don't have enough studies to show driver's education is effective," said Smith, who plans to push for SB 315 next year. "What that means to me is they are substituting their policy judgment over that of the Legislature. Their role, to me, was not to decide whether they agree with the law, but to implement the law."

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