



To: Transport Planners

From: Adrian Davis

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Subject: School Travel Toolbox: No 7 School based driver education for the prevention of crashes: Evidence and policy

Top line: Driver education in schools leads to early licensing. There is no evidence that driver education reduces road crash involvement. It may lead to a modest but potentially important increase in the proportion of teenagers involved in traffic crashes.

In March 2000, the British Government launched its road safety strategy, setting out how it planned to achieve a 40% reduction in road deaths and serious injuries by 2010.¹ Prominent within the strategy was a plan to reduce deaths and serious injuries in teenage drivers. The Strategy noted that drivers aged 17 to 21 years make up 7% of licence holders but 13% of drivers involved in road traffic crashes resulting in injury. The British government proposed to tackle the problem of teenage road deaths with driver education programmes in schools and colleges. Students aged 16 to 18 years were offered an education package developed by the Driving Standards Agency (DSA), the executive agency of the Dept for Transport responsible for driving tests in England. The DSA Schools Programme involved presentations by driving examiners about selecting a driving instructor, the theory and practical tests, and a range of road safety issues.

Driver education has a long history as a road safety strategy and considerable effort has been given to evaluating its effectiveness. A major concern with driver education is that it might encourage teenagers to obtain a driving licence and start driving sooner than they would in the absence of driver education. Because teenagers have a higher risk of road death and serious injury than any other age group, earlier licensing could offset any beneficial effect of driver education and increase the number of teenage road traffic crashes. To quantify the effect of school driver education on licensing and road traffic crashes UK researchers conducted a systematic search for highly robust studies.²

The three identified trials of driver education were conducted in Australia, USA and New Zealand, between 1982 and 1984, and it is important to ask whether their results can be generalised to contemporary driver education programmes such as the DSA Schools Programme as proposed by the British government. The DSA programme was much less intensive, the entire presentation lasting only 50 minutes, with no behind the wheel driver training and greater emphasis on taking the driving test. For driver education to be effective in reducing crash involvement, any effect of early licensing must be offset by improved driving skills, if indeed teaching driving skills reduces road crash rates at all. With its emphasis on the driving test, the DSA programme could easily increase licensing but with little or no impact on driving skills, potentially the worst combination from a road safety perspective. If the DSA programme increased the proportion of licensed teenagers by just 2%, then an additional 27 teenagers might be killed or seriously injured each year as a result of this road safety programme. This example serves to highlight how without a robust approach to evidence based public policy misplaced confidence in seemingly beneficial interventions could lead to harmful outcomes.

¹ DETR. *Tomorrow's roads: safer for everyone*, 2000 London: Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

² Roberts, I, Kwan, I. 2001 School-based driver education for the prevention of traffic crashes, *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, Issue 3.