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Driver education: It saves lives, but few use it

By Jennifer Moody
Albany Democrat-Herald

Natawsha Compton slipped behind the wheel of the pale green Toyota Prius as driving instructor John Bailey buckled himself into the passenger seat.

The 15-year-old watched intently as Bailey explained the dashboard functions: speedometer, turn signals, defroster.



Mark Ylen/Democrat-Herald
Instructor John Bailey observes Natawsha Compton, 15, of Corvallis as she properly enters the car.

She knows the drill. She knows the roads. So far, she's logged 40 hours with her grandfather, Jim Compton of Corvallis, and if it were up to her, she wouldn't have signed on for this at all.

Compton felt differently, however, which is why Natawsha spent that particular Friday in the Prius, and why she is taking driver education through Linn-Benton Community College.

"I think the more instruction she can get from professionals, the better," he said. "Kids tend to listen to other people more than they tend to listen to the people who are parenting them."

After a few classes, Natawsha said, she agrees.

"People think it's just so easy and stuff, but actually I've learned a lot of things," she said.

Motor vehicle crashes are the No. 1 cause of death for 15- to 20-year-olds.

A national study shows teens who take formal driver training have much lower crash rates. Yet only about a third of eligible Oregonians actually sign up for driving classes, saying they don't have the time, money or easy access to them.

Those statements prompt some to wonder if it's time to make driver's ed a law.

"They're definitely looking at mandating driver education. The parents want it, and we really feel it would be helpful as a state," said Phyllis Copeland, who oversees the LBCC driver training programs.

Copeland belongs to the Oregon Department of Transportation's Driver Education Advisory Committee. On Monday it will discuss the process to recommend mandatory driver's education legislation at the 2009 legislative session.

"At our meetings, the discussion is 'Are we ready to mandate?'" she said. "And the discussion is 'Yeah, we're ready to mandate.'"

Lora Hediger of Corvallis is all for it. Her 15-year-old daughter, Julie, is a driver's ed student at LBCC.

"I think it should be mandatory, and I think it should be built into their high-school curriculum," she said. "Looking at the statistics for teenage drivers and deaths and accidents, it's a little scary. The more we can educate them, the better off all of us are on the road."

Oregon requires license applicants to supplement a driver's ed course with at least 50 hours of supervised practice. Applicants who haven't had an ODOT-approved course are supposed to have 100 hours of supervised practice.

But the state doesn't collect any proof documenting the experience, nor are there any consequences for ignoring it. That leads Copeland and other instructors to believe it's just not being done.

"What happens is parents just go in and sign them off," Copeland said.

Even conscientious parents don't make the best teachers, she said.

"Parents essentially are passing on bad habits or inappropriate habits, even to the kids that we are teaching," Copeland said. Formal training, she said, is necessary to teach the rules of the road to consistent, statewide performance standards.

Students who do look for formal classes say access is a problem.

Linn-Benton Community College offers driver's education at its campuses in Albany, Corvallis, Lebanon and Sweet Home. But come registration day, parents in the know say you'd better arrive a couple of hours early to even hope for a place.

Jacqueline Smith of Corvallis, whose two children took classes through LBCC's Benton Center, said she arrived for registration just before the doors opened and found a crowd ahead of her. Her oldest got the only open spot left, she said: Smith happened to have her daughter's driving permit, insurance information and other required paperwork, while another parent did not.

"You have to show up at, like, 6," she said, "or you're toast."

The Scio and Philomath school districts still provide their own driver training classes, but they're the only ones in the mid-valley that do. But even in-house programs don't usually operate within the school day.

Ron Morella, who teaches driver's ed at Philomath High School, said a switch to trimesters bumped his class from the schedule. He does classroom work from 3:30 to 6 p.m. once a week and goes behind the wheel other afternoons and weekends to squeeze in the road time.

"A lot of the kids don't take the class because it interferes with their sports schedules," he said.

Time was when most mid-valley high schools offered driver's ed as a regular elective. But school officials say that was before the tax limitations of Measure 5 and the reading-math emphasis of No Child Left Behind, a one-two punch that took out many non-academic classes.

Without in-school access, some students say they just aren't tempted to go looking for a class. And in areas where training isn't offered all year, some students don't want to wait for the next round.

Doug Collins, a junior at West Albany High School who got his license last December without a formal class, said his family's insurance company gave a discount equal to taking driver's ed if he would fill out a driving record book and practice certain skills.

"It was a little more convenient for us to do that," he said.

Collins said he didn't look into classes but can't see how he would have had time for an extra one last fall, given band and drama practice and holiday commitments.

"We just decided it was going to be too much of a hassle for me to do it," he said. "If it was offered as a class at my school, I think I definitely would have done it. I definitely know why it's an important thing."

Bethanie Stearns, also a West junior, got her license last spring. She doesn't believe she missed anything by not taking a class.

"A lot of my friends who took (driver's education) said it was a lot of common-sense driving, and it wasn't really worth it," she said.

Even if the class were offered at her school, "I think I might have not taken it still 'cause I think I could have figured things out myself. There's some awesome classes I would rather take, honestly."

Cost is another factor. Although it varies by campus, from \$50 in Scio to a minimum of \$220 at Linn-Benton Community College plus a textbook, any price tag puts some potential students off, instructors say.

"In Scio, only about half the kids choose to do it, even though it's pretty cheap," instructor Aaron Shown said. "But still, to some kids, \$50 is a lot of money, or their parents don't want to pay it."

Prices vary because some districts subsidize upfront costs more than others, said John Harvey, manager of ODOT's driver education program. But the costs don't go away.

Driver classes must have certified instructors who have to update their skills every two years. The classes require not only textbooks but special cars with dual brakes and extra mirrors.

"When you break it down, you've got instructor costs, vehicle costs, in-car costs, insurance and gas, all of those variables," he said. "And it's ongoing."

ODOT's Transportation Safety Division is trying to make things easier, Harvey said. The state reimburses part of the costs for public programs that provide driver education. In 2005, ODOT successfully lobbied to raise that reimbursement from \$150 to \$210 for each eligible student.

ODOT also gave a grant to Western Oregon University that allows people who train as driver's ed instructors to take their classes free.

Time and costs aside, Harvey said he thinks the real reason families opt out of driver's ed is because, for now, they can.

"If you have an option that costs money, you have a variable: 'Do I spend X number of dollars, or can Dad teach me?'" he said.

Ideally, Harvey said, his group would like to see driver's ed required as a condition of receiving a license.

As chairman of the Driver Education and Training Association, which represents supervisors of state driver education programs, he knows at least 25 states require license applicants to have a driver training class, including California, Washington, Montana and Idaho.

But that would cost. Right now, of the \$34.50 Oregonians pay each eight years to renew their driver's licenses, ODOT gets \$6 to put back into class reimbursements. That generates between \$2.4 million and \$2.5 million a year, Harvey said.

But driver's ed actually costs about \$5.8 million, he said, which means renewal fees would have to more than double if the program is to pay for itself.

That's not a price some people want to bear.

"I don't think that it needs to be mandatory. The state already has the requirement of 100 hours of driving before kids can get their license, although I'm not sure how well you can regulate that," said Julie Salisbury of Lebanon, whose sons both took driving classes through LBCC. "It is too bad that it can't be offered through the schools. It is an expense for families to take through LB."

But Morella, Philomath's driving instructor, said he's in favor of a law. He said he can tell in the first few minutes whether he's riding with a driver who's had formal training, which is why he encourages parents who are on the fence about signing their teens up for the class.

"I tell them, 'Why you're really here is so you can have your kid around for the next 30 years,'" he said. "You want to keep that risk down to a minimum, this is the way to do it."