

State takes a fresh approach to driver education for teens

The program, devised by an Illinois consultant, is strong on class participation and seeks to dispel the cocky notion of invincibility.

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WARWICK -- Kids think they are invincible behind the wheel; that's a truism that parents have known since the first cave-teen took the first cave wheel out for a spin.

But the teens of this generation are even more convinced. Weaned on video games that are essentially driving simulators, possessed of more independence, more technological savvy and better hand-eye coordination than any before them, they think that their skills, timing, and good luck will keep them safe.

And they get in just as many accidents as teens always have.

One in three 16-year-olds will have an accident in their first year on the road. Drivers 16 to 20 account for 5,000 car crashes per day. And 8,500 in that age group are killed each year as a result of auto crashes.

It's because their attitudes and decision-making skills are poor, and we do little to teach them otherwise, says an expert the state is relying on to increase the odds of keeping Rhode Island's teens alive.

On Saturday, more than 60 of the state's driver education teachers gathered at the Community College of Rhode Island's Knight campus to hear about a new way of teaching teens -- one aimed at reaching them before they make that one wrong decision that could ruin more than just their own lives.

"The people in this room are the only gatekeepers between a kid and a bubble of steel and metal and plastic," Mark Horowitz, who devised the Drive Program, told the group.

"We're talking about 21st-century teens. They're not like we were . . . these kids think visually. So what do we tell them to do? Read chapters 9, 10 and 11. They learn by doing, not by reading."

Horowitz is the chief executive officer of the Illinois-based Moorshire Group. His program, now in use in 15 states, attempts to reach teens the way they learn -- instead of talking at them, it shows them a fast-paced video, puts them into problem-solving groups and forces them to make decisions in participatory classroom exercises.

"I came at it not from an academic point of view, but from a marketing point of view," Horowitz, a marketing executive and former USA Today guest columnist, said of his approach.

Horowitz examined the way driver education is taught in this country, and he saw only hour-long videos of police officers talking about the dangers of drunken driving and the need to pay attention behind the wheel.

Meanwhile, teenagers are text-messaging one another in class, surfing the Internet, and spending the day immersed in interactive media such as video games. They are experiential learners now, and states have long recognized that driver-ed classroom programs are viewed by teens as more of a necessary evil than as a learning experience.

"That sign didn't work, that public service announcement didn't work," Horowitz said of programs such as Click it or Ticket, which promote seat-belt use.

So the states try other methods.

"We try to shock them. But if we think that showing them a bloody eyeball is going to do it . . ." Horowitz shook his head, indicating it would do no good. "They remember what they come up with, not what they're told."

With this in mind, he crafted a program that the state bought for its driver education teachers to use, making Rhode Island the first in New England to acquire it.

First, the teens watch a video. It's quick and flashy -- 67 seconds with 100 special effects, and they often ask to watch it again and again, Horowitz said.

The video shows a teen driving, and flashes images of the multiple forces overtaking his mind. He dials his cell phone, changes the CD in his player, checks the cars around him. He pushes the envelope, ignoring the speed limits as he rushes to his destination.

Words flash up on the screen: "I was a good driver," it starts.

Teens all think that, Horowitz said. Many recognize they are skilled, and this makes them believe they are invincible, that bad things will not happen to them. When crashes do happen, they fail to see their responsibility in causing them -- the subtle steps and poor decisions that led to the result. It is that attitude, he said, that must be changed.

"There's an incredible disconnect between what a kid thinks of his driving and what a kid does with his driving," he said.

The program then segues into classroom exercises and group problem solving. It costs the state \$144 per teacher, and that provides classroom materials, the video, a slide-PowerPoint presentation and posters, said Emilio Colantino, director of community education at CCRI, which runs the driver-education programs for the state Office of Highway safety.

Teachers will be able to use the material immediately, and ideally, teens will start to question their belief that "nothing's going to happen to me, nothing ever did and nothing ever will," Horowitz said.