

Driver Education Program Evaluation

Prepared for Arlington Public Schools

In the following report, The Hanover Research Council outlines the curriculum, expectations, and financial considerations related to driver education programs in Virginia, with attention focused on Arlington County and its neighbors. We conclude with a brief discussion of the outcomes of public, private, and commercial driver education programs, as measured by the rate of crashes per student.

Overview

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death among teens in the United States, accounting for one in every three deaths in this age group;¹ in Virginia, the year 2006 saw 126 teens aged 15-19 die in car crashes. And although teen drivers may not be responsible for all of these fatal crashes, per mile driven, youth drivers ages 16-19 are four times more likely to crash compared with older drivers, with the highest period of risk occurring in the first year of eligibility.² In addition, while the emotional toll resulting from this high crash rate is incalculable, the financial cost to society is a staggering \$34 billion.³

While there is no way to avoid inexperience, a solid foundation in driver education is one approach to ensuring that new drivers are at least equipped with the knowledge and skills that only practice and time can hone. In the report to follow, The Hanover Research Council outlines the curriculum, expectations, and financial considerations related to driver education programs in Virginia, with attention focused on Arlington County and its neighbors, followed by a brief discussion of the outcomes of public, private, and commercial driver education programs. We conclude that Arlington Public Schools provide an extensive, affordable, and generally successful program for student drivers, although the rate of crashes by drivers at Wakefield High is a point of concern.

¹ <http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/factsheets/teenmvh.htm>

² Ibid.

³ Among drivers age 15-17 in 2006. See <http://www.reuters.com/article/pressRelease/idUS127078+09-Apr-2008+PRN20080409>

Curriculum

The Code of Virginia requires the state Board of Education to establish a standardized program with which all state-approved driver education programs must comply, whether they are operated by public, private, or commercial schools. Thus, the *Curriculum and Administrative Guide for Driver Education in Virginia* and the *Driver Education Standards of Learning* outline the content and requirements of all the driver education programs reviewed in this report, although each school system is of course at liberty to select its own textbooks and materials. As the *Guide* notes, “Course content, minimum requirements, and administrative guidelines for classroom driver education and laboratory training (driving and observing and, if utilized, simulation and multi-car range instruction), shall follow the Board of Education’s standardized program of instruction as outlined in the curriculum and administrative guide. Successful course completion is a prerequisite to obtain a Virginia driver’s license.”⁴

While the decision whether or not to offer a program of driver education is left to the school board of each school division, if a program is offered, then it must comply with the standardized program. The curriculum outlined by the Virginia Department of Education in cooperation with the Department of Motor Vehicles includes eleven distinct modules, which are listed below.⁵

- ❖ **Module One**—Virginia Driver Responsibilities: Licensing Responsibilities
- ❖ **Module Two**—Virginia Driver Responsibilities: Preparing to Operate a Vehicle
- ❖ **Module Three**—Basic Maneuvering Tasks: Low Risk Environment
- ❖ **Module Four**—Basic Maneuvering Tasks: Moderate Risk Driving Environment
- ❖ **Module Five**—Information Processing: Moderate Risk Driving Environment
- ❖ **Module Six**—Information Processing: Complex Risk Environments
- ❖ **Module Seven**—Driver Performance: Personal Factors
- ❖ **Module Eight**—Driver Responsibilities: Adverse Conditions
- ❖ **Module Nine**—Driver Responsibilities: Vehicle Functions
- ❖ **Module Ten**—Driver Responsibilities: Making Informed Choices
- ❖ **Module Eleven**—Laboratory Instruction – Behind-the-Wheel and In-Car Observation

The modules, each of which is associated with several of the 21 Virginia Standards of Learning for Driver Education, begin with an understanding of traffic laws and safety rules and proceed all the way through actual behind-the-wheel driving experiences. Emphasis is placed on substance abuse awareness, aggressive and distracted driving,

⁴ <http://www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/Instruction/PE/ProgramAdministration.pdf>

⁵ Ibid.

motorcycle awareness, and organ and tissue donation.⁶ Since this curriculum is standardized statewide, and since school divisions failing to comply with this program are not entitled to state funds for driver education, Arlington Public Schools may assume that its curriculum is in line with that of other driver education programs and schools.

The first ten modules, which outline the content of the theory portion of training, must be administered over the course of 36 sessions of classroom instruction, lasting a minimum of 50 minutes each, in accordance with the Board of Education's regulations. The final module, which covers the laboratory portion, must include seven 50-minute periods of in-car observation and seven 50-minute periods of actual behind-the-wheel driving. All state-approved commercial driver education schools must follow these instructional guidelines, as well. In public schools, driver training may count as either an elective or a required course, but students cannot be removed from instruction in any class other than health and physical education.

Throughout the classroom portion of the driver education program, schools have the right to choose, as Arlington does,⁷ to use a simulator. According to Vanessa Wigand, the Virginia Department of Education's Specialist for Driver, Health, and Physical Education, simulators are used by twelve school systems⁸ in the Commonwealth, but their use does not appear to significantly impact crash rates: the rate for public schools overall in 2006 was 10.3 crashes per student taught versus 10.0 at the twelve schools using a simulator. Furthermore, only nine other school systems join Arlington in offering driver's education as a 90-hour semester program, and while four of those divisions—including Arlington—boast crash rates lower than the state average, the other six have rates "significantly higher" than the state average.⁹ Thus, while Arlington's program appears to be working quite well (see the final section of this report), some factor other than or in combination with simulator use and increased instruction time must explain this success.

⁶ http://www.dmv.virginia.gov/webdoc/citizen/drivers/ed_reqs.asp

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<http://www.arlington.k12.va.us/15401082165116273/blank/browse.asp?a=383&BMDRN=2000&BCOB=0&c=54658&15401082165116273Nav=|&NodeID=122>

⁸ The other school systems that use simulators are Bath County, Bristol City, Campbell County, Chesapeake City, Hanover County, Henrico County, King William County, Richmond City, Newport News City, Northampton County, and Wythe County. See

<http://dls.state.va.us/GROUPS/DTP/MEETINGS/091807/curriculum.pdf>

⁹ The other school divisions offering the 90-hour semester program with low crash rates are Bland County, Charles City County, and Henrico County; the remaining, higher-than-average divisions are Dickenson County, Orange County, Roanoke County, Salem County, Suffolk County, and Washington County. Ibid.

Program Expectations

The vast majority of driver education programs, whether they are administered in a public school, private school, or commercial school, do not outline policies or expectations for students beyond the formal state guidelines and Virginia Standards of Learning; expectations regarding parental involvement are similarly scarce. Yet a growing number of school systems, including Arlington Public Schools, are making strides to increase parental involvement by implementing the *Partners for Safe Teen Driving* program.

Partners, which is coordinated by Prince William County Public Schools in conjunction with the Virginia DMV and the Virginia Association of Driver Educators and Traffic Safety (VADETS), is a program “that enables school divisions and communities to give parents the information and tools they need to help their teens become safer drivers.”¹⁰ Although there is no conclusive empirical evidence to support the hypothesis that increased parental involvement in driver education actually leads to improved outcomes,¹¹ the program rests on the assumption that since “parental involvement in a child’s education increases their level of success”¹² when it comes to academic pursuits, the same will hold true in driver education.

In the *Partners for Safe Teen Driving* program, mandatory parental involvement is minimal, requiring parents to attend just one meeting, lasting roughly an hour and a half, before their child is awarded the provisional driver’s license. Educators who lead the meetings, however, use the time to impress upon parents how important it is that they take an active role in their child’s learning process. The program provides parents with information regarding insurance for teen drivers, as well as recently-passed state traffic laws and laws specific to teen drivers. Additionally, the effectiveness of parental instruction and the importance of modeling responsible driving habits is covered, and the 45-Hour Parent/Teen Driving Guide, published by the Virginia Department of Education, is explained.¹³ At the conclusion of the meeting, parents receive a certificate of completion which must then be presented by the student in order to be granted the provisional driver’s license when they pass the road test.¹⁴

Parents have reacted resoundingly well to the *Partners* program, with 98 percent responding on the exit survey, which is administered at the conclusion of each meeting, that they are satisfied by the program. As a result of the its success, more

¹⁰ <http://www.safeteendriving.org/partners/index.php>

¹¹ http://injuryprevention.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/12/suppl_1/i30

¹² <http://pwcs.edu/curriculum/drivered/>

¹³ Virginia law requires that parents certify that they have driven with their teen for 45 hours, 15 of which must be after sunset, before the driver’s license is granted. See http://www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/Instruction/PE/parent_teen_driving_guide.pdf

¹⁴ <http://www.safeteendriving.org/pdf/Agenda.pdf>

and more Virginia school divisions are following the example of Prince William County and others such as Arlington by teaming with local law enforcement to implement the *Partners* program in their own communities. Below is a list of the 34 school divisions in Virginia besides APS which are offering the program during the 2008-2009 school year.¹⁵

School Divisions Participating in <i>Partners for Safe Teen Driving</i>	
Albemarle	Isle of Wight
Alexandria	Loudoun
Appomattox	Martinsville
Bedford	Montgomery
Botetourt	Norfolk
Charles City	Northumberland
Chesterfield	Page
Culpeper	Powhatan
Cumberland	Prince William
Danville	Richmond
Essex	Roanoke Catholic
Fairfax	Stafford
Franklin	Suffolk
Frederick	Virginia Beach
Gloucester	Washington
Henrico	Westmoreland
Highland	West Point

Source: <http://dls.state.va.us/GROUPS/DTP/MEETINGS/091807/curriculum.pdf>

¹⁵ <http://dls.state.va.us/GROUPS/DTP/MEETINGS/091807/curriculum.pdf>

Cost and Fees

The average cost of administering in-car driver training in public schools in Virginia in 2006 was \$189 per student, while the average fee charged to students was \$72.¹⁶ Arlington County's fee of \$100 is therefore somewhat above average compared with the entire state, yet a review of neighboring school districts' current rates reveals that APS is able to offer training to high school students at quite a reasonable rate.¹⁷ Given the generally higher cost of living in the Northern Virginia region, higher-than-average rates are to be expected, yet Arlington public schools students and their families benefit from a program administered at a fee only nominally higher than the mean (about \$25), while nearby counties charge between about \$50 and \$190 more, as the table below demonstrates.

Table 1: Arlington Area Public School Driver Education Fees

School System	Behind-the-Wheel Fee
Fairfax County	\$260
Loudoun County	\$125
Prince William County	\$175
Arlington County	\$100
MEAN	\$165

Compiled by The Hanover Research Council

In addition, an increasing number of public school systems have chosen to no longer offer in-car driver education to students, notably including Arlington's neighbor, Alexandria.¹⁸ This cutback has left many pupils to seek the required course of in-car training through commercial driving schools, which typically charge significantly higher fees. According to Wigand, the average cost of in-car training through a commercial driving school is \$275,¹⁹ a much higher price than that paid by the average Virginia public high school driving student, and considerably higher than Arlington's comparatively reasonable rate. While Wigand's figure is drawn from a statewide survey of commercial driving schools, Hanover finds that commercial driving schools in the Northern Virginia area in particular also tend to be priced around the state average. Fees are listed below for several area schools.

¹⁶ Unfortunately, no data is available on the cost of classroom instruction or simulated experience in secondary schools (although classroom instruction in driver education presumably costs no more or less than any other academic subject). When it comes to commercial driving schools, most offer only the in-car portion or a combined program which includes both classroom and laboratory training, but of those in the Northern Virginia area that do provide prices for the classroom portion by itself, the average fee charged is around \$215.

¹⁷ <http://www.apsva.us/1540108115415800/lib/1540108115415800/08-09HSPOS.pdf>

¹⁸ The other public school divisions in Virginia not offering in-car training are Appomattox, Boutetourt, Clark, Danville, Greene, Manassas Park, Montgomery, Pittsylvania, Poquoson, Portsmouth, Rappahannock, Roanoke County, Spotsylvania, Sussex, Warren, and York, as well as the District of Columbia.

¹⁹ <http://dls.state.va.us/GROUPS/DTP/MEETINGS/091807/curriculum.pdf>

Table 2: Arlington Area Commercial Driving School Fees

Arlington Area Commercial Driving School	Behind-the-Wheel Fee
AA Driving School	\$250
AA United Driving School	\$275
AAI Fast Track Driving School	\$250
ALL Star Driving School	\$250
Adam Driving Academy	\$265
Advantage Driving School	\$280
Delta Driving School	\$275
EZ Driving School	\$285
Eagle Driving School	\$285
Eddy's Driving School	\$280
Fairfax Driving School	\$250
Instructor's Choice Driving School	\$265
Syeda Driving School	\$299
MEAN	\$270

Compiled by The Hanover Research Council

Funding

Some of the cost of administering driver education in public schools is offset by funding dispersed from Virginia's Driver Education fund, as required by state law. Under Virginia Codes 46.2-335 and 46.2-332, the \$3 fee charged for a learner's permit and the \$1.50 fee for a new or renewal driver's license is appropriated to this fund, which is then dispersed to school divisions on a per pupil basis using their average daily membership. In 2006, the average per pupil state reimbursement was \$80.73, which was used to help offset costs to low-income students, to provide services to students with disabilities, and to lower fees for students overall.²⁰ In fact, a number of localities (24) charge students no fee, although they are in mainly rural and economically depressed regions of the state, such as Southside Virginia.

Additional funding for public school driver education is elusive in Virginia. In past years, the Virginia Department of Education has made several mini-grants available to support driver education²¹ and parent involvement programs.²² However, no record of such funding opportunities is found for the current decade. Additionally, some private foundations and corporations donate to driver education programs, yet they typically focus on funding special programs which address some particular aspect of driver safety, such as alcohol awareness, rather than provide general funding to schools struggling to continue to offer driver education in the face of statewide budget cuts. For example, in 2006, CarMax Foundation awarded a substantial \$155,000 grant to Driver's Edge, a nonprofit organization dedicated to preventing youth-related crashes and fatalities,²³ while Ford Motor Company awarded an undisclosed portion of its \$600,000 gift to South Florida to driver education programs in Miami-Dade County Public Schools.²⁴ Finally, the state of Georgia does award up to \$140,000 "to enhance or aid a driver training start-up and/or expansion opportunity" to public school driver training programs,²⁵ but no similar program could be discovered in Virginia – part of the reason, no doubt, why public school driver education is becoming increasingly less common across the state.

²⁰ Where applicable, students who qualify for free or reduced lunch also qualify for free or reduce driver education, although the fee structures are left to individual school divisions and are not made publically available. Additionally, schools are required by law to follow disabled students' IEPs as they apply to driver education, but again, the specifics of how special needs students are handled in driver education programs are not disclosed.

²¹ <http://www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/suptsmemos/1996/inf073.html>

²² Ibid.

²³ <http://www.csrwire.com/PressRelease.php?id=5628>

²⁴ http://media.ford.com/newsroom/release_display.cfm?release=29256

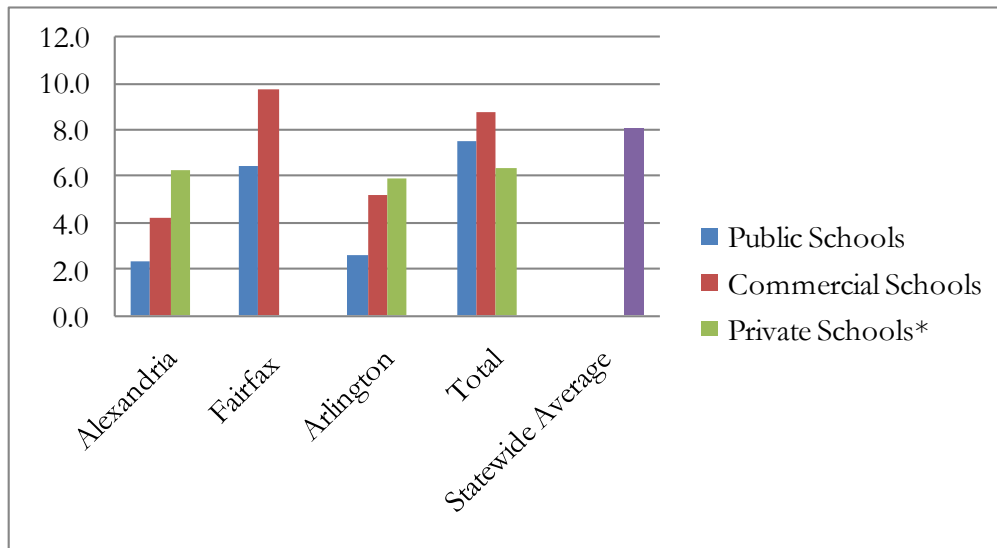
²⁵ <http://www.gahighwaysafety.org/DRIVERSEDGRANTS/>

Outcomes

While Arlington Public Schools, as already noted, provide comparatively low-priced driver training, this is one case in which less appears to be more: whether due to more hours of instruction, the use of simulators, the *Partners* program, or some other unknown factor, students who complete Arlington’s driver education program crash less than their peers. In 2007, the proportion of APS driver education students to crash a vehicle was only 2.6 percent, as Figure 1 below indicates.

However, this average belies the variation in collision rates at different Arlington High Schools, and it is important to note that while Yorktown and Washington-Lee High Schools have crash rates of zero, the rate at Wakefield High is a distressing 7.7 percent. Although between three and seven times as many students are taught driver education at Wakefield as compared to the other two high schools (91 versus 33 and 13 respectively in SY 2006-2007), rates so disparate probably warrant an investigation into what sets Wakefield students apart from their less crash-prone peers at Yorktown and Washington-Lee.

Figure 1: Crashes Per Student Taught



Compiled by The Hanover Research Council

*Refers to the following schools: in Alexandria, Bishop Ireton; in Arlington, Bishop O’Connell; in Fairfax, Paul VI Catholic High (no crashes reported).

Looking beyond the APS system, the crash rate among Alexandria students (at T.C. Williams High) is also quite low, at just 2.3 percent, although since this school system offers only the classroom portion of training, some credit for students’ success must go to area commercial driving schools, where they must now go for behind-the-wheel training. Next to Arlington and Alexandria, Fairfax County’s rate of 6.5 percent

seems particularly high, yet it too is below the statewide public school average of 7.5 percent, as well as the overall average rate in Virginia of 8.1 crashes per student.

Although crash rates among new drivers are obviously affected by many factors beyond the training they received, the graph above makes one particular theme clear: public school driver education programs tend to be associated with better outcomes than the commercial school programs offered in the same area. For example, although the crash rate among commercial school graduates in Arlington is lower than the rate among public school graduates in crash-prone Fairfax, *public school driver education graduates crash less than their commercial school peers in the same locality*. In each of the localities above, as well as in Prince William and Loudoun Counties (not shown)²⁶ and across the state, public school students fare better, a strong argument in favor of maintaining and investing in public school driver education.

²⁶ In Prince William, the rates are 3.8 percent in public schools versus 8.3 percent in commercial schools; in Loudoun, they are 4.6 percent versus 6.2 percent.

Note

This brief was written to fulfill the specific request of an individual member of The Hanover Research Council. As such, it may not satisfy the needs of all members. We encourage any and all members who have additional questions about this topic – or any other – to contact us.

Caveat

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