

Missouri driver's license laws are less strict than other states

By: LAUREN WRIGLEY and JENNIFER PROHOV

Kerrie Warne's 18-year-old son Tyler was driving on Interstate 255 one sunny afternoon in March 2010. When the road curved after seven miles, his car went straight. He drove off the embankment, and the car flipped several times before colliding with a tree. Tyler had fallen asleep behind the wheel and died in the crash.

"You never believe that your child will be the one that dies," Warne said.

Her son's death led Warne to found TyREDD, an organization that seeks to spread awareness of the dangers of drowsy driving. Warne is also president of the Missouri Driver Safety Education Association, which advocates improving driver's education and safety. Warne said requiring driver's education in Missouri is a priority for her because of the state's fatal teen crash rates.

Driver's education is also important to state Rep. Galen Higdon, R-St. Joseph. He proposed a bill to require Missouri public high schools to offer driver's education as an elective.

"We prompted the bill of driver's education, and we're gonna bring it mandatory back into the schools," Higdon said. "It will still be an elective, but more and more people would take it if it's an elective for graduating."

The Elementary and Secondary Education Committee approved the bill on April 11.

Missouri has the third highest rate in the Midwest for fatal crashes with a driver age 15 to 20 behind the wheel, according to data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the Federal Highway Administration. States in the surrounding area have fewer fatal crashes involving drivers age 15 to 20 than Missouri per 100,000 drivers in that age range. In Missouri, 35 drivers age 15 to 20 were involved in a fatal crash per 100,000 licensed drivers in that age range in 2014.

In order to qualify for a learner's permit in both Missouri and Illinois, a driver must be at least 15 years old and pass a written test. But in Illinois, a young driver must be enrolled in a driver's education course to be eligible for a learner's permit.

Ian Newman is a professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He worked on a study published in September 2015 that compared teens who completed supervised driving hours with those who took driver's education to receive a license. In Nebraska, a parent, guardian or licensed driver at least 21 years old can supervise teens with a learner's permit. The study compiled data on the subjects' violations, crashes, injuries, fatal crashes and alcohol-related violations.

Newman said the study found, “Young drivers who are not completing driver’s ed are 75 percent more likely to get a traffic ticket, 25 percent to be more likely to be involved in a fatal or injury accident and 16 percent more likely to be involved in an accident.”

Missouri license laws require 40 hours of supervised driving to receive an intermediate license. That can mean anyone from a parent or grandparent to a driving instructor is supervising. But Warne said relying on parents to teach their children how to drive is a problem.

“You have parents who may or may not be good drivers teaching their kids how to drive,” Warne said.

CoMo Driving School owner Lisa Swafford said driver’s education helps teens learn to drive responsibly.

“Driver’s education is a good tool to get through to them the seriousness of being behind the wheel. That it’s not just a joyride, it’s a job when you’re behind the wheel,” Swafford said.

Newman said driver’s education benefits teens up to eight years later and has both an immediate and long-term effect on their driving.