



## Making driver's education affordable and accessible in Michigan

### **The problem:**

From 1955 to 1996, Michigan law required public schools to make a driver's education course available to all eligible students, and the state provided schools with a per student reimbursement of a set amount (i.e., not tied to actual costs).

PA 387 of 1996 repealed the requirement for schools to offer driver's education courses and allowed schools that did offer courses to charge a fee as part of a 50% local match funding mandate. The Legislature also implemented the Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL) program, which took effect April 1, 1997.

PA 70 & PA 71 of 2004 eliminated the Driver Education Fund, which subsidized driver's education courses offered at schools, meaning schools would need to cover the full cost of driver's education courses, and fully moved the responsibility for driver's education from the Department of Education to the Department of State. This shift largely killed school-based driver's education programs and placed the full cost burden on students and their families.

The change was an attempt to save money, but unfortunately the reality is that not only has the privatization of driver's training been more difficult for the Michigan Department of State to oversee, but it's now up to each individual student and their family to locate a qualified driving school and pay for instruction out of pocket.

Many families simply cannot afford the cost of driver's education classes and road testing. Some private providers in the state are charging as much as \$650 for Segment 1 of driver's ed. All of this is significantly impacting the state's young drivers.

An analysis of our department's data showed that in 2000, 66% of Michigan teens had a driver's license. That number dropped to 56% in 2021. Even more startling, a 2012 [nationwide study by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety](#) reported that only 29% of Hispanic teens and 37% of non-Hispanic Black teens had their driver's license by the age of 18, compared to 67% of non-Hispanic white teens.

The same study also found that only one in four teens in households with total incomes under \$20,000 a year had their driver's license before their 18th birthday. But where household income exceeded \$100,000, 79% of teens were licensed by the time they turned 18. These inequalities are simply unacceptable. Fewer educated, licensed teen drivers can mean limited education and employment opportunities, create additional hardships for families who must arrange transportation for their high school students, and potentially means there are more unlicensed, untrained drivers on Michigan's roads.

[Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for teens](#) in our country. Car crashes killed about 2,800 teens aged 13–19 in 2020. That means that every day, about eight teens die in crashes, and hundreds more are injured. The risk is highest at the ages 16 and 17 – right when our teenagers should all be enrolled in a driver’s education course.

Research from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) shows that the most restrictive GDL programs are associated with a 38% reduction in fatal crashes and a 40% reduction in injury crashes among 16-year-old drivers. A 2001 [University of Michigan-led study](#) of the first two years after Michigan’s GDL program took effect found that the overall crash risk for 16-year-old drivers fell by 25%.

Most private driver’s education providers deliver quality instruction and a good service to Michigan families—and we will need them to help us keep our teens safe and make our roads safer for everyone—but access to driver’s training remains a core problem.

### ***The solution:***

The Michigan Department of State is considering two options to improve access for teens:

- Exploring a return of driver’s education to our public schools
- Providing grants to teenagers whose families can’t afford to purchase driver’s education courses out of pocket

School-based driver’s ed providers are better equipped to help a larger range of students, can better accommodate students with disabilities, and have greater access to learning resources.

As of October 2023, Michigan had 281 active driver’s education providers, and 38 of those were educational institutions. Last year, only two of those school-based sites had a complaint or potential violation that the department had to investigate, compared to 30 with private driving schools. In general, complaints and violations at school-based sites are less severe and are resolved more quickly when they are identified by the department.

We know that not every school district will want to or be able to immediately re-start a driver’s ed program. That’s why it’s important to make sure this is a two-pronged approach – providing funding and support for schools to opt in to re-start their programs, as well as providing grants to families to support their access to private driver’s education instruction.

As we have spoken with legislators and other stakeholders in the past months, MDOS has heard a strong desire by school districts, educators, families, and students to help more schools offer driver’s education as an affordable, accessible option to the 170,000 students who are eligible to participate in Michigan.

We sincerely seek the support of state lawmakers for the appropriation of \$45 million general fund dollars to break down the barriers so all Michigan teens can have access to affordable, accessible driver’s education.