

OUR VIEW

The road to teen driver reforms

Secretary of State Jesse White wants teen drivers “to get from Point A to Point B in the safest possible manner.” To that end, Illinois is poised to enact rules to better prepare teens for the rigors and risks of the road.

Many of the reforms come under Senate Bill 172, which awaits the governor’s signature. Rod Blagojevich should grab a pen. Taken together, these will represent some of the strictest graduated licensing requirements in the nation, putting Illinois on par with states like North Carolina, which saw teenager accidents drop after passing similar laws in 1997. That state saw fatalities among 16-year-olds plummet by 60 percent over a three-year period.

That’s a statistic we’d love to repeat, or beat. Central Illinois — Tazewell County in particular — is all too familiar with driver fatalities. It’s no coincidence SB172’s reforms were born out of a task force that included Pekin High School Superintendent Paula Davis. They include earlier curfews and more time behind the wheel in driver’s ed, both solid provisions.

Mostly, we like the emphasis on parental involvement. Teens would have to hold permits for nine months instead of three and log at least 50 hours with Mom or Dad riding shotgun. When Junior gets a ticket and wants court supervision, a parent or guardian would have to appear with him before a judge. The secretary of state also is offering a voluntary contract for teens to sign, with such pledges as, “I will not throw anything out of my vehicle,” and “I will always wear my seat belt.”

In addition to the graduation licensing requirements, other changes are on the way:

- To encourage kids to stay in school, the state can deny or cancel driving privileges of dropouts and chronic truants. That law took effect in July.

- To limit distractions, the state is raising the age for its cell phone ban, from 18 to 19.

- Starting Jan. 1, drivers found drag racing may see their licenses revoked and cars impounded.

Some teens may grumble about Illinois’ new tough love laws. We can live with it. Better yet, so can they.