

## Driver's ed gets 21st-century update



Students at West Forsyth High School in Cumming, Ga., use simulators during teacher Robert Fuller's driver's education class Wednesday. The class costs parents \$100.

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CUMMING, Ga. — In the back of a second-floor classroom at West Forsyth High School, four students in driving simulators approach stop signs, heed the speed limit and confront the mysteries of four-way intersections.

The simulators — including three computer screens that comprise the windshield, a steering wheel, turn signals, foot pedals, an ignition and gear lever — assess students as they "drive" and score them at the end.

For many of these students, it's their first "behind the wheel" experience. "I think it's a good alternative to actually driving the real thing," says Travis Keeler, 15, a 10th-grader who's never driven. "It does a good job of preparing me to drive. These things are pretty strict. If you mess up, it's going to fail you, but you learn the rules of the road, what to do at intersections, things like that."

His teacher, Robert Fuller, says the simulators are a critical part of his semester-long driver's ed class, which is a half-credit elective and costs parents \$100. "The simulator can't take the place of driving, but it ... enhances their driving ability," he says.

Driver's education during the school day has become a rarity in the USA. Students at West Forsyth High, 40 miles northeast of Atlanta, and all across Georgia owe a debt of gratitude to Alan Brown.

Brown, 57, is a Cartersville man who campaigned to restore driver's ed in Georgia after his son, Joshua, 17, was killed in a one-car crash on July 1, 2003. Joshua was driving about 35 mph in the rain when he lost control of his vehicle on a wet road and hit a tree.

In 2005, the state enacted Joshua's Law, which requires that any 16-year-old seeking a driver's license after Jan. 1, 2007, complete a state-approved driver's education course.

Brown says his son might be alive today if he had taken a "21st-century" driver's ed course. "Joshua did not know what to do when his pickup hydroplaned," Brown says.

Brown says he's been contacted by parents from around the country seeking information on how they can get driver's ed restored to or improved in high schools. Many novice drivers can't afford to pay for the classes because driver's ed has become largely the domain of commercial operators.

During the past school year in Texas, for example, just 21,601 students took driver's ed in public schools. Another 116,932 took it at commercial schools, and 52,500 were taught by their parents, according to Debbie Ratcliffe, spokeswoman for the Texas Education Agency.

Driver's ed in the modern era doesn't come cheaply. The simulators at West Forsyth High cost \$18,000 each, says Van Flanigan, a vice president of manufacturer Virtual Driver Interactive.

To parents of young drivers killed in crashes caused by their own inexperience, cost should not be an impediment:

Penney Gentile of Cooperstown, N.Y., started working for more and better driver's ed in her state after her son, Chris, 18, was killed in a crash on April 5, 2007. He swerved to avoid another car, and because of flooding on the roadway, he got into a 6-inch rut, overcorrected, lost control, flipped the car and was killed instantly, she says.

"I believed he was a good driver; he had shared the driving when we drove to Florida," Gentile says. "... I think if he had been trained on a driving simulator, and he had had that situation in a simulator, he might have handled it better."

Her efforts, along with those of Lindsay Rowley, 21, one of Chris' former fellow students, helped prompt an advisory panel that recommended driver's ed improvements that are still being implemented. They helped purchase three simulators for Chris' high school, which also expanded its driver's ed program, she says.

Robin Thompson of Fairfax, Va., began campaigning for better driver's ed after her 16-year-old daughter, Ashley Renee, was killed in a one-vehicle crash in 2003. "She swerved and overcorrected," Thompson says. "The car went into a skid, and quite frankly, she didn't know how to handle that." Thompson believes her daughter would have been better prepared after a good driver's ed course. "If Ashley had known how to handle the skid that day, she might still be with us," she says.