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Teens get driving focus

More schools implement program to teach students safe habits on roads

By RICHARD KELLEY
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In the wake of the deaths of several teenagers this year in traffic accidents, nine more area schools are moving aggressively to try to improve teens' driving skills by instituting the "Alive at 25" program for ninth-graders.

Millington Central High School will offer the program, as will private schools St. Agnes Academy, St. George's Independent School, St. Mary's Episcopal School, St. Benedict at Auburndale, Christian Brothers High School, Hutchison School, Tipton Rosemark Academy and Memphis University School.

"We've lost several students in the past," St. Agnes president Barbara Daush said. "And we don't want to ever be in that situation again. So we are committed to doing whatever we can to help our students stay safe."

The Alive at 25 driver program, created by the National Safety Council, has had considerable success since it began locally in 1996 at Germantown High and Houston High. Program organizers say it has helped to significantly reduce traffic fatalities for teens, whose deaths always seem a proportionately greater loss with so much life left un-lived.

No school has felt that as has Bolton High School
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ALIVE

this year, where three students have died in traffic accidents since May.

"I definitely want to do something after all the tragedies we've had with teenage drivers," said Bolton principal David Stephens, who has contacted Alive at 25 organizers.

The cost per student is \$18 to \$20, said Wayne Gutch, an instructor at the University of Memphis who teaches the five-day workshop. Alive at 25 is overseen by the U of M's professional and continuing education department.

"It's not a lot of money, but when you start talking 500 kids, it gets to be a substantial amount," Gutch said. "I've told people at other schools — I hate to phrase it this way — but what's a child's life worth?"

Gutch said that at Germantown and Houston high schools, before Alive at 25 was offered, the schools had 17 teen traffic fatalities in a decade. Since the program went active in 1996, they have lost just one.

The program also is taught at Collierville High School, and Arlington High School is considering it.

Gutch says Alive at 25 owes much to the city of Germantown.

"The city has taken a strong, proactive point of view with enforcement and working with parents' groups," he said. "It's

FATAL STATISTICS

National statistics on teen driving fatalities:

■ In 2005, 7,460 15- to 20-year-old drivers were involved in fatal crashes. Driver fatalities for this age group increased by 4 percent between 1995 and 2005.

■ In 2005, 3,467 15- to 20-year-old drivers were killed.

■ For young males, driver fatalities in 2005 rose by 5 percent, compared with a 1-percent decrease for young females.

■ Schools interested in the Alive at 25 program can call (901) 678-3727.

Source: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

more than just our program."

It's also more than a local problem. Traffic accidents, national figures show, are the leading cause of death for 15- to 20-year-olds.

In Tennessee from 2002 to 2004, the total accident rate per number of young drivers age 16 to 21 is highest in Davidson County. Shelby County comes in at 10th-highest, data from the state Department of Safety shows.

"I'm the parent of two teenage boys and I would gladly pay out of pocket, and in fact I did, for my almost-15-year-old to go to an Alive at 25 class," said Vicki Murrell, director of the U of M's professional and continuing education program. "I just told him

it was not negotiable. If he ever wants to get behind the wheel of a car, he has to go to this class."

The cost of the program, for public schools, has to come from funds the school itself raises. At Bolton High, Stephens is determined not to allow that to be the determining factor. "I don't think we need to let that be an obstacle," he said.

Joy Maness, director of the upper school at St. Agnes, said Alive at 25 will be mandatory for ninth-graders.

"We're going to teach it through a class we call freshman studies, where we deal with a lot of issues, sort of like an orientation class," Maness said, adding that there will be 85 students in St. Agnes' freshman class this fall.

But why ninth-graders?

"The rationale behind that is, while only a handful have their permits, the thought process is to prevent bad driving behavior before it occurs," Gutch said. "It's much more difficult once things are ingrained in your psyche."

And it is that teen psyche that can lead to problems.

"Other people get hurt. Other people die. Other people get tickets. It doesn't happen to me," is how Gutch describes the way many teens think.

Murrell said the class helped her son to confront potential situations on the road that he had never thought about, much less encountered as a driver.

Says Murrell: "They don't process 'what if?'"

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