

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5695

As of February 20, 2025

Title: An act relating to improving young driver safety.

Brief Description: Improving young driver safety.

Sponsors: Senators Liias, King and Nobles.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Transportation: 2/20/25.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Implements mandatory driver training education for persons 18 to 19 years old beginning January 1, 2027, with an ongoing incremental mandate for the next oldest cohorts every January 1st through the age of 24.
- Requires the Department of Licensing (DOL) to establish a program to expand education opportunities for driver training school instructors and a program to partner with tribal governments to provide young driver training education in tribal communities.
- Requires DOL to establish a program to provide vouchers to cover the costs of driver training education courses for certain low-income, novice drivers.
- Increases certain driver licensing and vehicle registration fees, and modifies certain license plate and infraction fee revenue, to fund the new programs.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION

Staff: Brandon Popovac (786-7465)

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Background: Driver Training Education—Generally. To be eligible to obtain a driver's license, a person under the age of 18 must complete a driver training education course offered by a private driver training school licensed by the Department of Licensing (DOL) or by a school district. An applicant for a driver's license 18 years of age or older must successfully pass a driver licensing exam, but is not required to complete a driver training education course to be eligible for a license. DOL may waive the driver training education course requirement if an applicant was licensed to drive a motor vehicle outside the state and provides proof that the applicant completed a driver education equivalent to Washington's education requirement.

Driver Training Education—Curriculum. The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) and DOL are required to jointly develop and maintain a required curriculum for school districts and approved private schools operating a traffic safety education program. The director of DOL is responsible for the administration and enforcement of laws pertaining to private driver training schools and driver training education courses, and may adopt and enforce administrative rules related to these laws.

Driver training education courses offered by a private driver training school for persons under the age of 18 must include:

- at least 30 hours of classroom instruction;
- at least six hours of behind-the-wheel instruction—or five or more hours of behind-the-wheel instruction and four or more hours of driving simulation; and
- one or more hours of in-vehicle driver observation.

Driver training education courses offered by school districts must include a minimum of:

- 30 hours of classroom instruction;
- 6 hours of driving experience; and
- 4 hours of in-vehicle driver observation.

Classroom instruction may be offered through in-person, classroom-based instruction or virtual classroom-based student instruction with a live instructor, as set by administrative rule. The classroom portion may also include self-paced, online components as authorized and certified by DOL.

Driver Training Education—Subsidy Programs. The Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) is required to contract with a private nonprofit organization to provide driver's license support for foster youth, subject to appropriation. Such support includes the reimbursement of fees required for a foster youth under the age of 18 to complete a driver training education course.

The Department of Labor and Industries (L&I) is required to provide vouchers to cover the cost of driver training education courses for minors enrolled in a state-registered apprenticeship program, subject to appropriation.

Driver Training Education—Agency Review. In 2023, the Legislature directed DOL to develop a comprehensive implementation plan to expand driver training education requirements for persons to acquire a driver's license between the ages of 18 and 24, with a target implementation date of July 1, 2026. The implementation plan was also required to include consideration of courses that could satisfy the new requirement; an assessment of public and private resources needed to support the new requirement; an evaluation of course access and opportunities to improve it, in consultation with the Office of Equity; a plan for public outreach and education; an exploration of a facilitating role for educational service districts; an examination of opportunities to address financial need through a grant, voucher, or other financial assistance program; and an assessment of approaches used by other states. The Legislature added other plan requirements in 2024, and the final report was delivered to the Legislature in December 2024.

Summary of Bill: Driving Training Education—Persons 18 and Over. To obtain an initial driver's license, the following persons must complete a driving training education course offered by a school district, approved private school, or private driver training school, or an online, self-paced driver training education course as defined by DOL:

- a person at least 18 years of age but under 19 years of age, beginning January 1, 2027;
- a person at least 18 years of age but under 20 years of age, beginning January 1, 2028;
- a person at least 18 years of age but under 21 years of age, beginning January 1, 2029;
- a person at least 18 years of age but under 22 years of age, beginning January 1, 2030;
- a person at least 18 years of age but under 23 years of age, beginning January 1, 2031;
- a person at least 18 years of age but under 24 years of age, beginning January 1, 2032; and
- a person at least 18 years of age but under 25 years of age, beginning January 1, 2033.

DOL must report annually, beginning January 1, 2026, until January 1, 2031, to the transportation committees of the Legislature on implementation of the new mandatory driver training education schedule, including the readiness of the private driver training schools to accommodate growth. No earlier than January 1, 2031, DOL may, by rule, delay or pause the new mandatory driver training education schedule if, after internal review, DOL determines there is an insufficient number of driver training education and traffic safety education courses or instructors available for the pending age cohort. DOL may also waive the driver training education course requirement if an applicant was licensed to drive a motor vehicle in a reciprocal jurisdiction outside the state or provides proof that they obtained equivalent education in a reciprocal jurisdiction.

As an alternative, to obtain an initial driver's license, the following persons must satisfactorily complete a condensed traffic safety education course, licensed by DOL and

consisting of at least eight hours of classroom instruction and three hours of behind-the-wheel instruction that follows the approved curriculum:

- a person at least 22 years of age but under 23 years of age, beginning January 1, 2031;
- a person at least 22 years of age but under 24 years of age, beginning January 1, 2032; and
- a person at least 22 years of age but under 25 years of age, beginning January 1, 2033.

DOL may require first-time driver licensees between the ages of 18 and 25 to take a refresher course, to include risk management and hazard perception, at the time of the person's first driver's license renewal.

Driver Training Education—Persons Under 18. Persons under the age of 18 may, beginning January 1, 2017, meet the traffic safety education requirement for a driver's license if they satisfactorily complete an online, self-paced driver training education course as defined by DOL.

Driver Training Education—Behind-the-Wheel Instruction. Any persons 21 years of age and under who complete an online, self-paced course must also complete at least six hours of behind-the-wheel instruction. Any persons 22 through 24 years of age who complete an online, self-paced course must complete at least three hours of behind-the-wheel instruction.

School districts, approved private schools, or private driver training schools may offer the behind-the-wheel instruction portion for up to four hours in a single day, with encouragement to do so when students must travel long distances to take the course.

Driver Training Education—New Programming. DOL must establish, subject to the availability of appropriated funds, a program to expand education opportunities for driver training school instructors (instructor opportunities program), specifically certification training programs, with required annual reporting on instructor opportunities program activities every July 1st. The July 1, 2030, report must provide a programmatic and funding needs assessment with any recommendations for instructor opportunities program support. Under the instructor opportunities program, DOL must:

- implement a comprehensive traffic safety education program to train driver training school instructors;
- establish mentorship programs and offer specialized grants or financial incentives to encourage diversity within the driver training school industry;
- collaborate with OSPI to align instructor requirements under DOL and OSPI rules to streamline the process of obtaining a driver training school instructor certification; and
- facilitate partnerships between private driver training schools and high schools, vocational-technical schools, colleges, or universities to enable private driver training school instructors to teach driver training education courses in school facilities, but with such courses not eligible for school credit.

DOL must also establish, subject to the availability of appropriated funds, a program to partner with tribal governments to provide young driver training education in tribal communities (tribal partnership program). DOL must provide a tribal partnership program implementation plan to the Legislature by January 1, 2026, and provide biennial reporting on program activities, beginning July 1, 2027.

DOL must also establish, subject to the availability of appropriated funds, a program to provide vouchers covering the average cost of driver training education courses for certain low-income novice drivers (voucher program), beginning January 1, 2027. DOL must consult with the Washington Traffic Safety Commission (WTSC) during voucher program rule-making on eligibility criteria and application and award procedures. DOL must consult with the WTSC and Department of Social and Health Services to provide to the Legislature a voucher program policy framework and guidelines, by December 1, 2025, to include consideration of:

- targeted demographics;
- vehicle need by geography, while accounting for mobility needs and options;
- reaching young adults over the age of 18, especially community and technical colleges students; and
- recommended voucher funding levels for projected and anticipated eligible persons.

Under the voucher program, driver training schools may not inflate course costs to offset voucher amounts, and DOL may evaluate course pricing to determine if inflation occurs. Voucher program funds are not an entitlement, and voucher recipient data collected by DOL is exempt from public disclosure. Recipients of driver training education financial assistance under the DCYF and L&I programs are ineligible to receive any vouchers.

DOL must report annually to the transportation committees of the Legislature, beginning January 1, 2028, certain voucher program data and statistics.

The three new programs—the instructor opportunities program, tribal partnership program, and voucher program—may receive funding from the following fee increases or specified fee revenue, beginning January 1, 2026, which are to be deposited into a newly dedicated driver education safety improvement account:

- an increase of \$15 to the \$35 driver’s examination fee;
- an increase of \$10 to the \$25 driver’s instruction permit fee;
- a \$0.25 increase to the \$0.50 license service fee;
- work zone speed safety camera system revenue in excess of system operating and administrative costs; and
- a specified portion of LeMay-America’s Car Museum special license plate fee revenue.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on February 6, 2025.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

Effective Date: The bill contains several effective dates. Please refer to the bill.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony: PRO: Many drivers do not know basic driving laws or how to share the roadway safely with other vehicle types. Online course components were authorized by the Legislature in 2023, and this bill clarifies that authority. In other states, online courses are provided to driver training schools that are incorporated as part of the classroom instruction portion. Online courses allow instructors to focus more on behind-the-wheel instruction. Online courses are administered by national experts and tailored to state law. The African diaspora are overly represented in traffic-related deaths. Evidence supports that young drivers would benefit from compulsory driver training education. The bill will save lives and highway workers on roadways in the midst of our current traffic safety crisis. The bill represents an investment in roadway safety.

CON: Young adults already have opportunities to take driver training education and should not be forced to do so. Driver training education graduates are still driving impaired and dangerously. Driver training cost is still a factor for young adults. Under the bill, driver training schools will just get more money. Traffic safety investments should be focused on dangerous drivers currently on the roadways. Public transportation is not a viable option for those living in rural areas which necessitates acquiring a driver's license. The bill creates unintended logistical and financial barriers for young drivers.

OTHER: Reform bills for driver training education reform are rare, and this bill needs to be perfected since it still has technical issues. Traffic safety education in public schools is still important to improve driver training education statewide. Driver training minority graduates are wishing to set up private driver training schools in their own community.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Senator Marko Liias, Prime Sponsor; Melissa Pace; Mellani McAleenan, AAA Washington ; Martha Foster Lucas, WA State Coalition of African Community Leaders; Sheri Call, Washington Trucking Associations; Billy Wallace, WA Northern Idaho District Council of Laborers; Rory Paine-Donovan, Office of the Insurance Commissioner.

CON: David Sedelmeier; Iman Janoo; ZHENHONG MENG.

OTHER: Lynn Rogers, Professional Driving School Association of Washington; Alex Hansen, The Washington Traffic Safety Education Association.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: No one.