

Skid Monster could keep more teens safe on the road

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When it comes to teaching young people how to drive safely, parents and instructors have to get creative. A few leaders in the state-including the Edmonds and Marysville School Districts-are learning how to successfully teach traffic safety education with limited money.

A new major component of learning how to drive better revolves around a tool called the Skid Monster.

The beast looks much like a regular car, but two caster wheels are attached that extend like wheels on an office chair. The result is a driver training car that operates perfectly when it's driven correctly, but instantly simulates a wheel skid if it's not. Even at five miles per hour, the Monster will skid in a circle if it's driven around a corner too fast.

The Skid Monster costs \$5000 and requires twenty hours of instructor training. For the students, the benefits are immediate and last throughout life. They instantly learn what happens when they take a turn too fast. They also learn to look far ahead of the car and they learn how to recover when a car starts skidding. But, they learn in an empty, safe parking lot with no threat to their lives.

Finding an extra \$5000 in a school's traffic safety education fund is tough, even though the purchase could likely save a kid's life. Statewide, school districts haven't had an increase in their driver training budget since 1989. The minimal fees paid for drivers' licenses are supposed to go straight back to traffic safety, but the fund is raided by at least 18 other agencies. That financial situation won't be changing in the near future.

The Edmonds and Marysville School Districts were able to squeeze out the dollars in ways that worked for them to buy the Monster. Edmonds received a few grants from the state and the Alderwood Rotary, and Marysville purchased the Monster instead of a standard driver's ed car. But not all districts can do that.

All school districts should look around their communities to find businesses or public agencies they can partner with to buy the Monster and share the space to conduct the driver training. Any company that utilizes drivers to deliver their product could share the Monster with a local school to better train their employees. Delivery drivers are often forced to drive in severe weather conditions and under tight deadlines. Police officers drive in dangerous high-speed chases. The Monster would allow both these groups to develop safer driving skills before they're out on the road. Partnerships are the key to getting more people - of all ages - trained on the Monster.

I drove the Skid Monster last summer with the guidance of Edmonds School District traffic safety instructor Liz Taylor. In five minutes, I learned that I took corners too fast and I didn't look far enough to the horizon. The consequence: I spun out. But within 10 minutes, I'd realized my mistakes and drove perfectly through the course of orange cones. More importantly, the next time I drove my truck, I was practicing everything I'd learned in those few minutes. This is where the value of the Monster is really proven. Parents are encouraged to sit in the back seat while their child is driving the Monster. They learn through the process too. Then when they get in the passenger seat with their new driver, they can constantly reinforce the lessons just learned. Hopefully the lessons will stick with the teenager.

I was what they call a "good kid" in high school. I didn't smoke, drink or skip class. But I was a bad driver. I cared more about talking to friends in my car than paying attention to the cars around me. In 1990, Liz Taylor was my driving instructor at Lynnwood High School. Sure, she told me to look ahead, drive defensively and not take those corners so sharply. Since when do 16 year-olds listen? With the Monster, it's not as dangerous if the kids don't listen. The car teaches them instantly.

It's too bad the state can't back these valuable vehicles with some cash. Washington's rate for driving accidents isn't as terrible as other states. In fact, we have the fourth lowest fatality rate in the country. But young people are much more likely to be involved in those crashes. Drivers aged 16 to 19 have car accidents three times more often than the rest of the population, and fatality rates are twice as high. That's more than enough reason to toughen driving training standards and give schools the tools they need to improve traffic safety instruction.