

Anderson-area schools work to reduce teen driving accidents

By Liz Carey

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ANDERSON — Hunter Alexander has only begun to drive, but he already knows the dangers of getting behind the wheel.

“My neighbor’s granddaughter was in a wreck. It was pouring down rain and the car she was driving hydroplaned, then it flipped into a ditch,” he said. “It really had an impact on me because a friend of mine had been down that same road just a couple hours before.”

Fatal accidents among teen drivers have increased over the years, and law enforcement officials and educators are concerned. At this time of year, law enforcement officials worry about teens driving. This year, said South Carolina Highway Patrol Lance Cpl. Kathy Hiles, the Region 3 covering Anderson, Greenville, Spartanburg, Pickens and Oconee counties has two more teen deaths on the roads than last year.

“Right now there is concern because of their inexperience on the road and the nature of the weather,” Hiles said. “With school getting out, we are concerned about students being out more, with there being more distractions and with the possibility of hazardous road conditions because of the weather.”

Between January and September 2009, 10 young people between the ages of 15 and 24 died on Anderson, Abbeville, Oconee and Pickens county roads. In 2008, six died in Anderson County alone.

In response, many schools are working year-round to curb teen driving deaths.

In Williamston-based Anderson School District 1, fatal accidents have led parents and educators, together with the highway patrol, to start working with a new teen driving program.

The program, Alive at 25, is part of a new approach to helping teens become better drivers.

“Instead of training them how to drive, we’re trying to change their behaviors,” Hiles said. “The program works to help them eliminate the distractions that can lead to accidents.”

Robert Binnicker, principal of Wren High School, said that after two fatal accidents in the 2008–2009 school year, the school decided to ensure the program was there to supplement the driver education program.

“The problem was that we can’t get everybody through the (driver’s education) program with the number of students that we have. It’s virtually the same curriculum that we have at the high school that is at private programs,” he said. “So we wanted something to supplement that curriculum.”

This year, the students will have the opportunity to take the course, and next year, only those who have completed it will receive parking privileges at the school.

“I think in our area, the issue comes down to three things, speed, not wearing the seat belt and the inexperience of the driver,” Binnicker said. “There’s a big difference in driving 65 on an interstate and driving 35

on a secondary road. ... I think the more time that teenagers can spend driving in a car with an adult, the better off they will be. Nothing beats experience. And when you have an adult, when you have a parent in the car, they can advise the teen on how to improve their driving.”

Binnicker said the program’s success in other schools shows that it works, but the results for his school aren’t in yet.

“I don’t know that I ever feel like we’re doing enough. I’ll know that we’re doing enough when there are no more fatalities. The school itself has a lot of programs and we do a lot of things with the students to show them the impact of driving,” he said. “This is probably one of those programs that we really won’t be able to test it for some time. “

Other districts work to eliminate wrecks by strictly controlling which students are allowed to drive to school.

In Anderson-based Anderson School District 5, driving to school is a privilege that can be revoked.

“We do have safe-driving requirements for students who drive themselves to the Hanna-Westside Extension Campus and on our high school campuses,” said Tripp Dukes, assistant superintendent for planning at District 5. “However, if a student receives a ticket on the way to or from HWEC, the student’s driving privilege may be revoked.”

Dukes said a student who is turned in by a teacher, administrator or another student for unsafe driving may also lose driving privileges.

Dukes said the stricter controls over driving have led to a decrease in the number of accidents involving student driving between HWEC and the students’ home schools.

Hiles said statistics show that driver distraction is one of the largest causes of teen fatalities.

At Pendleton High School in Pendleton-based Anderson School District 4, instructor Kevin Durham works issues like distractions into his driver’s education curriculum. Sometimes those issues spill out to the school as a whole.

On Dec. 3, a film talking about texting while driving was shown to students during some of their advising periods.

“The laws are starting to go toward eliminating distractions,” Durham said. “Statistics show that 80 percent of accidents that occur to teenagers are because of distractions... like talking on cell phones and texting. I think this film was a real eye-opener to the students.”

For student Hunter Alexander, it was. He won’t be texting while he’s driving, he said. And he’s going to be careful when he gets his license.

“I don’t want to be the one who does that and ends up killing someone,” he said. “I don’t want to be responsible for something like that.”

