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How Dutch Fork tries to protect teen drivers

Students must take a defensive driving course if they want to park at the school

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Dutch Fork High students must take a nationally recognized defensive driving course before they can apply for a coveted on-campus parking permit during the 2007-08 school year.

The decision by Dutch Fork's administration puts the school in a position to be a pioneer in the campaign to promote safe driving. The Lexington-Richland 5 school is South Carolina's first to embrace "Alive at 25," an optional course that is endorsed by the National Safety Council. Other states already use the course to sharpen driving skills among young motorists and offer them insurance discounts.

"We're hoping that by Dutch Fork adopting this program, it will be a catalyst for bringing Alive at 25 to every high school," said

DRIVERS

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Brooke Russell, director of S.C.'s chapter of the National Safety Council.

A kickoff event at 11 a.m. today open to the public will feature pep talks by law enforcement authorities, graphic exhibits and impaired-driving simulators. Russell sent letters to high school principals across the state inviting them to the event.

At least 500 Dutch Fork students have signed up to take the four-hour class that will be offered next month on weekends and after school on Thursdays, principal Jim Taylor said. Taylor began marketing the idea by encouraging a 33-member steering committee to take the course.

"Images will last in your mind way more than a statistic," said Samantha Caldwell, a junior who voluntarily took the class earlier this month.

Caldwell, 16, stepped forward in memory of Megan Preston, a senior who died this past November from injuries sustained in a car-train collision in Irmo. Alcohol was a factor in that fatality, investigators said.

"I wanted to do something to remember Megan, and I didn't know what to do," Caldwell said. "This seemed like one way to do that."

Two other Dutch Fork High students, Francis Nguyen and Grant Gallagher, were killed in a

late-night crash eight days after Preston died.

"These deaths have been devastating to a lot of our students," said Kelly Payne, the teacher credited with bringing Alive at 25 to the attention of Taylor and students. "They felt they wanted to do something that could stop this from happening."

Taylor is hopeful District 5 trustees will approve a one-year waiver of the school's \$40 parking permit fee, a trade-off he said will send a strong message about the initiative. He calls Alive at 25 the most important instructional program he has encountered in his 35 years as an educator.

"We want our students to be responsible when they get behind the wheel of a car," Taylor said. "We want them to be alive when they are 25."

Insurance companies see a decline in accident claims after motorists reach age 25.

Like most public schools, Dutch Fork High offers a limited number of driver training classes during the school day. The classes cost \$200. Most teens, however, learn to drive by taking lessons from a private instructor before trying to qualify for a license. Taking a state-approved beginners course also makes new drivers eligible for insurance discounts.

Participants in the optional Alive at 25 classes view graphic films, hear lectures and use equipment such as "fatal vision" goggles that simulate impaired driving. The

course costs \$35, which defrays instructors' pay and other expenses. Some will go back into sustaining and expanding the program, Russell said.

Jordan Bridges, 17, was among Dutch Fork students who took the course and came away with a greater appreciation of how to improve her driving.

"I feel like I'm a better driver now," the junior said. "In fact, I know I am."

Adam Bouknight, 15, received his learner's permit this week. He, too, is a course graduate and one of its chief advocates.

"I've been asking everybody I know to come" today, Bouknight said. "Some people think it's stupid. But it's a really good program — probably the best thing I've done in my life."

Greg Shearer, a 17-year-old junior, took the course when he lived in Colorado, where it is a widely embraced.

"I didn't think I would like it," Shearer said. "I thought my parents were trying to save money (on qualifying for an insurance discount), but then I saw they really did care about me."

Payne, a social studies teacher, stepped forward because "I love the kids. I wanted them to have ownership and have a healing from what's happened this year. God put it on my heart to have this happen."

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