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Schools adopt safe driving course

Lexington County districts using 'Alive at 25' program

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Teen Driving in the U.S.

Traffic crashes are the leading cause of death for U.S. teens, accounting for about 44 percent of deaths.

Young drivers are involved in fatal crashes at more than **twice the rate** of all others.

The **first year is the most dangerous** for a newly licensed teenage driver; more than one in five are involved in crashes.

Each year, nearly **6,000 teens are killed** in vehicle accidents; more than 3,800 killed are drivers ages 15-20.

315 young drivers were killed last year in South Carolina; 152 were not wearing their seat belts.

SOURCE: S.C. chapter of the National Safety Council

A nationally recognized defensive-driving course is gaining traction in the Midlands after being launched formally in the state a little more than a year ago at Dutch Fork High School near Irmo.

The "Alive at 25" program, endorsed by the National Safety Council, is offered at 16 high schools across the state, including several in four Lexington County school systems.

Since January there have been more than 3,300 participants — nearly eclipsing last year's total.

Sgt. Devon Hughes, the Lexington County Sheriff's Department leader who is working as the traffic coordinator for the S.C. chapter of the National Safety Council, said she's seen a difference already.

"They're given this missile to drive, and they're not given that many tools, and this is another (tool) to make them better drivers."

Lexington 3 and Lexington 4 have signed on for the 2008-09 school year after watching the program's popularity grow in other districts — mainly in Lexington 1 and Lexington-Richland 5 where there have been more than 2,200 participants combined.

And the Columbia Police Department is offering the course for the first time, partly in anticipation that Richland County schools also will take it on.

"We are trying to be proactive over here with regards to what we're doing (about) teenagers and the alcohol issues," said Sgt. Mike Modica of the Columbia police. "It's such a fantastic program, and it's a good way for us to be involved with the community and the teenagers."

Local high school students have until about mid-August, when they register for classes, to take part in the driving course to receive benefits — such as on-campus parking permits — before classes resume.

Some changes for the 2008-09 school year:

- Lexington 3 made the course mandatory for all Batesburg-Leesville High students who want campus parking permits.
- The course is optional for Lexington 4's Swansea High students, but participation translates into reduced parking fees.
- All four Lexington 1 high schools are starting the first full school year in which the course is required to qualify to park on campus.
- In Lexington-Richland 5, Dutch Fork and Chapin high schools participate. The course is optional, but students who take part can get preferential parking spaces. The course eventually may become mandatory.

Kelly Payne, program coordinator for Lexington-Richland 5, said she hopes the entire school district will support the program. Too many students have died, she said.

About a year ago, in a span of a couple of months, three students were killed in driving accidents. Three former students also were killed.

This past school year, however, was the first time that Dutch Fork High had not lost a student to a driving-related accident, those familiar with the program said.

Payne gives some of the credit to the Alive at 25 program.

"It readies them to be in the real world," she said. "This is preparing the kids to be functional adults in our society."

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