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New Pennsylvania law not yet putting a dent in texting while driving

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Lisa F. Young



By Jon Schmitz Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Like many teenagers, Erica Cimato of Moon practically wears out her cell phone sending text messages -- more than 100 per day by her estimate.

But none are sent when she's behind the wheel. Before she joined Moon Area High School's chapter of Students Against Destructive Decisions, "I used to do that and drive all the time," she said. "Now, I'll give the phone to whoever's next to me and tell them to do it for me."

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- No, we're 2-0 and the defense is doing fine
- No opinion

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A state law banning texting while driving for all motorists is barely more than a year old, but it's hard to imagine that anyone at the high school is unaware of it.

The school and SADD chapter have participated in several programs that focus on the dangers of texting while driving and address other teen driving safety issues.

On Friday, the school hosted its annual "mock crash" for members of the junior class. Smashed-up cars, students soaked in fake blood and real-life emergency responders and vehicles were to be used to leave a lasting impression in advance of their prom, said Joseph Martonik, student coordinator.

Last year, students wore brightly colored signs around their necks with anti-texting-while-driving messages in advance of an assembly at which 1,200 students viewed a powerful 11-minute video produced by AT&T called "The Last Text." It profiled four crashes, three of them fatal, believed to have been caused by the typing of banal messages like "Yeah," "LOL" and "Where u at."

Mr. Martonik and Pennsylvania State Police Trooper Robin Mungo, who has shown the video at other schools, used the same phrase to describe students' reaction to it:

"You could hear a pin drop."

Teens know the law

The law signed in March 2012 by Gov. Tom Corbett made texting while driving a primary offense, meaning police didn't need another reason to pull someone over for texting.

Texting while driving

• A law signed in March 2012 by Gov. Tom Corbett made texting while driving a primary offense, meaning police didn't need another reason to pull someone over. The law carries a \$50 fine and nearly \$90 in court costs.

• Fatalities among teenage drivers rose 19 percent in the U.S. during the first six months of last year but declined in Pennsylvania.

• Thirty-nine states and the District of Columbia have banned texting while driving.

• State Rep. Joseph Markosek, D-Monroeville, is pressing for passage of

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"I don't have any statistics, but I can tell you it seems to have made an impact, just from the feedback we get from students," Trooper Mungo said of the law, which carries a \$50 fine and about \$90 in court costs.

Teens who are learning to drive "are definitely aware of the law," she said. "They probably know the law better than we do."

The numbers seem to bear that out: Of the 113 texting citations that had been issued in Allegheny County as of late last month, only four were to drivers younger than 20.

Fatalities among teenage drivers rose 19 percent in the U.S. during the first six months of last year but declined in Pennsylvania, according to preliminary figures released recently by the Governors Highway Safety Association.

Thirty-nine states and the District of Columbia have banned texting while driving. One Pennsylvania lawmaker, Rep. Joseph Markosek, doesn't think that's enough. Mr. Markosek, D-Monroeville, is pressing for passage of legislation to ban the use of handheld devices while driving, citing the report that crash deaths are increasing among teen drivers.

"Too many young people are killed by car accidents each year. Despite the current law prohibiting texting while driving, six Pennsylvania teen drivers were killed in the first six months of 2012," he said in a news release.

"Our current ban on texting while driving is a step in the right direction, but it is inadequate to protect people from drivers, especially teens, distracted by handheld devices. People of all ages

legislation to ban the use of handheld devices while driving.

- The Virginia Tech Transportation Institute found that texting while driving multiplies the chance of crashing by 23.

- The National Safety Council said texting while driving causes 1.6 million crashes per year.

- Composing a typical text message is roughly akin to closing one's eyes for nearly five seconds, during which time a car going 55 mph covers more than the length of a football field.

- The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety estimates that it is to blame for 11 teen deaths each day.

- In a survey commissioned by AT&T, 97 percent of teens said texting while driving is



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should have their hands on the wheel and be focused on the road when they are driving."

Danger doesn't deter some

If the danger of typing a message on a phone while hurtling down the highway wasn't apparent on its face, there's quite a bit of research to underscore it.

There's the oft-cited finding by the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute that texting while driving multiplies the chance of crashing by 23. And the calculation that composing a typical text message is roughly akin to closing one's eyes for nearly five seconds, during which time a car going 55 mph covers more than the length of a football field.

According to the National Safety Council, texting while driving causes 1.6 million crashes per year. The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety estimates that it is to blame for 11 teen deaths each day.

In a survey commissioned by AT&T, 97 percent of teens said texting while driving is dangerous. A no-brainer, right?

But 43 percent acknowledged that they do it.

A poll of drivers by AAA produced a similar disconnect. While 94 percent of respondents called texting a serious threat, 35 percent admitted reading a text or email while driving within the previous month.

dangerous. But 43 percent acknowledged they do it.

- A poll of drivers by AAA found 94 percent of respondents called texting a serious threat, but 35 percent admitted reading a text or email while driving within the previous month.

- AAA said that during the first year of the statewide texting-while-driving ban some 1,302 citations were issued in Pennsylvania and 196 in the metro Pittsburgh area (including Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Fayette, Washington and Westmoreland counties).

- Research from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee found text-ing bans work best when they are accompanied by an overall ban on handheld phone use, making enforcement easier.

- In a survey by Liberty Mutual insurance and SADD,



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When Trooper Mungo visits with students, she asks if they text while driving. "Are there students who raise their hands? Yes," she said.

59 percent of teens said they had seen their parents text while driving.

"I think the mentality among kids is that it won't happen to me," said Kayla Kalamasz, a senior and SADD member at Moon Area High School. "I feel like we limit the chances of students texting while driving by how many programs we put on for them."

One of them involves a simulator that helps students understand the implications and possible outcomes from impaired or distracted driving. They get the chance to see what would happen if their phones captured too much of their attention.

"A lot of people didn't make it home," SADD member and Moon Area senior Sara Jarrett recalled.

Sara was "killed" in last year's mock crash, in which the driver of the other car had been drinking and the driver of the car she was in was texting just before impact.

"I knew it was just a simulation, but it felt real," she said. "It was actually scary. I started to cry."

Adding to the drama of the event, one student is costumed as the Grim Reaper, going into classrooms and choosing students at random to be taken away, their empty desks a symbol of the potential impact of poor choices, Mr. Martonik said.

1,300 citations in year one

AAA recently released research of enforcement during the first year of the statewide texting-while-driving ban. Some 1,302 citations were issued in Pennsylvania and 196 in the metro Pittsburgh area including Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Fayette, Washington and Westmoreland counties.



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In Allegheny County alone, 113 citations had been issued as of late last month. The Robinson police department, with nine citations, was the top suburban force, ahead of Jefferson Hills with seven and Monroeville with six. Police in Bethel Park issued four citations, as did the forces in Ross and West Mifflin. No other suburban department issued more than three.

"AAA is encouraged to see that law enforcement agencies are off to a great start in the process of educating drivers and saving lives," said Brian Newbacher, spokesman for AAA East Central.

Enforcement in other states has increased after the laws' first year. For instance, California cited 2,845 drivers in the first year of its texting ban; the following year it cited 7,924.

Trooper Mungo said she hasn't written any citations but has pulled alongside vehicles in traffic and gestured to texting drivers to put down their phones.

"I'll give them a look and a smile," she said.

"It is difficult to catch someone texting while driving," said Steve Cowan, safety press officer for PennDOT District 11. "Perhaps the law needs to be strengthened."

The publication The Atlantic Cities recently reported on forthcoming research from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee that showed texting bans work best when they are accompanied by an overall ban on handheld phone use, making enforcement much easier for police.

Power of the parent

While there are numerous safe-driving programs in schools and so many teen organizations that Trooper Mungo said she can't keep track of all of them, one factor that can be overlooked is the powerful influence of parental behavior.

In a survey by Liberty Mutual insurance and SADD released last year, 59 percent of teens said they had seen their parents text while driving.



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"Your kids are always observing the decisions you make behind the wheel and, in fact, have likely been doing so since they were big enough to see over the dashboard," said Dave Melton, Liberty Mutual's managing director of global safety, in a release reporting the survey results.

"I tell parents not to text," Trooper Mungo said. "My daughter's 12 and she tells me how to drive. They're paying attention to what we do."

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Jon Schmitz: jschmitz@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1868. Visit the PG's transportation blog, The Roundabout, at www.post-gazette.com/Roundabout. Twitter: @pgtraffic. First Published April 11, 2013 4:00 AM

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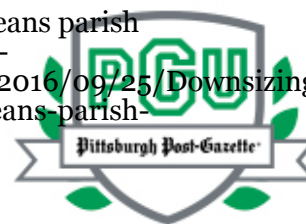
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