



PROGRAM EVALUATION DIVISION

NORTH CAROLINA GENERAL ASSEMBLY

November 2010

NCAR 2010-01

North Carolina Accountability Review: North Carolina's Driver Education Program in Public Schools

Summary

The State Board of Education and Department of Public Instruction (DPI) administer the statewide Driver Education program funded annually by a \$33 million transfer from the state Highway Fund. As directed by the Joint Legislative Program Evaluation Oversight Committee, the Program Evaluation Division conducted an accountability review of the board and department's administration and oversight of Driver Education.

The North Carolina Accountability Report (NCAR) model assesses program design, strategic planning, management, and evidence of results. NCAR produces a rating from criteria similar to the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's ExpectMore.gov model, with criteria adjusted by the Program Evaluation Division for state government. The Division rated the Driver Education program based on analysis of interviews, questionnaire responses, and other information submitted by DPI.

The Driver Education program received the lowest NCAR rating, Results Not Demonstrated. PED could not determine whether the program was effective or efficient.

1. There was no standardized statewide curriculum.
2. The State Board of Education delegated program design and operations to Local Education Agencies.
3. DPI conducted no technical oversight, only limited cost analysis, and was not considering potentially more cost-effective instructional modalities such as distance education.

Because the State Board of Education delegates program responsibility to each of the 115 Local Education Agencies, program standards, performance measures, and accountability vary across localities and from one school to the next. DPI has assumed the role of fiscal agent for disbursing Driver Education funds to Local Education Agencies but does not conduct oversight or examine return on investment in the form of improved teenage driver outcomes.

The General Assembly may wish to consider two options.

1. **Strengthen statutes to assure that the Board of Education and DPI conduct fiscal and technical oversight of the Driver Education program.**
2. **Direct the Program Evaluation Division to include a proposal for a full evaluation of Driver Education in the draft work plan submitted to the 2011 Joint Legislative Program Evaluation Oversight Committee.**

Scope

The State Board of Education and Department of Public Instruction (DPI) administer a statewide program for Driver Education funded annually by a \$33 million transfer from the state Highway Fund. As directed by the Joint Legislative Program Evaluation Oversight Committee, the Program Evaluation Division conducted an accountability review of the board and department's administration and oversight of Driver Education.

The North Carolina Accountability Report (NCAR) model assesses program design, strategic planning, management, and evidence of results. NCAR produces a rating from criteria very similar to the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's ExpectMore.gov model, with criteria adjusted by the Program Evaluation Division for state government. The Division rated Driver Education after analysis of multiple interviews, questionnaire responses, and other information submitted by DPI.

Background

NC Gen. Stat. § 20-88 provides a framework for a statewide program of education for teenage drivers to be administered in the public schools. The statutes provide guidelines for program implementation and flexibility that allows Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to enter contracts with public or private entities to provide the program.

Under NC Gen. Stat. § 20-88.1, DPI receives funds from the state Highway Fund through the Department of Transportation to provide the Driver Education program. Once the funds are transferred, LEAs are responsible for funding all students enrolled in public, private, and home schools. The funding formula is based on the average number of ninth graders enrolled in the program in each LEA. North Carolina is one of eight states that fully fund driver education; it is the only state which funds the program from its state highway fund and does not have a dedicated revenue source for this purpose. Of the other 42 states, 10 provide partial funding and 32 do not fund their program at all.

Issues

Three central issues emerged from this NCAR review.

- 1. The lack of a standardized, statewide Driver Education program curriculum has created a patchwork of programs that suffers from a lack of consistency in performance measures and oversight.**

The State Board of Education and State Superintendent of Public Instruction have primary responsibility for organizing and administering the Driver Education program. DPI did not provide any documentation of program design, implementation, or evaluation. No clearly defined goals for the program have been published, nor is there a strategic plan. DPI reported, however, they have developed strategic plans for other public school programs.

Because the State Board of Education delegates program design and operations to LEAs, each LEA sets its own Driver Education curriculum. Results from a 2010 Office of State Budget and Management survey indicated at least eight different curricula were in use. This

decentralized organization gives the appearance of no state lead agency to conduct oversight of a major public school program.

2. Program design and operation are delegated to Local Education Agencies with little input from the state, which results in self-monitoring and no program or continuous improvement plan.

DPI has delegated the organization, administration, and delivery of Driver Education to individual LEAs. Although this implementation strategy is used for many types of programs, it requires central oversight to ensure local implementation meets standard criteria. However, DPI conducts little centralized technical oversight of the Driver Education program. The few instances of technical oversight of locally implemented programs identified by the Program Evaluation Division were conducted by the responsible LEA. If an LEA were to identify a shortfall in their program, there is no formal 'lessons learned' process to share findings with other LEAs. LEAs also conduct sole oversight of contracted services; however, DPI does no cost analysis to identify the most efficient or best-practice model for the program.

3. DPI conducts no technical oversight and only limited cost analysis, which has resulted in an annual reversion of funds and lack of statewide data on program participation or outcomes.

DPI did not provide formal documentation of programmatic or fiscal goals and outcomes for the Driver Education program. Concise, consistent program goal statements are integral to program design and implementation; however, DPI questionnaire responses reflected different program goal statements that varied from one response to the next, demonstrating the program has no one guiding statement. Individual LEAs opt to develop and administer Driver Education programs; DPI has no screening or approval process. Further, LEAs are not required to report program deficiencies or corrective actions taken. DPI does not maintain central data from which lessons learned or best practices might be gleaned.

DPI operates as the fiscal agent for the Driver Education program and distributes funds to LEAs; however, it conducts only limited review of expenditures. DPI has not established financial efficiency or effectiveness goals and offers minimal fiscal oversight. Although DPI repeatedly referred to itself as a fiscal agent in documents submitted for this review, this role is not identified or defined by statute.

Options

Based on data from this review, the Program Evaluation Division identified two options for action by the General Assembly.

1. Implement and strengthen statutes requiring the Board of Education and the Department of Public Instruction to conduct fiscal and technical oversight of the Driver Education program.

Potential actions include the following options.

- Implement 2010 NC Sess. Laws 2010-31, Section 7.12, requiring the creation of a standardized curriculum for the Driver Education program.

- Develop an appropriate strategic plan with goals and performance indicators to be reported to the General Assembly including number of program participants, adoption of the standardized curriculum, program expenditures, and student driver test success rate.
 - Seek the most cost-effective method to deliver driver training.
 - Clarify the roles of the State Board of Education and State Superintendent in establishing program criteria and taking responsibility for program curriculum and administration such that these responsibilities are not delegated to LEAs.
- 2. Direct the Program Evaluation Division to include a proposal for a full evaluation of the Driver Education program in the draft work plan submitted to the 2011 Joint Legislative Program Evaluation Oversight Committee.**

Potential actions include the following options.

- Determine the most cost effective method to deliver the Driver Education program.
- Examine alternatives to classroom training such as online formats.
- Review programs in other states.
- Compare relevant outcomes among completers with a comparison group of similar students who did not complete the program.

Program Evaluation Division Contact

For more information on this report, please contact the lead evaluator, Larry Yates, Larry.Yates@ncleg.net, 919 301-1863

John W. Turcotte is the director of the Program Evaluation Division.