

# North Carolina Driver & Traffic Safety Education Association (NCDTSEA) 2026 Legislative Agenda

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## Purpose

The North Carolina Driver & Traffic Safety Education Association (NCDTSEA) seeks to strengthen and modernize driver education across North Carolina to improve teen driver safety, expand equitable access, and ensure a sustainable, high-quality statewide program.

Since its establishment in 1970, NCDTSEA has represented educators, administrators, and traffic safety professionals in state and local agencies committed to reducing roadway fatalities and improving driver preparedness.

Driver education in North Carolina is delivered through two pathways:

- **Public School Driver Education Programs**, administered through local school districts under the Department of Public Instruction (DPI)
- **Commercial Driver Training Schools**, certified by the NC Division of Motor Vehicles (DMV)

While both systems serve students, this agenda is focused on restoring and sustaining the public school program which remains the primary and most accessible provider statewide, although with a decline to about 71% of the eligible students<sup>1</sup> participating in the public school Driver Education programs in 2024-25. That is equal to about 25,000 NC students who could be enrolled in a Driver Education program within the local public school system, but are not. For reasons explained below, the access to qualified instructors is dangerously decreasing and immediate State action is required.

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## The Need for Action

### 1. Teen Driver Safety Crisis

According to the most recent information from NCDOT: During the 2024 “100 Deadliest Days” (from Memorial Day to Labor Day), there were:

- o 12,360 teen-involved crashes
- o Over 2,300 injuries
- o 32 teen fatalities

Teen driver safety remains a critical public safety issue.

### 2. Declining Access to Driver Education

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<sup>1</sup> An eligible student is a student enrolled in a public, private, charter, home school or federal school in NC and is at least 14.5 years old.

Focused efforts from an increasing workforce reduced the backlog from the pandemic; however, since 2023, NC students are experiencing increasing wait-times and a lack of equitable access to both instructional phases (1) Classroom instruction; and 2) Behind-the-Wheel training due to growing teacher shortages as illustrated below (where STEP stands for Safety and Traffic Education Program). These situations have produced excessive waiting periods for both phases, resulting in students being forced to delay until they are 18, or seeking self-funded commercial pathways.

District Backlogs Annual Comparisons						
SY	19-20	20-21	21-22	22-23	23-24	24-25
Districts serving less than 70% (bar) (equals backlog)	84	62	23	32	51	58
Notations	Pandemic shutdown STEP began	Pandemic shutdown	STEP full swing	STEP full swing	STEP ended Dec. 23 midyear	2 years after STEP

### 3. Workforce Shortages

Recruitment and stabilization of workforce is increasingly challenging:

- Lack of structured statewide training and certification support requires districts to find avenues to achieve certification and training to address instructional needs.
- 48 school districts currently have no pathway for new teacher training
- Driver education instructors, already an aging population, are retiring or leaving programs at a higher rate than prior years
- Compensation levels (approximately \$20/hour) limit recruitment and retention

### 4. Need for Dynamic Funding

- NC has an excellent funding source established by the General Assembly in 2016 through DMV Fines and Forfeitures.
- Now, there are rising operational costs including:
  - Competitive personnel wages and salary
  - Vehicle replacement and maintenance
  - Rising fuel and insurance costs in volatile market

### 5. Emerging National Risks Among Older Teens

- Increasing numbers of teens are delaying driver education
- Other states (e.g., Ohio and Washington) are exploring driver education for individuals over age 18
- Rising crash rates among drivers ages 19–21 highlight the need for proactive solutions

## NC Legislative Priorities

## 1. Rebuild the Driver Education Workforce

- Increase funding for instructor training, and retention of skilled instructors, to provide necessary and quality instruction.
- NC should establish its own program using, for example, state funds from the DMV Fines and Forfeitures Fund (where there is a set-aside of approximately \$30 million annually for the State's Driver Education Program). With a reestablished annual line item of \$600,000 (or 2% set-aside for statewide administration), NC's new Driver Education Training Program could produce at least 225 new Driver Educators per year. NC needs at least 500 more new Driver Educators to meet the demands of our growing population.
- Establish recruitment incentives and career pathways
- Expand partnerships with community colleges, colleges and universities to prepare new educators

## 2. Restore Statewide Program Infrastructure

Reestablish centralized State-level support to better serve more students and families:

- Ensure all students receive comparable, high-quality education
- Ensure all students have timely access regardless of geography or income

## 3. Expand Equitable Access

- Prioritize funding and support for rural and underserved districts and students
- Reduce reliance on private providers due to students' cost barriers
- Students in rural and underserved areas face limited access
- Many families must rely on higher-cost private providers
- Unequal access creates barriers to student licensure and economic opportunity

## 4. Explore Extended Driver Education Options

- Study feasibility of driver education requirements or programs for individuals over age 18
- Address safety concerns among older teen and young adult drivers

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**Expected Outcomes: With State support and investment in a new Driver Education Training Program, NC students and families will have:**

- Timely and equitable accessibility to quality instruction and reduced waitlists
- Effective training of instructors and students
- Reduction of teen crash rates and fatalities
- Support of data-driven graduated licensing (GDL) requirements
- Sustainability of the statewide program

**Conclusion:** Investing in Driver Education is an investment in public safety and our children. NCDTSEA urges the North Carolina General Assembly to take action to ensure that every student has access to high-quality, timely, and affordable Driver Education.