

KERRI MILLER: Chances are, at some point in your life, you've taken a behind-the-wheel driving exam to get your driver's license. Honestly, my palms are sweating just thinking about it. In Minnesota, perhaps unsurprisingly, 16 to 20-year-olds make up about 50% of the people taking road tests last year. But within that group, examiners at the drivers and vehicle services have noticed a disparity.

18 to 20-year-olds are passing their tests at a much lower rate than 16 and 17-year-olds, and the overall rate of passing. Mark Larson has administered more than 10,000 road tests during his career, and now oversees exam operations across Northern Minnesota. He's here to help us make sense of the numbers and share what examiners are seeing behind the wheel. Hi, Mark.

MARK LARSON: Hi, Kerri. Thank you so much for having me on today.

KERRI MILLER: Before we get into the numbers, let's pause on the fact that you've given more than 10,000 road tests in your career. That's a lot. Has anything changed about the drivers that you're testing today?

MARK LARSON: Nothing that I would pinpoint. I mean, like I said, I've done many road tests over my 24 year career and it's still the same drivers education. They're still getting the same six hours behind the wheel, and they're still making similar and same mistakes as they always have.

KERRI MILLER: But there is some interesting data. So the state data shows that 16 and 17-year-olds are passing this road test at a higher rate than their older counterparts, 18 to 20-year-olds. So why is that? Does it have anything to do with high schoolers being required to take driver's ed?

MARK LARSON: Yes. Anyone under 18 needs to take driver's education. And through the years, looking at data, anyone who has taken driver's education always has been more successful passing the road test, especially on the first attempt.

KERRI MILLER: And I will say that I am a parent of kids who are in this age group. And when these numbers first came out, there was some talk around the dinner table about friends who are waiting to hit that 18-year-old thing because they say, I don't really want to pay for driver's ed. I don't want to spend all the time to do the behind-the-wheel classes. Plus, it does cost money because most school districts don't offer this anymore as a regular part of their curriculum. It's through community and they have to pay for it.

So they're like, they're just waiting till they're 18 and then they think they're going to go take the road test. So is that new?

MARK LARSON: No, that's always been in play. And it's a little bit economy-driven as well. A driver education course could cost you between \$3 and \$500. Not everybody has that disposable income to be able to afford that.

So then they decide to wait till they're 18. Then they got to hold their permit for that period of time. Then they can take the road test. What they're missing out on is all those life lessons that they teach you in driver's ed, where to look, how to look, how to prepare for a turn, how to make a lane change. So that has a direct correlation with 16 and 17-year-olds having a 75% pass rate compared to 18, 19, 20, 21-year-olds at a 51%.

KERRI MILLER: During the pandemic, we heard that 16-year-olds aren't chomping at the bit as much as they used to be to get their license. They're waiting, they're delaying that. So are you worried that this is going to be like a continuing problem, as people do wait. Are they going to just continue to age out and not get that critical instruction?

MARK LARSON: No. When I looked at data and I just started at 2019, that's when we got a new system at the state. And looking at the raw numbers, it's approximately the same amount of 16 and 17-year-olds taking road tests and approximately the same number with that next age group up. So I haven't seen a huge decline and more people waiting, but it's still hard to tell. I mean, it looks like it's running parallel year to year.

KERRI MILLER: I mean, you've watched thousands of people begin those exams. Can you usually tell within the first minute whether someone is ready to drive?

MARK LARSON: I wouldn't say within the first minute, but I would say four or five blocks into the test. When we pull out, I mean, we start immediately scoring and it's right turns, left turns, and they need to make lane changes and turn signals on and different things. So if you start out of the chute, already making a bunch of errors, your chances of success are not very good because there's a lot that happens on that test. Each test takes approximately 15 minutes.

KERRI MILLER: So what are the common mistakes that lead to that failing score, like things that probably they don't maybe think about that the examiner is paying close attention to?

MARK LARSON: Well, if they go through the driver's education, they learn how to turn a turn signal on, when to turn that turn signal on, when to check that blind spot, all those different things to be a safe driver. Now, when you get to that next group up, now you're learning from, and I hate to say it, your parents, maybe your grandparents, or a close friend, whatever it may be, and you're only going to learn as much as how they drive.

So if they're a driver that isn't looking where they probably should, not using their turn signal appropriately, not using lane position correctly, well, your chances of success are not very good compared to someone who's taken that professional six hours of driver's training.

KERRI MILLER: So given that, would you recommend that people who are maybe even over 18, they're not required to take driver's ed anymore? But would you say, you really should? You should do that, you should get in even maybe the behind-the-wheel part of that education.

MARK LARSON: I would absolutely. So in the past, if I was doing a road test for a 21-year-old or a 35-year-old and they weren't successful, I always recommended, hey, go take one lesson, go take a two hour lesson to help clean up some of the errors that you're making. It's only going to benefit you because currently, if you take four road tests and you fail all four, you're required to get six hours of driver education. So sometimes going a little early, taking two hours is much more cost effective than waiting until you fail test number 4.

KERRI MILLER: Yeah, that's really good advice. I mean, I'm just thinking, for someone who's failed their first road test, do you have a piece of advice before they schedule another one? Would you say that same thing, go take some behind-the-wheel?

MARK LARSON: Yeah, absolutely. And part of that-- so if you're taking a road test and you did fairly good. But you ran over the poles in the parallel park. Well, that's an automatic fail. Now to that person, I may not say, hey, go get two hours because that'll help you. I would tell you, hey, go practice that parallel parking a whole bunch or go practice that 90 degree.

Whatever that minor error is, that's what I would recommend they do. If someone is, I mean, over the board, they're turns aren't good, they're not looking where they should, they're not doing lane changes properly, that's somebody I would recommend. Hey, go get some professional training.

KERRI MILLER: If someone listening has a road test coming up, would you give them one piece of advice that they should keep in mind before they get behind-the-wheel with an examiner, which is always let's just say it's a stressful a thing? I have to think as an examiner, you can sense that anxiety when you get in the car.

MARK LARSON: You end up learning how to read the people. Some people like a little bit of chit chat at the beginning. Some don't want, they just want to go. So you learn your applicants per se.

But my biggest advice would be make sure you're looking where you need to. It's one of the most critical parts of driving is scanning that intersection, checking that blind spot. And I think we can all relate.

We're going down the freeway and we go to make a lane change, and all of a sudden a car is there. Well, as experienced drivers, we're not looking over our shoulder like that 16-year-old is on a road test. So it's a little bit of a reality check.

And another part that I really like is when your kid is doing behind-the-wheel, they will point out every mistake you're making for the next month or two months. Hey, you didn't look at that intersection, you didn't turn your turn signal on, you didn't do this. So that's a reality check, too. And I hate to say lazy driving, but less attentive driving maybe a better word for it.

KERRI MILLER: I can testify that, that has happened.

MARK LARSON: If they have a lot of errors for observation, so they're not looking where they need to, it's one of the most critical parts. I mean, if you ask people who have been in an accident, many will say I never saw that other car. Well, probably because you weren't looking appropriately or that at least would have helped.

KERRI MILLER: Thanks so much for sharing your knowledge, Mark. It's fascinating to talk with you. Mark Larson is the Northern District exam program manager for Minnesota Driver and Vehicle Services.