

# Choosing a Driving School

*A GUIDE FOR PARENTS  
OF BEGINNING DRIVERS*



*For more than 100 years, AAA has played an important role in the communities it serves, protecting and saving lives of drivers, passengers, bicyclists and pedestrians of all ages. AAA published its first driver's training course for high school teachers in 1935 to support the goals of reducing traffic crashes, and continues to accumulate valuable information and tips to assist consumers evaluate and select a driving school.*

## **Driver Education – A Foundation for Safe Driving**

Getting a driver's license is an important step to adulthood for young, new drivers. Classroom training provides a solid base for grooming well-trained, educated drivers, but getting behind the wheel on the open road is the true test.

Imagine building a house without blueprints or an understanding of construction principles. If you are lucky, you may end up with a beautiful home. Most likely, you will end up with a pile of rubble.

Learning to drive and successfully navigate America's roadways is like building a house. You need knowledge, skills, and plans. Without this solid foundation, you take a big risk each time you get behind the wheel.

Quality driving instruction provides the foundation needed for safe driving practices. Instructors ensure their students have the basic skills, knowledge, and habits needed for safety on the road. Many states recognize the value of formal training and may require driver education courses as a condition to obtain a full, unrestricted license. Structured classroom and behind-the-wheel instruction are the first steps in preparing students for the rigors of today's highway system.

If you are looking for assistance in selecting a driving school, this brochure will help you:

- Define the type of training that best suits your needs;
- Understand specific requirements for the facility, instructor, structure, and lesson;
- Find local driving schools; and
- Investigate driving schools with a checklist.

## **Make a Smarter, More Informed Choice**

Driver education courses are designed to teach new drivers the fundamental skills and basic knowledge required to drive a motor vehicle. Your search for a quality school may be more successful if you know what to look for in facilities, instructors, structure, and lesson plans. The following tips may make it easier for you to select the best driver training school for you.

- **Ask friends and neighbors.** Have they or someone they know attended a driver training school? Can they recommend one for you? Why did they select this specific school?
- **Call several schools.** Find out about course schedules, fees, registration procedures, and the next available course dates and times.
- **Visit schools.** Ask to see classrooms and if you can observe part of a course. Classrooms should be clean, orderly and set up to conduct classroom sessions. During your classroom visit, check to see if:
  - A desk is available for each student.
  - A distance learning TV, modern instructional equipment, computers, monitors, chalk or white boards, and other visual aids are visible from all desks.

- **Ask to see the course curriculum or textbook.** There should be a study guide or textbook for each student. Materials should be current and in good condition. Each student also should receive a copy of the state driver's handbook.
- **Check the Driver Education School License.** The Driver Education School license must be displayed in the school's business office.
- **Ask how many fully licensed driver education instructors work for the school.** Determine how many instructors teach the classroom, behind-the-wheel, or both phases of the course. The ratio of instructors to students may affect the time it will take to complete all of the course requirements. A good ratio is 30 students to five instructors, which allows sufficient time for students to complete the training in approximately 12 weeks.
- **Check classroom vs. behind-the-wheel sessions.** The ideal course integrates classroom and behind-the-wheel training. The classroom time should consist of a structured lesson plan that includes coverage of risk prevention and the fundamentals of defensive driving practices. Behind-the-wheel sessions should correspond with the classroom lesson plan to reinforce and demonstrate the practical usage of the classroom concepts.
  - Beginners learn best with two in-car lessons each week.
  - Classroom and behind-the-wheel lessons should be supported by practice sessions. Look for schools that offer interactive educational tools to help parents provide at least 50 hours of supervised, supplemental driving experience for novice drivers.
  - Driving environments should include residential streets, city traffic, rural roads, highways, and limited-access freeways.

Students also should receive limited-visibility/limited-traction instruction at night and in poor weather.

- **Ask to see the driver education vehicles.** Instructional vehicles should be late-model cars in good condition. Some states mandate driving school vehicles be no more than four years old. A plus: newer vehicles have more advanced safety systems. They should be clean, late model cars and all vehicles must have the following equipment:
  - Rearview mirror;
  - Two exterior side mirrors;
  - Rearview mirror, eye-check mirror, and dual-control brake for the instructor;
  - Safety belts, air bags, and head restraints; and
  - Wedge-shaped seat cushion and pedal extensions to accommodate students of varying height. (Even in vehicles equipped with power seats, students less than five feet, five inches tall find visibility greatly improved using these tools.)
  - A large "Student Driver" sign, as well as a sign that identifies the driving school, to alert other drivers that the driver behind the wheel is learning to drive.



- **Find out about the instructors.** Consider instructor experience – both overall and at a particular institution – when evaluating a school. School management and instructional staff should have successfully completed a minimum of three professional development courses.

The following professional organizations sponsor courses that can help instructors meet state instructional standards:

- Your local AAA/CAA club;
- The Driving School Association of the Americas Inc.;
- The American Driver and Traffic Safety Education Association; and
- The Association of Driver Educators for the Disabled.

All instructors should be licensed by the state. License renewal requirements vary from



state to state. Continuing education ensures instructors know how to teach current information – such as the latest visual search techniques. Instructors also should be monitored by school management and undergo periodic performance evaluations.

- **Students with disabilities:** Students with disabilities should choose a school with instructors and equipment prepared for their specific needs. For instance, vehicles should include hand controls, an adjustable steering column, and other aids for disabled drivers. The Association of Driver Rehabilitation Specialists (ADED) can provide information about facilities in your area.
- **Check details.** Ask about refund policies, class make-up policies, and remedial training policies. Do you need to sign a contract?
- **Find out about complaints.** Ask how to file complaints and how the school resolves complaints. Check with the Better Business Bureau, which keeps files of complaints and compliments received about local businesses.

- **Ask for references.** Get the names of previous students and parents you may call as a reference. Ask them about their experience with the school.
- **Cost considerations.** Cost is one of many factors to consider when seeking a driver-training program. Driver education costs range in price and structure, so you will need to factor in some basic information to determine the overall cost and viability of the program. Items to consider include:
  - Amount of classroom instruction offered combined with behind-the-wheel training. A typical driver-training package consists of 30 hours of classroom instruction and six to ten hours of behind-the-wheel training.
  - Additional behind-the-wheel lessons beyond the state's requirements may be offered at a per-hour fee.
  - Missed lesson fees may be incurred when the new driver misses a scheduled class or behind-the-wheel training session.
  - Cancellation fees may be incurred if you do not contact the school 24 hours prior to the scheduled lesson start time.

### Additional Information

The Department of Motor Vehicles can provide information on state regulations for driving schools, but cannot recommend a specific driving school. Standards vary from state to state; a state license does not guarantee a quality driving school.

Some AAA clubs offer driving instruction or may be able to recommend a school. Contact your local AAA club for additional information.

## Resolving Concerns

A professional driving school will help new drivers learn proper vehicle-control techniques, not just prepare them to pass the state's driver exam. If you feel the driving school is not providing sufficient instruction to meet this goal, talk with the instructor or the school manager or owner. School instructors and management should take constructive action to ensure new drivers graduate with good driving skills.

If corrective action is not taken, contact the Department of Motor Vehicles for help in resolving your concerns. Also, consider filing a report to the Better Business Bureau. A report becomes a permanent part of the school's record.

## Supplementing the Classroom Experience

Driver's education is an important part of learning to drive. However, the driver's education instructor cannot be the only person to work with the new driver. As a parent, you are the person who cares most about your teenager's driving ability and safety. Getting a driver's license is not the end of learning to drive.

Parent involvement in driver education is a must if there is to be complete training of a new driver. The six hours of behind-the-wheel instruction a new driver receives in many states falls far short of the amount of time actually needed to learn to drive on today's roads and highways.

Annually, more than 3,500 teenagers between the ages of 15 and 20 are fatally injured in traffic crashes. A large increase in fatalities occurs at age 16, when most teenagers are driving for the first time and continues for the next several years. A leveling off occurs around age 19, when young

adults have become more familiar with the challenges and responsibilities of driving.

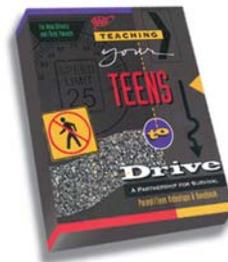
This staggering number of fatalities represents a need for a change in the way young drivers learn how to drive. That is one of the reasons AAA developed *"Teaching Your Teens to Drive."* This program, designed to help parents participate in the process of educating teenagers, includes information about conducting practice sessions with your driver behind the wheel.



*"Teaching Your Teens to Drive"* helps you prepare your new driver for this new phase in their life, with 13 lessons focused on developing the following skills:

- Basic vehicle control;
- Visual search habits;
- Vehicle positioning and speed adjustment;
- Passing and off-road maneuvers;
- Freeway and night driving;
- Driving on slippery surfaces; and
- Reducing risks.

Through repetition, new drivers can learn how to effectively manage visibility, time and space from behind the wheel and protect themselves and others from crashes. With consistency and patience, these supplemental practice sessions can give new drivers the equivalent of a few years' driving experience and move them safely past the high risks associated with first-year driving.



To order *"Teaching Your Teens to Drive,"* call AAA at 1-800-327-3444 or contact your local AAA/CAA club and ask about special AAA member pricing.

## Evaluation Checklist

This checklist may be helpful during your driving school visits.

### School 1

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Initial Contact \_\_\_\_\_

Instructor Interviewed \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone Number \_\_\_\_\_

Price Quoted \_\_\_\_\_

### School 2

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Initial Contact \_\_\_\_\_

Instructor Interviewed \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone Number \_\_\_\_\_

Price Quoted \_\_\_\_\_

### School 3

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Initial Contact \_\_\_\_\_

Instructor Interviewed \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone Number \_\_\_\_\_

Price Quoted \_\_\_\_\_

## Reputation

The school meets minimum standards set by state licensing agencies.

School 1	School 2	School 3

The school is in good standing with the Better Business Bureau.

School 1	School 2	School 3

Class size and length is clearly stated. AAA recommends a class size of no more than 30 students with a maximum session of three hours.

School 1	School 2	School 3

School management openly discusses the instructional program, equipment, facilities, and instructor qualifications with prospective clients.

School 1	School 2	School 3

Instructional materials are state-approved and provided free, for rent, or for purchase to students for home study. Offices are separate from other non-driving businesses.

School 1	School 2	School 3

Advertisements are not misleading and include recommendations from qualified institutes or organizations.

School 1	School 2	School 3

## Facilities and Equipment

A variety of current classroom equipment – personal computers, DVD/VCR, chalk or white board, traffic graphics – should be used. All classroom equipment should be visible from each seat.

School 1	School 2	School 3

Textbooks should be less than three years old.

School 1	School 2	School 3

The classroom should be accessible to physically challenged drivers.

School 1	School 2	School 3

Vehicles should be less than four years old and include rearview and side mirrors, safety belts, air bags, adjustable steering column, and power seats.

School 1	School 2	School 3

Each vehicle should have an eye-check mirror, rearview mirror, and dual-control brake for the instructor.

School 1	School 2	School 3

The school should have wedge-shape seat cushions, pedal extensions, hand controls, and other driving aids available.

School 1	School 2	School 3

## Instructors

Instructors are members of the American Driver and Traffic Safety Education Association (ADTSEA), the Driving School Association of the Americas Inc. (DSAA), and/or the Association of Driver Rehabilitation Specialists (ADED).

School 1	School 2	School 3

All instructors are state-certified.

School 1	School 2	School 3

Instructors are educators, having received training in driving techniques and how to teach those techniques.

School 1	School 2	School 3

Instructors have clean driving records.

School 1	School 2	School 3

## Lesson Structures

The course outline includes performance standards for beginning drivers.

School 1	School 2	School 3

Classroom and in-car sessions are well organized and coordinated. Class lessons are relevant to in-car exercises.

School 1	School 2	School 3



Provided as a public service  
by your AAA club.

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For more information about  
AAA Traffic Safety Programs,  
contact your local AAA club's  
Traffic Safety Department  
or visit [www.aaa.com](http://www.aaa.com).



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