

# Bill would let Minnesota teens take driver's ed online — without instructor

Proponents cite convenience, flexibility, but virtual instruction also raises concern.

By [Tim Harlow](#) Star Tribune

February 12, 2021 — 12:30pm



A+ Driving School

Michelle Allender and Jack Rudman of A+ Driving School in White Bear Lake conducted an online driver's education class.

Prospective teen drivers in Minnesota may soon be able to take driver's education courses online at any time, day or night, without an instructor present, if a measure before the Legislature passes.

Teens seeking their provisional licenses would still have the option to take drivers' ed classes in person but could enroll in a program allowing them to complete the curriculum on their own time starting in June 2022. There would be no changes to the behind-the-wheel requirement, during which students practice driving with an instructor.

"I support kids being in the classroom," said Sen. John Jasinski, R-Faribault, the lead author of the bill. But with advances in technology, "this is a great option to get it done without having to choose between going to class three times a week or participating in a sport. It creates more flexibility."

In Minnesota, students must complete 30 hours of classroom training to obtain an instructional permit and six hours of behind-the-wheel training to obtain a provisional driver's license. The training provider must be approved by the Department of Public Safety (DPS).

In response to COVID-19, DPS issued a variance that allows driving schools to conduct classroom sessions through live virtual teleconferences, provided the student and instructor were connected by video and audio. When Gov. Tim Walz's pandemic-related executive orders are lifted, students will be required to return to the classroom.

If the plan becomes law, students could complete a classroom session online from any DPS-approved provider, even if the vendor is not based in Minnesota. The provider would have to deliver content that complies with state law, Jasinski said.

Companies such as [driversed.com](http://driversed.com) and [aceable.com](http://aceable.com) could provide online training, but Jasinski said the preference is to have an in-state brick-and-mortar company do the training.

Online providers would be required to measure the amount of time a student engages with the content, use rotating quiz questions and develop a means to measure performance, according to the bill. It also would require providers to offer customer support through a toll-free telephone number.

All of that frightens instructor Mark Lee, who has taught driver's education in northern Minnesota for 35 years. Lee, former president of the American Driver and Traffic Safety Education Association, said he understands that a form of online driver's education will eventually happen in Minnesota, as it has in 11 other states, but he said allowing for that type of delivery before standards are put in place is putting the cart before the horse.

"Let's sit down with organizations and schools together and look at the issues, delivery methods, standards and what is important and draft things up, and then go to the Legislature," Lee said. "Nobody has a good grasp on that. It can't just be a student logging on at 2 a.m. and letting the computer run and hope to pass."

James Kilibarda, owner of Elite Driving School in Richfield, said he fears by going online, he would lose the personal connection he develops with students, something he says is an important component of driver's education.

"It has to be more than knowledge," he said. "You don't want students sitting in front of a simulator. Nobody will say that is a good idea."

Chris Claeson, driving programs manager at AAA Minneapolis, said the organization could offer AAA's "How to Drive" class — which is offered in 10 other states — if Minnesota approves online classroom training. But she also would prefer that an instructor be involved "in some way, shape or form."

Bottom line, she said, "We need to make sure this is done right. We need to make sure standards are higher and the program so good that kids learn what they need to learn. The quality needs to be there."

Rep. Erin Koegel, D-Spring Lake Park, author of a companion bill in the House, said those concerns will likely be discussed before a final version of the [bill](#) is presented for a vote. "We are trying to figure stuff out," she said. "As written, it won't be the final bill." Koegel said the bill, aimed at making sure everybody has access to driver's education, has bipartisan support. "If we make sure all stakeholders feel it will work for them, it might have a shot [at passing]."

Tim Harlow • 612-673-7768 **Tim Harlow** covers traffic and transportation issues in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area, and likes to get out of the office, even during rush hour. Harlow also covers general assignment and breaking news and weather.