

Irondequoit teens learn about dangers of distracted driving

9:40 PM, Oct 25, 2012 |



Rachel Woltz (seated) tries to dial an onscreen phone while driving to simulate a distracted driver. Behind her are fellow seniors at Irondequoit High School Leah Warner, Elizabeth Crowder, Raymond Payner and Matthew Miller (left to right). The simulator is part a traveling program for Distracted Driver Awareness Day. / Jamie Germano/Staff Photographer

Written by

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IRONDEQUOIT — Drunk driving campaigns have made many students better at self-policing; if a classmate gets behind the wheel after having a drink, potential passengers are quick to ask questions about sobriety.

But though texting while driving has been shown to be just as dangerous as driving drunk, are students policing one another in the same way?

Not quite. But it's getting better.

"As a passenger, I'll usually take their phone and do it for them, or if I'm driving and I'm with someone, I'll say 'Oh, can you just text my mom for me?'" said Rachel Woltz, a senior at Irondequoit High School. "Teenagers have seen all these car accidents and it's in our minds that maybe we shouldn't be doing that."

On Thursday, students at Irondequoit High School got a taste of just how challenging it is to drive safely while texting.

Using a computer simulation program that included a steering wheel, pedals, and a projected city street, the students attempted to complete a crosstown drive while sending several text messages, which would randomly pop up on the screen.

Most of them crashed while they were trying to respond to the texts. The ones who didn't would almost certainly have been pulled over for drifting into other lanes or stopping in moving traffic to respond to a text.

"I actually hit a deer when I was doing it. I was so focused on dialing that I lost focus on the actual street," said Matthew Miller, a senior at Irondequoit High School. "It's crazy how just one word can make you so distracted. A simple 'hello' can make you get into an accident."

The hands-on experience seemed to resonate with the students.

Faculty members were pleased that the students were pointing out mistakes to one another that were being made while the driver attempted to text.

That type of peer reinforcement can be far more effective than a blackboard lesson.

"With this, it's visual and it's very close to real while obviously being safe," said Barb Reardon, director of community education for the West Irondequoit School District.

The simulator was brought in by a Nationwide Insurance agent, who was invited to the school by State Assemblyman Joseph Morelle, D-Irondequoit.

"We've done a pretty good job in America of creating a social barrier to drinking and driving. People are much more aware. They designate drivers," said Morelle. "Hopefully we're starting to create that culture as well as it relates to texting."